



# Gandy Dancer

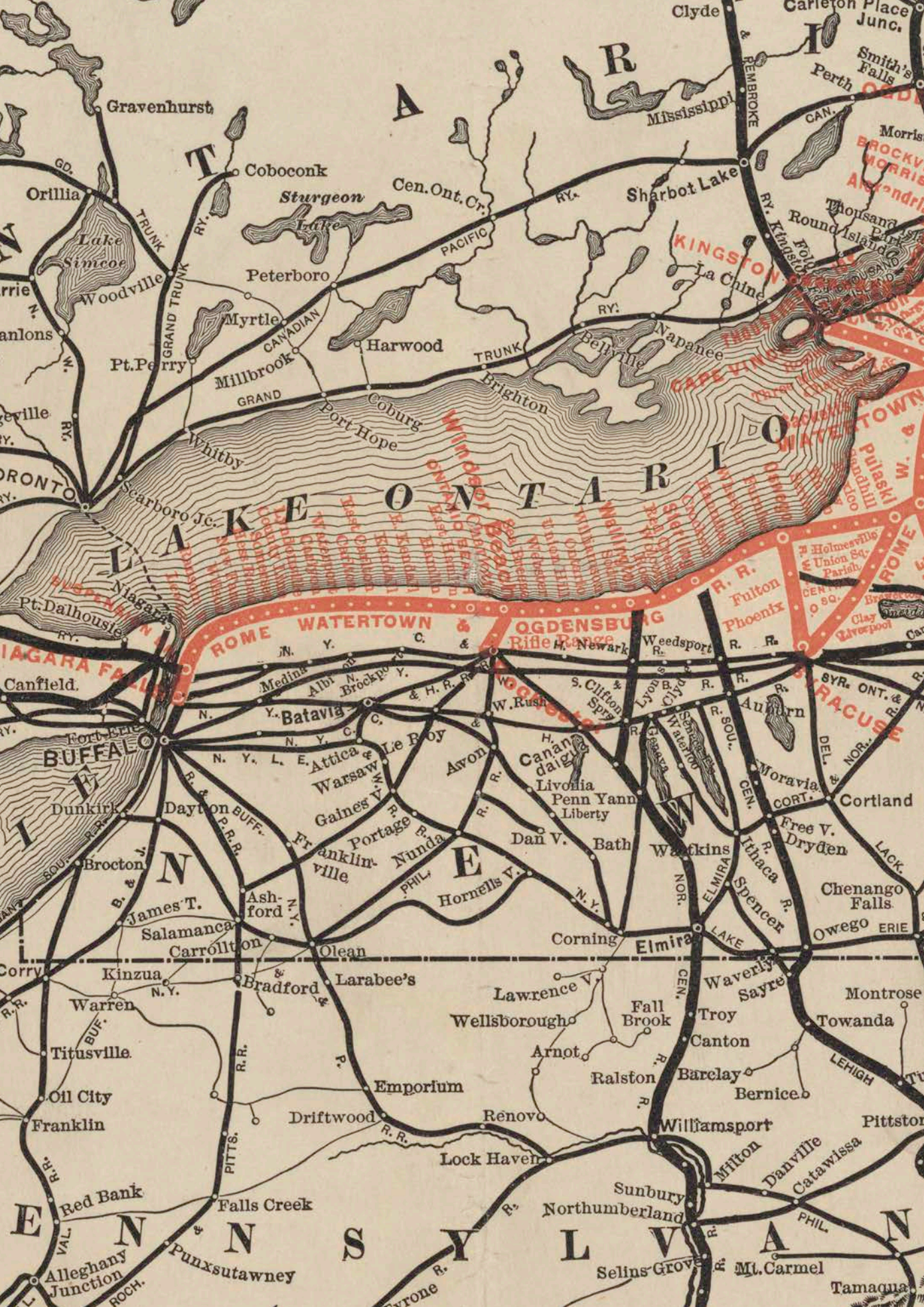
*A student-led literary magazine of the State University of New York*

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**gandy dancer** /ˈɡɑn dē ˌdɑns ər/ *noun*

1. a laborer in a railroad section gang that 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.

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

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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.

We use Submittable to manage submissions and the editorial process. Prospective authors can submit at [gandydancer.submittable.com/submit](http://gandydancer.submittable.com/submit). Please use your SUNY email address for your user account and all correspondence.

*Gandy Dancer* will accept up to three submissions from an author at a time.

**FICTION:** We accept submissions up to 25 pages. Stories must be double-spaced. We are unlikely to accept genre or fan-fiction.

**CREATIVE NONFICTION:** We accept submissions up to 25 pages. CNF must be double-spaced.

**POETRY:** Three to five poems equal one submission. Poems must be submitted as a single document. Format as you would like to see them in print. Our text columns are generally 4.5 inches wide, at 11pt font.

**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.

Please visit us at [www.gandydancer.org](http://www.gandydancer.org), or scan the qr code below.

Questions or comments? Send us an email at [gandydancer@geneseo.edu](mailto:gandydancer@geneseo.edu)



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*Special thanks to the Parry family*



# Dear Readers,

Normally we take time here to welcome you into the issue, and to tie the works within it together in a way that gives you some sense of the context of the journal and the value of our mission. The present being what it is, we feel an even more pressing urge to speak deep truths about literature, art, and life. It's time to be profound. Please excuse us if we are not up to the task.

COVID-19 has transformed the context of our production and the daily context of all of our lives. The death toll in New York state alone has, at the time of writing this, surpassed 15,000. The struggles for all people, but especially the most vulnerable in our society, are severe. Given the transition to online education, the production of *Gandy Dancer* was different than it has ever been before. Due to the cancelation of our Visiting Writers series, you will note that this semester's publication lacks our usual book review and author interview.

Luckily, technology has allowed us to stay connected enough to produce a journal we're proud of, even in the wake of the unrest around us. *Gandy Dancer's* mission is to connect readers, writers, and artists of all kinds across all SUNY schools. How timely. It's easy to feel isolated in a time where we're not in our classrooms, we're not attending club meetings, and we're not making art in the same way we were. But many of us are still making art.

Engaging with that art and literature feels equal parts impossible and necessary. We offer you this journal as a multipurpose tool. That is to say, we hope you will utilize this journal in whatever way, or ways, you need. Two purposes strike us as equally important. The first being escape, whether that be into the lives of characters and speakers, or into the words of a poem. We cannot, in good conscience, call *Gandy Dancer* a light read, but the contents of this issue are as engaging and vital as ever.

The second purpose we seek with this issue is one of reckoning. Through our "Remote Voices: Posts from the Pandemic" section, we want to invite you to face this moment through art. Why engage with challenging things during a challenging time? Maybe because when everything is terrible, sometimes it is just as relieving to cry as it is to laugh. Maybe because it is comforting to see you are not the only one who is angry and confused and worried. Find catharsis in the idea that, as Evan Goldstein puts it in his poem "Litany in April," "your kindness was good, your anger / is good...and you were good."

With that being said, we encourage you, to the very best of your ability, to continue making and enjoying art. *Gandy Dancer* exists as a lasting testament to the connections we have to each other, through the SUNY System, and

beyond that, the connection we have to all people through our creative work. Maintain existing connections, make new connections when possible, and support one another endlessly. You are not alone in this.

Your friends,

Nicole Callahan & Natalie Hayes  
April 2020



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*Cover photo: Frank—Brian Menia*





# **Gandy Dancer**





# if you have ghosts (you have everything)

i never met my grandfather till today—

he dies in 1975  
and today he was born  
at the bottom of a drawer in the kitchen,  
his coffin and crib:  
he is swaddled in moth-eaten dish towels  
by a nameless undertaker  
or perhaps the autophagic author himself

his crib and coffin:  
he was buried a lifetime,  
deaf to my own cacophonous et cetera

amidst cardboard boxes  
he arises, stretches  
and sits on our couch, transparent and whispering  
his earliest recollections in ink from distant trenches:  
he eats sliced-up milky way bars,  
listens to little orphan annie and the manhattan rainstorms  
as they flood his empty pillowcase;

my earliest recollection is a blank notebook,  
never happened,

didn't fall from the sky till three-quarters of a century later,  
in drops of impossible invisible ink

in 1934 i smell decades-old storms,  
tobacco smoked by children  
and today he tastes dough  
from hands of women he could have loved

together we break toys, apologize to our ghosts  
listen to drops on macadam phantoms.

we think tonight was cloudy.

we left identical sleigh tracks in identical snow  
laughed identical laughs whose echoes and imprints  
are separated only by city and by many, many newspapers.

we remembered the same sun,  
the same rain and lightning

and we both wrote that we might be heard over the century's thunder  
but stopped, hid, tired, retired—

shaking hands  
halfway to tomorrow,  
never touching—

two strange strangers  
left sleepless and motionless in the same notebooks,  
the same house:  
in the same cradles and the same coffins.

# autophobe

i laugh without listening  
and cancel all my plans

in black and white  
dressing every windshield in dew

i dream of you in bars  
in bars  
i wake up wallowing  
hollow  
in all our distances and headaches

every day a virgin hangover  
my dry eyes are roof tiles  
in wait  
for acid to come pouring  
out of a cracked ceramic sky

umbrellaless

i cancel plans 'cause of my veins'  
caramel sludge cravings ever  
clear embers and  
candy climbing tumbles  
i crumple through the openings  
of every suburban sliding glass door



to sear the acoustics of some stranger's  
morning cigarettes

make clouds  
and disappear into vapor-burned valleys

i cancel plans 'cause the moon has been full for three months  
and the atmosphere's been seizing grandly  
in time to my throat's theatrics,

in time to the tics of my lighter's  
flickers and clicking calls

that won't stop  
'cause i don't leave my bed

# The Biggest Drill

During high school, Missy worked part-time at Gino's Pizzeria. The summer after she graduated, the manager promoted her to a full-time position. She got a new red T-shirt with *GINOS* stamped across the chest in white letters, and most days she wore a red bandana over her dark hair to match.

The guys from Connolly Carpentry showed up in July. That first time, Missy watched them emerge from the Catholic church across the street and point to Gino's. One man shoved open the door with his shoulder and the shop filled instantly with their laughter and complaints.

"Christ, it's hot in here."

"You're telling me," said Missy. "What can I get you?"

"A cold beer, for the love of God." The voice that answered was husky but high-pitched, with a thick Jersey accent. Missy looked for its owner and was surprised to see a woman on the crew. Or something like a woman, anyhow. Her hair was dark and curly, like Missy's, but she kept it tucked under a Yankees cap instead of a bandana. She was short and broad, and the outline of a sports bra showed through her company T-shirt. She spoke like she was throwing something.

"Drill Bit, you better hope the foreman doesn't catch you with a beer," said one of the carpenters, bumping her with his elbow. He was a doughy blond guy with translucent eyelashes.

Drill Bit's face split with a conspiratorial smile. "He won't know if you don't tell him."

"He's tired of your shit," mumbled another carpenter. He looked the oldest, perhaps due to his bald pink head.

The crew sat on stools at the plastic counter and called for five beers and two pepperoni pies, then ripped into one another until their pizzas arrived.

The guys were so big and the stools were so small that they looked like top-heavy beige flamingos suspended on one leg.

As Missy set their pizzas on the counter, redolent of hot oil and oregano, she said, "I haven't seen you all before. Are you new in town?"

"We're here on a job, refinishing the pews in that church," said the blond carpenter.

"That one across the street?" Missy pointed.

He nodded.

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing's wrong," the blond carpenter replied. "They just need a new coat of stain."

"I'm glad we're refinishing, not replacing them," Drill Bit added. "Under all that wear, they're beautiful old pews. Solid maple."

"You won't be so glad after a full day of scrubbing seats," said the bald carpenter. He looked at Missy and winked. "She's an apprentice, so she gets the shit jobs."

"Thanks for that," said Drill Bit, looking straight ahead into the kitchen.

To change the subject, Missy asked, "Is Drill Bit a nickname?"

Drill Bit lifted a slice off the pan, stretching ropes of mozzarella until they snapped. "Of course it is." Having separated her slice from the pie, Drill Bit squinted at Missy's name tag. "Is Missy a nickname?"

"No, that's actually my name. Why do they call you Drill Bit?"

The bald carpenter threw an arm around Drill Bit's shoulders and grinned. "It's 'cause she's little, but she's got the biggest drill on the crew!"

Drill Bit ducked out of his grasp and rested her elbow on the counter. Missy caught her eye, and Drill Bit shrugged.

The crew teased Missy, describing the potency of the enormous drill. With a tool like that, they assured her, Drill Bit could screw anything. Missy played innocent, asking them if it was difficult to refinish furniture and how long it took. They said they didn't expect this job to take longer than a week.

For a while Drill Bit said nothing, she just smiled as Missy danced around their innuendos with practiced expertise. Under her eyes, Missy felt elegant and in the know. If there was any danger here, it came from her and not the five large men she worked with.

They finished eating within twenty minutes and left a big tip. Drill Bit was the last one out the door, and as she left, she said, "My real name is Casey. In case you wanted to know."

Casey's crew returned on Tuesday and then again on Wednesday. On Thursday, during a story about a beehive in the wall of a client's house, Casey caught Missy staring from behind the register. "*She* knows what I mean," said Casey. "I bet bees follow her everywhere thinking she's a flower. Right, sweetheart?"

There was a beat of silence as Casey, her crew, and Missy's coworkers waited for Missy to deflect. But she didn't. She stood with a stupid smile on her face and color in her cheeks. Behind her, a cook chuckled. "I don't think so," she said at last.

Casey raised her eyebrows.

Missy cringed through the rest of her shift. She worried that Casey's crew would stop coming in, but the next day they were back and more boisterous than ever. At first, she was relieved, but then she noticed a sharpness to the crews' jokes, an edge directed at Casey. They shoved her and grinned at Missy and returned to the subject of Casey's drill. They grew more insistent as their lunch hour waned. Before they left, Casey wrote her number on the back of the receipt and returned it to Missy.

"Let me take you out," she said.

The crew snickered, ready for Missy to lay their doubts to rest.

Missy heard herself say, "Okay."

As soon as the door slammed behind Casey, the cook whooped. "All right, Missy!"

"That's enough," said her manager. Missy didn't dare turn her head. She didn't want to catch his eye or see his tight, knowing smile. It was unprofessional to accept the phone numbers of cocky dykes on company time.

The other waitress, Kendall, sidled up and nudged her. "Look at you," she said. She smiled but not at Missy. She grinned with her eyes on the door.

"I don't know why I did that."

"I think *I* do."

"That's enough, Kendall," said the manager.

Kendall lowered her voice. "All this time I've been dishing about my boyfriend, and you never had anything to say. Now I know why."

"It's not like that," said Missy, slapping her palm on the counter over Casey's receipt. She dragged her palm to the edge of the counter and let the receipt drop into the trash can below.

Behind them, the cook laughed. "So, what? You said yes to not hurt her feelings?"

"You're too sweet, Missy," said Kendall. "You better learn to say no or people will take advantage."

Missy pocketed the receipt when she took it out of the trash. After work, as she walked home along the highway, she pinched and worried the paper, wondering what to do. Kendall had offered to drive her, but Missy refused because she didn't want to be interrogated.

It took her forty-five minutes to reach the narrow clapboard house where she'd grown up. She sat on the steps out front, peeled off her sweaty jacket,

and fished out the receipt to take a closer look. To her horror, she saw that the ink had smeared, obscuring Casey's phone number. The fives resembled sixes and the ones could have been sevens or vice versa.

Once she realized some smudged ink might prevent her from calling Casey, she stopped wondering what to do with Casey's number. Missy knew she wanted to call her, she just needed to figure out how. On the same receipt, below the smudged number, she wrote out as many possible combinations as she could think of. She swapped fives for sixes and ones for sevens, keeping the legible numbers constant. Then she dialed each possibility on her smartphone, one by one, until she heard Casey's voice on a voicemail recording. Missy hadn't expected Casey to pick up anyway—she didn't know anyone her age who picked up calls from random numbers, and Casey didn't look more than a few years older.

*Casey here. You know what to do.*

"Hey," Missy said after the beep. "It's Missy. From the pizza shop. I just thought I would call." She hung up because she didn't know what else to say, and fretted until she felt her phone vibrate in her back pocket during dinner.

She bolted up from the table.

"You okay?" asked her dad, pausing with a can of beer halfway to his lips.

"Sit down," her mom demanded. "We're saying grace."

"It's my friend," said Missy, improvising. "She needs homework help."

"Didn't you graduate?" quipped her older sister Bree.

"Yeah, but she didn't," Missy snapped.

"Sit down," her mom said again. "We'll say grace and then you can go."

Missy bowed her head, heart pounding, and listened to her dad recite a prayer in Polish.

*Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty.*

The prayer was short, so Missy had time to get to her bedroom before she answered the phone.

"Hey, Missy. Sorry I missed you before."

"It's okay! No problem at all."

"Is this a good time to talk? You seem out of breath."

Missy made an effort to slow her breathing. "No, no. Now's a good time. What's up?"

Casey laughed. "I guess—I want to know if you want to see me. When we're both off the clock."

"Yes."

When Missy didn't elaborate, Casey asked, "So...are you free tomorrow night?"

"You mean Saturday? Saturday I'm free." She paused, then forced herself to continue. "Let's drive somewhere new. I'm sick of Bayonne."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll think of someplace," said Casey. "Is that where you live, Bayonne? Can I pick you up?"

Missy struggled to think of a suitably anonymous meeting place. Her house was out of the question, as was Gino's Pizzeria. In the end, she gave the name of a local Korean grocery because none of her parents' friends shopped there.

As soon as she hung up, Missy felt overwhelmed by the task of dressing for their date. In high school, she'd dressed in whatever clothes her peers wore, noting the most popular styles of blue jeans and ballet flats. She saved her paychecks and bought the right brand of backpack. She gravitated toward shirts with brand names splashed across the front. Now that she worked full time she wore her Gino's T-shirt almost every day.

But with Casey, she couldn't rely on context to dress. She didn't know Casey from high school, and she certainly couldn't wear her employee uniform on their date. The thought of dressing like Casey, in Carhartts and flannel, crossed her mind. But she couldn't imagine wearing Casey's clothes any more than she could imagine Casey in a dress. The image embarrassed her and brought to mind how appalled she had been by Casey's appearance that first day in the pizza shop. Or maybe she wasn't appalled—maybe that was just the name she gave to feelings of another kind.

After dinner, Missy decided to wear sandals, shorts, and her church cardigan, buttoned up to hide the little gold cross she wore around her neck.

The following evening, Casey picked her up and drove north along the Hudson River, stopping at Liberty State Park. From there they could see the backside of the Statue of Liberty, as well as some of lower Manhattan across the water. Casey parked the car and bought two ice cream cones from a truck. Then they crawled under a railing and found a place to sit on the rocks, with the river just a foot away. The sun set behind them, leaving the cityscape to glitter against a dim eastern sky.

"Have you always lived in Bayonne?" asked Casey, licking a drop off the side of her ice cream cone. Tonight she wore a clean shirt and jeans in addition to her usual Yankees cap.

"Pretty much." Missy smiled. "You know the church you're working on? I grew up going to that church."

Casey grinned and said, "No way!"

Missy remembered her first communion, standing at the altar in a frothy gown. She remembered her first bittersweet sip from the communal goblet, and the ham hocks her mom brought to the potluck after the service. That night, her parents gave her the little gold cross she wore every day, more out of habit than devotion.

"The windows are beautiful," Casey continued. "And so are the pews, with the new stain and all. Do you like going there?"

"I go because I've always gone. My mom likes it."



"And you like going to church with her? Living with her?"

This question struck Missy as condescending. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I just meant, how is that like for you? Tell me about your family."

"My family," said Missy, running a curl between her fingers. "Well, my parents are Polish immigrants. My dad is an electrician and my mom is very Catholic."

Casey raised her eyebrows.

Missy braced herself for more questions about her beliefs, about her mother, but none came. Relieved, she added, "My mom and my sister always butt heads."

"Why?"

Missy rolled her eyes. "A million reasons. Stupid reasons. I think Bree will be happy once she has kids of her own to boss around."

"Oh, she wants to be the boss. I get it, I'm like that too."

Missy felt a little thrill. Then she felt embarrassed and exposed. What was she doing on a dark riverbank with a woman who dressed like a man? Her mother thought she was at Kendall's house. She should be at Kendall's house. If Casey had picked Missy up from her house rather than the Korean grocery, would her mom have shaken Casey's hand?

To distract herself from hypotheticals, Missy said, "Let me tell you about my sister. When I was little, we would play house and she would make me be the dog."

"That's mean."

"It was! Bree would be the mom, our friend would be the dad, and she'd get a doll to be the baby."

"She couldn't let you be the baby?"

"No! I had to be the dog. She made me drink from a cup on the floor—"

Casey laughed so hard Missy had to stop the story.

"You shouldn't laugh so hard at my sad story," she teased, once Casey had recovered.

"It's not the story that's so funny. It's your delivery."

"My delivery?"

"Yeah," said Casey, looking from her to Manhattan. "Like at the pizza shop, when my crew was making dick jokes. You went along with it, all sweet and simple until you looked at me. Then the joke was on them. You know what I'm saying?"

"Not really."

"It's not a bad thing. When I first saw you, I thought you were pretty and mysterious. But I didn't know you were funny until later."

Missy looked down at the Hudson River. She was flattered and flustered, but at the same time she felt criticized. Like she'd been caught in a lie. Missy changed the subject. "Where did you grow up?"

"I live in Newark," said Casey, pulling down the brim of her Yankees cap. "I have an apartment and a couple roommates."

Missy waited for elaboration, then asked, "But where are you from?"

"Trenton. I haven't been back in a while, though."

A drop of sweat slid down Missy's spine. Had Casey's family rejected her? She decided not to press any further and instead pointed across the water. "Do you ever work there?"

"In Manhattan?" Casey laughed bitterly. "No. I'm not ready for a Manhattan job, and if my crew keeps giving me grunt work, I never will be."

"So you've never been?"

"I go to Manhattan every chance I get. Mostly weekends," said Casey, resting her hand on the rock beneath them, behind Missy's back, barely touching her. "You should join me sometime." The phrase was heavy with bravado, so different from the gesture, which was cautious and shy.

Tenderness welled in Missy's chest, and longing. She leaned back, and Casey's arm stiffened to support her weight. Casey's fingers curled around her hip and Missy put her hand on Casey's thigh. She felt muscles tense beneath her hand as she stared across the water, picking out blinking pearls of light, square panels of light, rhinestone strips of light, white-hot balls of light. Rows of windows glistened like scales. She felt the rough cotton of Casey's jeans and the promise of soft skin underneath. She turned away from the lights and toward Casey, tried to kiss her but missed her mouth in the dark, getting her cheek instead and clicking teeth. Casey's hands smelled like some kind of wood, maybe maple, and water rushed past them toward the sea.

"I can tell you more if you want," Casey mumbled.

Missy giggled.

"I can tell you everything I know about Manhattan—the communist bookstore in the Bowery, the lesbian bar that doesn't card, the best cannoli you ever—"

Missy's giggles turned to snorts as she collapsed into Casey's arms.

"Stop laughing, I'm serious. The best cannoli you ever had."

"Shut up, shut up," said Missy, pulling Casey's face to hers.

But as soon as Casey shut up, Missy heard footsteps on the path above. She looked up and saw a figure hurry by, growing smaller already in the distance.

"What's wrong?" asked Casey.

Missy sat up and adjusted her cardigan. "I heard someone."

"Yeah?"

"I know a lot of people in this area. I'm just nervous."

"I thought you lived in Bayonne."

"I do, but some people from my church live here." She paused. "And I'm not gay, you know."

Casey adjusted her cap, ran a hand over her ponytail, and gave a short laugh. “No?”

“No.”

“So you kissed me, what? For the hell of it?”

“No,” Missy blurted. She paused, searching for the words that would manage Casey’s reaction. “I just—I wanted to try it.”

“You were nicer at the pizza shop.”

Missy felt her throat close.

“At least you smell good. You smell like pizza crust.”

“Stop it.” Her voice wobbled.

“Aw, sweetheart.” Casey squeezed her knee. “Can I drive you home?”

Missy sniffled and nodded.

They scrambled off the rocks and back onto the path, where street lamps and a few pedestrians made Missy’s palms sweat and eyes burn. Casey unlocked the car as they approached and opened the door on the passenger side.

As Casey walked around the front of the car to the driver’s seat, Missy blurted, “That wasn’t right, what I said. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Casey paused to kick the front tire of her car. With her eyes on her work boots, she said, “I did think this would make a cute story, though.”

Missy gripped the edge of the car door. “What do you mean?”

“Like, if it worked out between us, if you were the waitress that I met on my lunch break. That would be a cute story.”

On Sunday morning, Missy walked into church and gasped.

“You okay?” her dad asked.

Her mother pulled on her arm. “Missy, you can’t stop in the middle of the aisle.”

“Look at the pews,” said Missy.

“What about them?” said Bree.

“Oh! They’ve been refinished,” said her dad, nodding. “I think Father Kaminski mentioned that was gonna happen last week. Looks nice.”

Missy followed her family to the front of the church. They sat in their usual pew, three rows from the pulpit on the left-hand side. The organ music tapered off and the priest began to speak, but Missy wasn’t listening. She stared down at the pew itself, at the wood beneath her fingertips, wood she would have called yellow just last week. Now she saw tiger stripes in its glossy surface, flashes of bronze and gold, glistening scales, luminous as pearls. *Solid maple*, Casey had said. *Beautiful*.

While her mom gazed at the priest, Missy peeled off her cardigan.

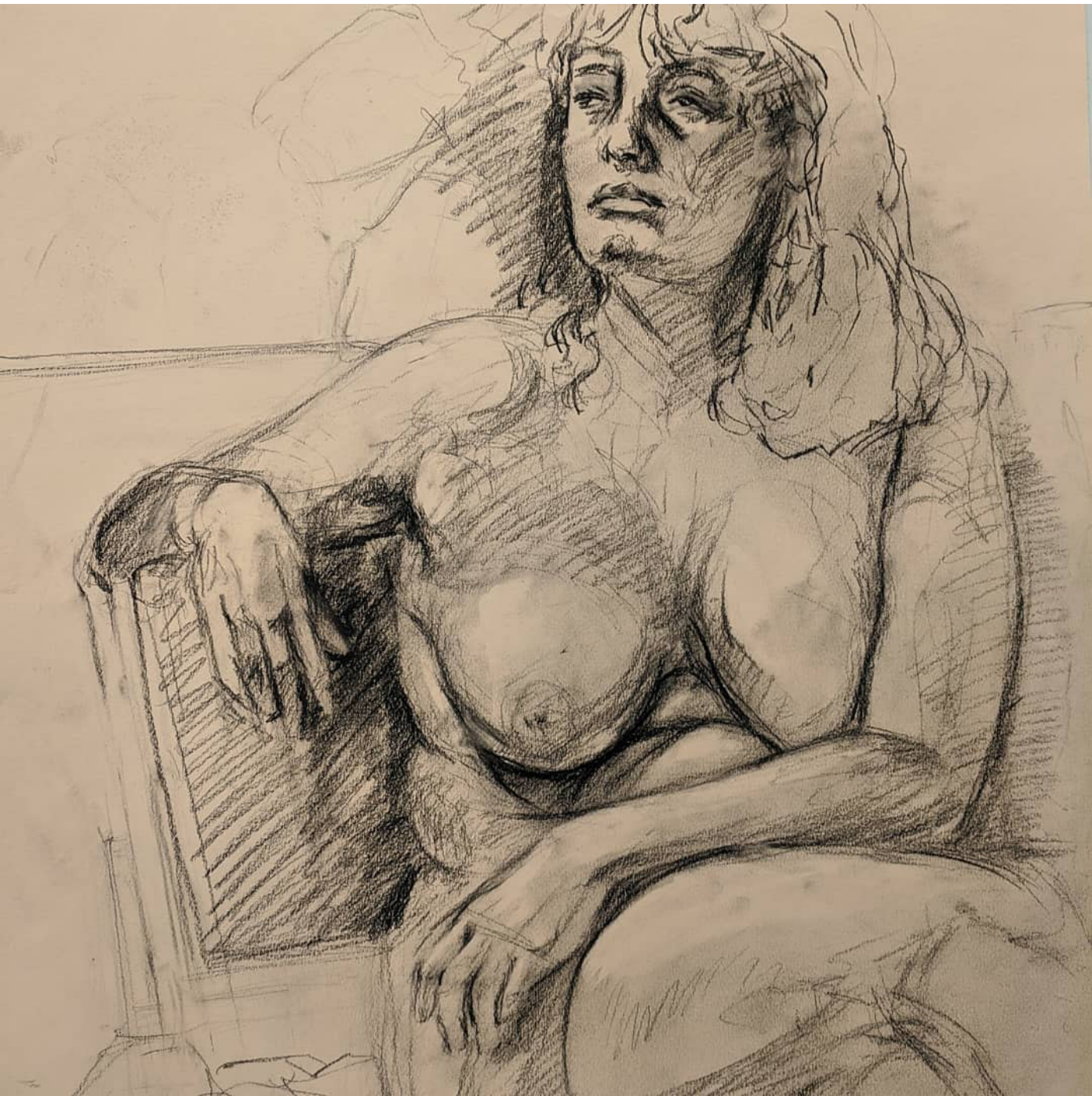
# I have heard You calling in the night

the cheap rusting razor blades  
& sucked in stomach  
plump with ribs and scar tissue  
begging for nourishment, for peace  
the pink glittery knockoff  
sneakers & the way the frogs  
kept her awake  
she blamed the noise  
at least

the darkness of 4:34 a.m., oranges  
& ten-pound eyelids  
questions, caffeine  
the bikini size on the scratchy plastic tag  
not reading the right letter  
the way she hated mirrors

the ripping phone charger & wired earbuds  
the weight of the rain against cracked glass  
an aching head pressed against the cold schoolbus  
window, looking at the blur of cars and lives  
speeding past hers, wondering what must it feel like  
having somewhere to go

metal braces catching on warm cheeks  
& the strange familiarity of the copper taste  
of blood and the color on her wet fingertips  
scratched knees against church pews  
blurry eyes with tunnel vision on a crucifixion  
of her own



*Figure Study* (charcoal on canson), Hunter Celeste



# The Language of Physics Between Two Bodies

Two stars dance about gravitationally; a beauty, she says, in abstraction. Art in motion and in the moments leading up to death; *There's something beautiful*, she says, *in the movement of a thing before it destroys itself*. This happened somewhere between three-and-a-half and six billion years ago, and we're just now able to know it—able, at least, to see it—and those two dispositions somehow seem at odds. The difference between seeing and knowing has something to do with depth, belief, and intimacy. How long has it been since we were truly understood? When was the last time we could say we were known, and have we ever loved? What was it that we as stardust were here to do but dance?

# Miseducation

Reddened sclera surrounding black mirror iris  
matched the heavy hollow color of his pupil.  
I, his son, only first met the man at sixteen.

He taught me mornings are for work,  
evenings are for smoking pot.

He taught me how to turn powder into rock.  
*Use a cold penny, he said—*  
*The magnetic property of copper attracts the oily residue.*

He taught me how to fish  
in the crook of the elbow.  
*Release the tie-off first, then depress the plunger, he said—*  
*Shooting while tied-off, you might blow a vein that way.*

He taught me how to shave:  
with cold water and against the grain.

He never taught me to hold a door for a woman,  
long division,  
or how to turn a wrench.

My father chain-smoked Camels,  
and I am a quick learner.

# Chasing Reflections

It is one thing to recognize who's in the mirror but quite another to feel a connection. I can picture, with an assuredness that makes it scrunch up, every contour of my face, but I cannot bring myself to know it is mine on an emotional level. I can only guess at reflections of faded blue eyes, half-grown eyebrows, and inadvertent scowls to pick myself out from a crowd.

I try to recognize my face under harsh bathroom lighting—all sense of connection warped and washed out. I am seventeen. It is the height of August. I look in my familiar mirror and see a face I don't want, a face of someone stuck in his ways, a face that seems pudgy and dull and repulsive. Maybe it's the bathroom's salmon-pink walls and outdated spherical light fixtures just above the mirror. I watch the mouth hang ajar as I taste something sour. The face is mine, and I know it too well. I stare into my eyes imploring the mirror to change who I am, high on snippets of weight loss stories, warnings from my doctor, and appearance possibilities. I resolve then to lose the physical burden of who I was, not to indulge myself any longer.

I saw, in my mind, the man I wanted to mold out of the fat of a boy, to sculpt with the intention and pride I lacked. In front of the mirror, I imagine my thumb and forefinger pinching and dragging to create prominent cheekbones and a jawline like shattered glass barely covered by tanned skin. I wrangle my nose with a crack and squeeze of its bony bridge, bringing it to a gentle, inconspicuous slope. I try to twist my expression into something new, massaging flesh into a face disinterested in the world. I force open my eyes, so my irises don't simply leak out from squinting eyelids like beady afterthoughts. I rip apart rough blotches of skin and remove the capillaries just under the surface—fingernails negotiating with anatomy to eliminate my propensity to blush. I yank at my cheeks hoping to make my face gaunt and chiseled. I bash in my forehead with the base of my palm in an effort to

combat how far it protrudes. I want a face like a wall, able to wholly contain the humdrum of the restless neuroses going on in my head. I want to create a Frankenstein's monster of myself—an amalgamation of stolen anatomy I could bend to my own vain ideals.

I wanted to construct my face, pick out the pieces and tweak. To choose. To morph and distort to fit my perception of stoic, of attractive. I wanted a face with a stony, unencumbered gaze my mind could attempt to imitate. I wanted everyone to see me, to want me, not this desperate need to chase. I wanted a face that doesn't twitch its pleading eyes around to its own reflection at every turn.

Pleading eyes only go so far for identifying a problem to be changed. You must substantiate a problem before it can be addressed. Food is the problem. Food merges with your identity and self-perception, the fat, the chronic exhaustion, the overeating, the Fluffernutter sandwiches with far too much fluff, the ginger ale you somehow convince yourself it's okay to suck down when you get home from school, the excessive salt of leftover pork chops you scarf down because it makes more sense to finish them up before you make more, the stretch marks that adorn your abdomen and grow up with you, the blue jeans that are more like circus tents, and the person you've become, the only person you know, the person you've resigned to accept.

Eating was a part of my identity. It felt good to taste things and gorge myself beyond the pressure of a full belly, and it was better than doing nothing. Food fills time and space. Eating goes beyond a biological process. Losing weight, like it or not, means losing parts of yourself.

Gym class. Senior year of high school. The assignment is to assess your physical condition by BMI, place yourself in a category—obese, overweight, healthy, or underweight—and evaluate what steps to take to reach “healthy” on a little index card. There's something demoralizing about honesty, accepting the truth about your own wrongdoings, failures, and weaknesses. There's something demoralizing about taking that real look at yourself—to become your own objective mirror. But I was honest then. I sat on a bleacher of beige plastic, seething as I forced my hands to stop trembling. Tennis shoes squeaked on the sticky gloss of the gym floor. *My name is Daniel Fleischman. I am currently obese at seventeen with a weight of 281 pounds. I should eat less and exercise more.*

I didn't follow my own instructions then. I was complicit in letting myself languish in self-destruction. I ate and ate knowing full well the dangers of not being “healthy,” and I went along with it, for nearly eighteen years I went along with it.

I tell people my motivation was my health. That's only half the truth. August, the summer before college, the phone rings. I've been dreading the

call. It was my doctor, a pediatrician who has known me since I was born and watched me grow tall and wide. He was following up on bloodwork from a checkup two weeks earlier.

"Hello?" I say.

"Hi. Is this Daniel Fleischman?" His voice was restrained, languid even, deep and smooth as it always was, paternal in his delivery. He knew just where to inflect, perfect bedside manner. Maybe he's just a good person.

"Hi, Dr. Branch." I begin to pace around my kitchen.

"We have the results back from your blood work." Papers rustle.

There are still scabs from the blood being drawn, my arm too fat to find the vein on the first go. I walk down the hall and into the bathroom, the one with salmon-pink walls and round lights. "Go ahead," I say. I know it isn't going to be good.

"Your blood pressure is a little high; so is your cholesterol. You fall into what we consider pre-diabetic. You're at a heightened risk for type 2 diabetes. If we don't make a change to your diet or exercise routine, your health will remain in question," he says.

I lean on the sink with one elbow, phone in the other, and look down. I couldn't look in the mirror. He reads off several more formalities—tips for portion control, a suggestion to do more cardio, and advice to discuss this with my parents. He asks me if I understand. I do. All the fat and excess skin on my torso droop downwards as my back arches over the sink.

"Thank you for calling, Dr. Branch. I'll eat less and exercise more."

I didn't know if that was a lie or just an empty promise. The least I could do was look in the mirror. I should've been concerned with my health. I was. I am. But, in the moment, all I saw was my ugly face. I didn't want to be ugly. I wanted to be more attractive, slimmer, appealing. I had graduated from high school that June, and I didn't want to be fat through college. I wanted to reinvent myself, rebel like so many others do, become a new person, kiss someone, have sex, lose myself and the face I recognized all too much, and watch it all melt off like quicksilver. I wanted to change the reflection, my outward presentation to the world and all its creatures, at any cost.

The cost was food. About two weeks after I had decided to slim down that summer, my first sacrifice came and went. My family and I went to get ice cream. All four of us: my father who's had salt-and-pepper hair since he was twenty-something. He dyes his hair brown now. He likes navy blue nylon dry-fit shirts and cell phone holders that attach to his belts. He shed the carapace that was his own obesity a couple years before. I can still remember the tattered green recliner that used to creak and whimper under him as he drank coke by the liter and vanilla ice cream by the tub before passing out, not to be disturbed. My father's weight left with that chair, yet the memory lingers. My mother who has hazel hair that curls down to her shoulders and frames

a round face. Her presence brings the word *jolly* to mind, but you bite your tongue because that would be an awful thing to say. She once looked like me. She feeds the family. Every morning and night for our entire lives, she has fed us. She takes pride in feeding us, but she turns down compliments. A good cook, nothing more. Food made us happy, so she fed us. Us, as in my sister who pretends not to care, and me. My sister who was as voracious as me but smiled more, who doubted I could shed the pounds that she hasn't managed to, who was most surprised to see me thin, who, I believe, feels guilt over that doubt in hindsight.

We went to an ice cream stand called King Kone whose sign is a creepy ice cream cone with a face: smug, smirking, and cold. Its cheeks are permanently red and reminded me of my own. I saw my face in the sign's undefined jawline and head, round like a marshmallow. It seemed to laugh at me as it taunted my stomach into rumbling.

"What are you gonna get, Dan?" my sister asks as we drive up, my eyes still observing the sign.

"Nothing."

"He's been eating less, Jess, honey. You know that," my mother says, coming to my defense as she often does.

"But you have to have some," my sister insists, digging her finger into my cheek. "Why did you even come with us if you're not getting any ice cream?"

"I wanted to spend time with you guys," I say in good faith, while swatting her hand away with rotund fingers, fully aware food is what brings families, ours included, together. When you're eating, you don't have to talk. We pull into the parking lot.

My usual order was a medium chocolate-vanilla twist with rainbow sprinkles, always rainbow sprinkles. Instead I feast my eyes on familial tongues shoveling the frozen custard into their mouths. I surprise myself when I am actually able to hold back and not get a cone. *All I have to do is not eat. The more you put in, the more weight you'll put on. Not doing something is easier than doing something.* Thoughts followed me around as a hundred pounds sloughed off like an insect's molt. I watched my reflection in the side window the whole way home.

You must commit to losing weight; eating is a choice that can be denied. All I did was cut calories, limit portion size, and, well, skip meals. Breakfast was out, and lunch was something I learned to go without most days—a secret deprivation I held close to my slimming chest when my mother called and asked if I was eating. Fall semester, freshman year of college was colored by dizzy spells and the warm, fuzzy black of failing peripheral vision when I stood up too fast. I only fainted once.



I got out of bed and stood on legs that gave out like the spongy grilled chicken I would allow myself. A tingling sensation originating from my stomach climbed up my spine. My vision went to black, then I felt my knees, my forearms hit the floor, and then my head hit the dresser. But I was fine, resilient, strong. I had resolve.

I knew what I was doing was wrong and destructive and too far in the other extreme. I knew that in the moment, and I know that much better now looking back. I can't change my actions, though, especially when I reap the benefits now. I can't condemn myself for my past methods when I'm content with the results in the present. All I can do is accept it and move on.

I knew I had succeeded, and I wanted others to know, too—to look up at the cliff I stood atop, the one that had taken so long to climb. After freshman year of college, a year after I began to lose the weight, I went to see Dr. Branch for another checkup. I told my mother I wanted to make sure everything was up to par in terms of health, but, deep down, I wanted to be praised.

I drive to his office, stealing glances at myself in the rearview mirror. I park and step out, my eyes jump from window to window in search of better views of myself. I step through the automatic doors. The waiting room is empty besides a receptionist, a rainbow of plastic children's chairs, and a fish tank. I sit across from the fish tank and meet my own eyes in the reflection while I pretend to watch fish. The seat feels so much better when you can fit in it. I am called into the office.

There, I strip to my boxers and mess with the scale, satisfied. Dr. Branch walks in.

"Wow, look at you! You look great," he says.

I smile.

"This is absolutely fantastic. I can see you've really taken your health to heart. This is one of the most drastic improvements I've seen in my career. You've made my week, Daniel. How'd you do it?"

"Portion control." I don't tell him about starving myself.

Frankenstein's monster was beautiful before it came to life. Is guilt the right word for what I felt? Maybe. Or was it pride? Acceptance, regret, shame, control, or strength, perhaps? Did I hate who I was or simply want to improve? Did I just switch from gluttony to vanity, indulging my thin dreams pulled taut like a sheet over a bottomless pit of insecurity rather than resigning myself to a life of endless pepperoni and onion pizzas? These are the thoughts that enter my mind when I look in a mirror. I don't have answers. They just float around in space as I look myself in the eye with a dash of pity and glimmers of satisfaction, my hands resting on the cold porcelain of my sink. I can't help but watch my reflection match my stride and meet my eyes in a window

as I walk past. I try to grab my thoughts as I ogle the image of my face in the screen of my phone. I'm forced to meet my own gaze, myself a reflection, as I try to find the line between new and old.

People throw the word "journey" around like it means something. I stood still, and the world moved around me, twisting and distorting like rolls of fat moving out like a shockwave, as if someone smacked my gut when I was seventeen. I chose to stop moving, forego who I was a hundred pounds ago in favor of a face I didn't know in a reflection I'd never seen. I thought I could be better. I thought losing weight would do that. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* ends in a long, desperate chase: Victor Frankenstein chases his creation, his monster, the reflection of his and humanity's greatest delusions, into frozen tundra and death. Then the monster mourns.

For a long time, I would look at mirrors and want to see something else, but I never sloughed off my cynical, self-serving doubts that a thin me would ever be me. Thin is impossible; fat is forever. But now I am thin, and I look at myself at every chance I get, and I like what I see, but I get absorbed in forehead wrinkles and the pronounced brow bone that remain. Now, I look at mirrors to make sure I never go back. I fill my hand with the same kind of fat, there's just less of it. The stretch marks are still there—tiny ravines of skin stretched paper thin that look like they could tear at any time. Thin is possible; flaws are forever. I don't think I've even moved an inch.

All I heard for a while were faceless "Congratulations!" and "You've lost so much weight! You look so good!" or, like my cousin before a light Thanksgiving dinner, "I didn't even recognize you!" If I could work up the nerve, I would smile and hug them and feel hands on my shoulder blades. I'm the only one who's allowed to question if it's really me.

I never lost the weight of what I saw in the mirror that summer. I just held myself back, never eating or accepting. I know lots of people don't feel quite right in their own skin—or fat for that matter—but they move on in stride. In my eyes, they do not get stuck in their reflection and peer at windows or chrome finish or TV screens looking for someone who isn't there and who they're scared to ever have back. The world stops. When I walk past a window, I indulge myself. I indulge myself. I indulge myself beyond recognition.

I peer at the handsome reflection rather than through the window. There is another me looking back through the same pane. He knows every secret about me; I know every secret about him. He knows what I've gained, and I know what he's lost. I see someone who could've kept the pounds with the lick of an ice cream cone with rainbow sprinkles. Only chance divides past and present. Either one of us could be the one on the outside looking in, haunting the other, both apparitions bound by actions and inactions, the same person underneath the fat. I force myself to relearn, without even slowing my pace, who is stuck inside the glass.



*Two to One* (stoneware), Erin Doescher

# You don't even live there anymore

We used to sit inside rhododendron  
and leave our legs dangling

I used to sit starving on your couch  
that was falling apart; that stuck to our  
thighs and smelled like vinyl

While you reheated leftovers all alone  
even though you were just eight at most

We used to hurl ourselves into the bright  
green chasm in your backyard

And we would sometimes sleep under the stars

You were my sister and your sisters were my sisters  
and I wonder now if you all are still

Do we presently belong to each other at all?

How do I  
combat the flux  
the way time races  
like how the water

would flood across the barnacles  
we used to scrape our toes on

Was it all a pipe dream? To happen upon  
artificial sisters who lived and loved in an  
island of their own?  
Who used to dance across a neck in a  
minivan to buy their eggs

Why did we come apart and why did you  
let us; why did I?

I wouldn't recognize your kitchen now  
It's renovated and there's only one fridge  
instead of the unusual two  
and cabinets.

# Under the aEgis

There is a certain calm in the barracks at this hour, in the half hour after dinner and before evening roll call. The unspoken agreement here is that even amidst the wide expanse of the barracks, this half hour belongs to each man, and is his alone. Private Yun Ji-sung watches his unit leader, Corporal Kim Jae-hyun, lounge in the corner and go about his evening routine. He has flipped his beret into a makeshift bowl full for chips. The latest music video from BLACKPINK is stuck on repeat on the screen in front of him, its repetitive chorus ringing off the metal cots.

Corporal Kim powers through a third bag of chips. What a fucking pig, Ji-sung thinks. With an overhead announcement that it is twenty-one-fifty, the TV turns automatically to the evening news. Before the screen's static has a chance to settle, the corporal grunts and reaches over with his toe, pushing the off button. Ji-sung wonders if he could follow this man into war. The men turn to each other and talk about the day, their girlfriends, dinner.

The metal cots ring with the grunts of bored men doing pushups. Ji-sung watches one man across the hall grunt between sets of twelve pushups. "If I make ninety-two pushups in under a minute," he says, "I can get three extra days off next month." He flips over onto his back, huffing as he comes up for air.

Ji-sung winces as Corporal Kim tunes the barracks' decade old guitar for the thousandth time, all the while insisting that "Wonderwall" by Oasis is worth playing daily. Since the workday has ended, Corporal Kim wears his uniform unzipped, exposing a burgeoning belly filled with ramen and snacks from the on-base convenience store. Ji-sung watches him strum away, making the guitar strings shinier with each pass of his fingers. Within a few chords Ji-sung is entranced. Corporal Kim might be a pig but he sure sounds like an angel.



In the cot adjacent to the corporal's, Ji-sung sits at his cot with a journal in his lap. *Day 5*, he scrawls. *First night on patrol. I should call Mom. I miss JiYeon...* He stops, not sure what else to say. He looks up at the wall-mounted clock, watching the second hand tick away. It's 9:50 PM—no, it's twenty-one-fifty. He has to remind himself he's a soldier now, and that's how soldiers speak. A wad of paper enters his peripheral vision and lands near his chest.

"Shit, sorry Private. I was aiming for that broken record to your left."

Ji-sung looks up to see Corporal Lee Min-ho grinning down at him. The corporal's body shines bright and tan after five hundred days of labor under the sun. His lean and mean workout routine is visible beneath his undershirt, fatigues, and loosened boots.

"Ji-sung, was it?"

Private Yun nods.

"I think we're paired up for patrol tonight."

Private Yun shrugs.

"Your unit leader didn't tell you? At twenty-two hundred, two men from the barracks go up into the mountains to check the Super aEgis II turrets in our sector. In ten minutes, kid."

*I said maaaybe, you're gonna be the one that saaaves me*, Corporal Kim sings.

Corporal Lee retrieves the wad of paper and hurls it at Corporal Kim.

"Yeah, yeah," Corporal Kim says, tucking the guitar away beneath his cot.

Corporal Lee reaches over and ruffles the little hair that Ji-sung has. "I'll see you soon, Private Yun."

Ji-sung runs his hands through the remnants of his hair, feeling where he had longer locks just seven weeks before, six weeks in boot camp and a week at his assigned base. His fingers settle on the red grooves created by the interior netting of the helmets, created to provide support. He rubs the almost bloody welts, hoping to massage some circulation back into his skull. Ji-sung slips his journal underneath his pillow, hoping he will have more to write about when he wakes up. He hopes he will sleep better. Lately, his dreams are of rolling around in dirt. In uniform, crawling through barbed wire. A canteen, shovel, extra magazines, radio are all clipped to his waist and with every wriggle, they get snagged on the barbed wire just inches from his face. The world is on fire and the war is real. Other nights, he dreams he is a small turtle, and the helmet is his shell, its rough canvas interior netting chafing his whole body. Either way, he wakes feeling itchy and trapped. Ji-sung wonders if the others have similar nights. He hopes they do. He hopes all these men have had similar nights and that their dreams faded with time. Six hundred more days, he tells himself. Ji-sung clips his tactical vest at his sternum, secures the helmet at his chin with a wince and pulls his bootstraps up.

Corporal Lee whirls by Ji-sung, with boots polished darker than the war-paint Ji-sung used at boot-camp. “Up and at ‘em,” he says to Private Yun; then back at the barracks in general, he shouts, “The war hasn’t ended yet!”

After yanking up his boots, Ji-sung catches up to his corporal. Corporal Lee’s knuckles ring dully on the wrought iron doors of the armory. They duck in as rain begins to fall, trekking in size eleven and nine boot prints. Corporal Lee salutes the draftee on duty, Sergeant Park Kyu-jin, who has his feet up, bootlaces undone, and a copy of *Die Another Day* in his hand. After dismissing the salute with a flick of his eye, the sergeant waves his hand toward the racks of K2 rifles. Ji-sung stands still. He looks at Sergeant Park, then at Corporal Lee.

“Did Corporal Kim teach you nothing? The lower ranking soldier signs the paperwork and then I retrieve the rifles.”

“Sir.”

Ji-sung reaches down to the desk, hurriedly scrawling *Yun Ji-sung / Private / 17-5401254 / 20:50*. Below that, he writes *Lee Min-ho / Corporal / 16-76045990 / 20:50*.

Above them, the rain picks up; the slats that make up the roof are thundering across the armory, shaking the iron cage that holds the rifles. Corporal Lee reaches inside the cage to collect both his and Ji-sung’s rifle, pausing just for a moment to listen to the gathering storm.

“Sarge, are you sure it’s safe for us to go out there?”

Sergeant Park doesn’t look up from his book.

“What do you mean, Corporal?” Ji-sung asks, looking from his accompanying corporal to the sergeant on duty. In the ensuing ten seconds of silence, the rain fills all of their ears.

“It’s raining, Sergeant Park.”

The sergeant puts the book down and looks directly at Corporal Lee. “Good, you can place a tarp over the aEgis II turret on your way. The damn thing has been reporting heat signatures just past the steel fence, go check it out.”

Corporal Lee sighs and motions for Ji-sung to bring along two rain ponchos from the desk. They throw them over themselves and are enveloped by a mass of camouflage print. The corporal retrieves a radio off the shelf, and they head out into the mountain. Ji-sung sees Corporal Lee swing his rifle to his back, breaking protocol. They are taught to always be alert on patrol, to heed regulation. But it’s wet and late. They are tired; so they break protocol. After a while, the rain slows to a trickle and they march side by side, trekking up the usual path lined by dirt-filled tires.

“Chin up, Private Yun. This shouldn’t take long.”

“Sir.”

They continue along the path, grunting as they go uphill.

"I tried my best back there, you know."

"Sir?"

"To get us out of this bullshit duty. Whether we do this or not"—Corporal Lee gestures around them, catching drops of rain in his palm—"doesn't change much." That thing up there? The Super aEgis II has night vision and can shoot accurately up to four kilometers. It's basically a stationary Terminator."

"If you say so, sir."

Ji-sung and Corporal Lee keep on moving, looking just ahead. Left boot, right boot. The butt of his rifle slaps into Ji-sung's left shoulder, just into his wing-bone. He reaches up and adjusts his flashlight so that it points downward. Out in the dark and wild, he only concerns himself with what he can immediately see. There is the wetness of the leaves and dirt all around him, and he finds himself thinking how easy it would be to just lie down in the softness and rest. Just for a minute. He feels the rain seep through the poncho onto his fatigues. He'll feel the cold in his bones soon.

"Do you smoke, Private Yun?" It is less a question and more a statement.

"Sir?"

Corporal Lee points to a stone shelter just ahead. Maybe twenty steps. It looks like it's barely big enough for two men, if that. Ji-sung remembers that in his initial training he was told to take cover there during active conflict and fire north; really, it has turned into a pit stop for soldiers on their nightly patrol. The corporal drags Ji-sung inside and the poncho and fatigues settle onto their skin. Ji-sung imagines himself a snake in the barracks, shedding all these green layers. In the comfort of the stone shelter, Corporal Lee slips out a pack of Marlboro Ice Blasts from a pocket inside his fatigues and taps one out.

"You're Delta Unit?"

"Yes, sir."

Corporal Lee exhales with a laugh. The cold air and the mint of the cigarette clash in the few inches they share. "I'm sorry about your unit leader, Kim Jae-hyun. He was born in the year of the pig and he thinks he can use that excuse to the absolute fullest."

Ji-sung isn't sure how to answer, especially when he isn't addressed by his rank. "So what's out there, Corporal Lee?"

Min-ho continues to smoke his cigarette, looking into the leaves that sway in the wind.

"Legend has it, the souls of boys who were virgins when they were drafted. They roam the DMZ, doomed to roam no-man's land until every draftee gets laid."

Ji-sung looks quickly away. A spurt of smoke escapes his nostrils as he hides a laugh.

"Really though, I hear conservationists have discovered species of tigers and birds native to our country, thought to be extinct, in the DMZ," Corporal Lee says.

"How did they get there?" Ji-sung looks into the darkness, as if expecting to see the moonlight glint off a tiger's claws.

"I'm sure those nature nerds got permission to venture into some DMZ areas with some fancy binoculars." The corporal shrugs, tapping the cigarette with his index finger.

"So, the Super aEgis II turret, " Ji-sung says, "is it true it can fire in the dark?"

"Yes, and it's so accurate, it can blow that zit off your forehead."

"Huh."

"What, Private?"

Ji-sung takes a long drag off his cigarette. He embraces the nicotine entering his blood stream, imagining that it is actually entering through the space between his index and middle finger. He feels the tension that has built up his neck and elbow joints. "Sir, won't it still be wet in the morning? And if it's so efficient, why are we even here?"

"Yeah, kid." Corporal Lee taps the end of his cigarette with his index finger. His eyes follow the clump of ash down and watch it disintegrate into a puddle by his boot. "How was boot camp? You arrived here last week, which means you graduated boot camp just over a week ago."

"Sir. It was all flowers and sunshine. You know how it goes."

Corporal Lee spurts out a mentholated laugh. "I suppose. It's been so long, I can't even remember how my boot camp was."

Ji-sung notes the hints of aging on his young corporal and wonders what that is like. He looks up, lighting up the inside of the hut with his flashlight. Some of the smooth patches of stone are inked in marker by the soldiers who have passed through: *LYS 3.14.2012* and in another corner, *KHY 5.16.2015*. Corporal Lee catches Ji-sung's eye.

"Here."

The private looks down, sees a hand holding a faded marker.

"Go on."

Ji-sung accepts the marker and uncaps it. He reaches up to a small patch of smooth stone and scribbles. *Yun Ji-sung 11.31.2020* and next to it, *Lee Min-ho 5.21.2019*. Maybe in two years he'll take a fresh-faced private up here and scribble proof that he's done his 600 days of soldiering. Who knows, maybe the war will have ended before then.

Their cigarettes start to flicker out. Ji-sung mimics his corporal as he drops the butt, stomps it out, and scoots it into a corner of the shelter. The rain falling from their rifle tips makes a clicking sound on the stone floor. The

canvas rifle strap, the metal clutches on their tactical vests, the unwelcoming wet cloth of their fatigues, all seem to weigh more now.

"Just a few more minutes, then we'll reach the turret. Let's cover it up and go home," Corporal Lee says.

Ji-sung wonders how it would be to use his rifle as a walking stick. After all, it *is* just the right length. "Do you have a girlfriend, sir?"

Corporal Lee almost stops; surprised a private would speak first. "No, kid. I don't. Too much of a headache while you're here."

"Oh."

"Do you?"

"Yessir. We started dating right before I went to boot camp."

"Unf. Sorry, kid."

"Sir?"

"Good luck."

The rain has picked up again, and the two men can feel it more and more, almost piercing their vests and their uniform shirts, onto their bare backs. They trudge along in silence, the air between them heavy with Corporal Lee's relationship advice. To Ji-sung's right, Corporal Lee steps and waves again to just ahead of them.

Ji-sung sees it: the Super aEgis II, with its dull green plates, two-meter barrel, and fifty-caliber bullets that snake around the machine. The automated turret is on a raised platform made of stone. It turns, scanning the northern mountain skyline for threats. What threats, Ji-sung isn't sure. All it sees are the birds and tigers, once thought extinct, now free to roam this patch of the Korean mountains while the war continues.

Ji-sung is wet, miserable; the barrel of the rifle digs into his leg with each swing. He notes the tarp at the bottom of the stone platform, folded into a neat square. From underneath the tarp, ropes snake out in clumps.

"That thing can stop a tank in its tracks—and it's still not waterproof," Corporal Lee says and strolls over. He begins to climb the side of the turret, pulling himself up with his right arm. He has a length of rope wrapped around his left arm and begins pulling the tarp up with him.

Ji-sung takes the hint. He jogs over, starts to tie the other end down to the hooks at the bottom of the platform. All he wants is to be dry, back in the relative comfort of the barracks, where he can warm up. So he yanks on the rope, reaching for more of it. His right hand brings the rope over the hook, securing the rope to a piece of curved steel.

His fingers slip and his palm smashes against the protruding hook. Flesh meets steel and draws blood from his right hand. Ji-sung swears into the rain, stepping back to see his work and clutching his hand to his chest. He takes a careful step back, avoiding the steep drop behind him.

"Corporal Lee?"

There's no answer. The tarp comes loose, the wind whipping it toward Ji-sung. The other rope flaps by him. The flashlight on his helmet carves swathes of light through the night as Ji-sung swings his head around, looking around for Corporal Lee. He calls out again before seeing a light halfway down the mountain, fainter than those from the barracks. Just strong enough to be a helmet-mounted flashlight. "Corporal!" he yells, but his voice gets caught in the wind.

Ji-sung looks down at the pristine knot he made, then to the rest of the tarp waving in the wind. The rain flowing down the back of his neck meets his bloody hand, leaving streaks of blood on his uniform. In his hand, Ji-sung feels the rope that sent Corporal Lee Min-ho down the mountain.

Beside him, the Super aEgis II machine gun whirs in the night, scanning left and right for threats. It blows sparks into the wet night.

MITCHELL ANGELO

# Un-disorders

I tell you I love you because I am well adjusted.  
All the shouting is only planes overhead. I tell you  
I love you because I am well adjusted and not because.  
There is yellowcake in the cupboard. Remember the planes.  
There are mousetraps in the cupboard. I am well adjusted.  
Not because. Because.

Mattress the dirt. Sift through the wet  
sky. Imagine rain and then not. Promise  
it's only planes overhead. All the shouting is only yellow  
cake. Adjusted. Who knows how many planes are left.  
There aren't enough piles of dirt in the world to fill me.  
Don't think about it. The dirt can be yellowcake. Don't think  
about it. I tell you I love you because you cannot.  
I tell you I love you because I am well adjusted.



# Campfire Songs

Digestive space,  
a reason to start numbering again.  
An overestimation of the pebbles, the piles.

I wish you could have seen it. The white belly  
peppered with rot. The odd-cocked jaw of roadkill.  
Must have miscounted the miles and ended up far

from home. Bloated necked, white bulging. The boys  
back home call that a shiner—it's a pretty bad one.  
The road ripped through her skull like

spilled ink. Numeric space,  
A reason to ingest again—

I wish you could have seen it. Splayed gentle,  
like mouths on a mirror. I'm probably  
lying, it's easier this way. Twisting your skin

around your ankles. Bending the toenails blue.  
I laid down next to the dead deer so she  
wouldn't feel embarrassed



*Indigo* (photographic print), Kayden Michael Strauss

# how to: immortalize a body

embalming:        to forestall decomposition.

begin by washing the body  
in germicidal soap. be sure

to massage the limbs—  
cooperate with rigor mortis.

then pose the eyes  
& shut. make them look  
natural.

then—

read to the corpse  
the definition of *graceless*        &

use an adhesive  
to shut the mouth.

# listen: to give attention to one's sound

If sounds are only vibrations      how are they stuck  
inside my head &

why      are they telling me how to  
unmake my body?

They pulse,  
warning      me to kneel & pray as though the grace  
of the world hangs from my teeth.

The vibrations tell me: my body is      condemned—

I pretend      like I have an underbite  
to resist      this instruction

but the voices persist—

my jaw aches.

I poke at my belly button      trying to feel

where I came from. I trace my collarbone  
trying to understand my slender bone structure.

I look at my hips and sigh  
because

I wish I could

go swimming

in a stranger's spit.

# splitting

she sits in her spot in the classroom, same as always. instead of her notebook, she takes out her laptop. in this particular class, she could get away with dicking around and not doing anything of actual substance, both in the sense of her professor not actually caring and it not hurting her grade. there hadn't been anything major that happened that particular morning or the night before, but the hole above her hip felt bigger than usual. nothing she could do about it for now. had to go to class. maybe if she hadn't skipped that one time before she could have skipped today. but she did skip that one time before. everyone says that health comes first, but that's hard to put into practice when thousands upon thousands of dollars are being put into your education.

sometimes she feels like it isn't as bad. like it's scabbing over and starting to heal like it is supposed to. she'd answer questions, smile at her classmates, check in with those who weren't there to make sure everything was okay. send them the notes and tell them that she's there if they need anything. no one really seemed to notice anything unusual, except for one of her professors who commented that she was mumbling more than usual. she went to her club and held her shit together; she smiled some more, tried to make jokes, and suggestions. then, there were moments where it felt like even her slightest movements were making her side split further open, and the wound was consuming her. like there was blood running from her breast down to her side. when it hurt, she'd kind of hold her breath to avoid crying out in pain. no one noticed that either. she kind of hoped someone would notice. maybe see her discomfort, see her eyes squeeze shut, and face twitch. maybe they'd pull her to the side and help stop the bleeding. tell her to take a break and that it was okay to be vulnerable. nobody did that.

she pulls herself onto the bed and lays on her back. pulling the hoodie up, she decides it's time to finally see if it was all in her head or not. her skin

was tinted red, her jeans stained from the blood. had no one seen that? the fact that no one actually said anything made her think that it wasn't real. her finger traces the inside of the wound, following it from its start on her hip bone, up to just beneath her breast, just slightly out onto her back, and then back again to where she began. she had forgotten how her bones felt. how hot her flesh was. the pulsating of her intestines was a new sensation. had it been this big before or had she just repressed the thought of bloody fingertips reaching out from bruising, beating, oozing flesh?

for a while she just lies there, thinking. curious as to what started the splitting again. was it because of him? despite how hard she's tried to remember him when she last saw him happy at the movies with his hair dyed a pale blue color, misery crept into the memory. suddenly she could see him lying there, wrists split down the center. and then he was hanging from the shower or the rafters, the chair tipped over beneath him. and then he was foaming from the mouth, eyes glossed with a pill bottle or a needle in hand. how miserable the unknown was. if she knew how he'd done it, her mind could only wander so far. but, she didn't know. they never release the details of a suicide. maybe that's why the memory came back. because she would never know.

after some time, she gets up, closes her door, shuts her blinds, and turns on her music really loud. she puts on a playlist called "happy hits!" that way if her roommates come by they won't be able to tell what she is actually doing. she pulls the flat sheet from her bed and goes to sit at her desk. she'd already stained its soft, off-white pattern from the bleeding, and never really slept under it anyway. her phone dings. it is one of her friends asking if she's okay. she responds that she is, but she was "just going through it atm." not entirely false. she was going through it at the moment. she strips down to her panties so that there wouldn't be more blood dripped onto her clothes.

taking one of her dry erase markers (she didn't have any regular markers), she holds the linen to her side, traces her wound, and cuts out a piece to size. she tears another strip to gag herself with; ready for the agony. first, she takes a bottle of rubbing alcohol from her drawer and pours it down the side. her teeth feel like they're going to shatter from how tightly she's biting down. she doubles over in pain, gasping for breath. she's forgotten how much that hurts. then she grabs a miniature sewing kit, meant for little tears in sweaters or leggings or whatever. not for stitches through flesh, that was for sure. she takes a lighter to the needle. heat cleans tools to an extent, right? or maybe she was confusing that with cauterizing a wound. doesn't matter. it's probably going to get infected regardless. she picks a spool of thread with a soft pink color; it will blend with her bruised and bloodied flesh and with the roses from the bed sheet.

quietly, carefully, she stitches the fabric into her flesh. most of the playlist she had put on had been absolute shit, but she likes this song. it reminds her



of when she would do talent shows and things of the sort. she sings along breathy and tense to take her mind off the pain. that way, she could vocalize her pain without raising concern. “and i never wanted anything from you.” the fabric was sticking to her insides. she’d probably have to add a second layer of fabric if she wanted it to last. “except everything you had, and what was left after that too.” her hands are shaking wildly. the needle struggles through her rotting flesh and eases through the sheet. “happiness hit her, like a bullet in the back.” the second layer of fabric hurts more than the first. she had hoped it would be the opposite. she puts the remnants of the sheet into a lump in the back of her closet in case she needs it again, shoves the bloodied clothes into her laundry bag.

down in the laundry room, she scrubs the blood out of her hoodie and jeans in the sink. hopefully a good wash and some of that prewash stain removal shit will get most of it out so she won’t have to toss the clothes. another girl comes in with a basket of laundry. she looks at the girl, then the jeans, then back again. she gives an empathetic smile.

“that time of the month, huh?”

“yeah,” she lets out a forced laugh. “always comes when you least expect it. but what are you going to do?”

“cute jeans. hope you get the stains out.”

“thanks.”

# Oil and Wine

Sunrise splinters from the willow tree.  
October's breath slept on your chest  
before she woke and wound around me.

The grass fogs and forgets your tracks;  
any records, scratches, or cracks  
to stumble and fall for.

Thumb wiped on my shirt,  
I point toward what hurts;  
press and pry to come up.

You put me to bed and I shake.  
Sunrise splinters and you  
tell me I shake.

JACK WHITE

# Northern Gold

Call me dirt and gravel. Sunken  
dew tickling a cracked bench.

Exhale my name into a cold  
that drizzles and steams  
against a morning's unbending warmth,  
brisk stone steps or the breeze that skims them.

Watch me through the dust of a cabin air,  
tapping on a locked window and weeping into oak.

As I was in the morning,  
I will be in the night.



*White Face* (oil on board), Hunter Celeste

# In Other Words...

My phonetic spine infinitely stretches from my vulgar tailbone past the end of my individual hair strands. Meanwhile each crunch and crack my bird-bones sing is a phenomenon unknown to the hibernating forest. The snow absorbs my vertebrae's piercing soliloquy. I have laid there familiarizing my coat with the slush for a plural moment. Cold is not a feeling, but a lack-there-of. No one came that day or this second to save me from the prepositional phrase leaking out of my skull and





*Remote Voices:  
Posts from the Pandemic*



# Holding My Breath

I am not a runner, but today I run. I don't have a destination, I just want to be somewhere else, anywhere other than trapped between the walls of my apartment. I let my feet guide me, propelled forward by the strength in my legs. Even chronic pain can't stop the momentum, as my subconscious actions are powerful, an unstoppable force. My brain is in tune with the rhythm of my feet as they hit the pavement one behind the other, right foot, left foot. Remember to breathe. I hear the constant reminder in the voices of my mother, the doctors, my therapist, my friends. Breathe in the sickly sweet scent of magnolias; breathe out the pain.

It feels like the apocalypse has hit New York City, the seemingly endless motion and boundless energy paused in silent fear. The city that never sleeps entered hibernation, and although there will be no returning to normal, no one knows when we will return to anything at all. I have lived through September 11th and Hurricane Sandy, and I have never seen anything like this. Acutely aware of my surroundings, I marvel at nature still in motion, triumphantly blooming as humanity quietly resigned itself to stillness, locked away in homes. Staten Island may be the sleepest borough, suburban and slower paced, but it is unrecognizable in this eerie ghost town state. The high school across the street from my apartment building is deserted in darkness, no raucous laughter of restless teenagers screeching and fighting. The playground is silent, save the swings gently swaying in the soft breeze. Gang violence and shootings seem to have disappeared during this pandemic, but I know the real danger is for those trapped inside with an abuser. It makes my stomach churn to think about my students. I hope to God they are safe.

Restaurants, nail salons, and stores are closed or mostly deserted, desperate signs with delivery information posted in the windows. The local dive bar has written their phone number for takeout in decaying red paint, which



drips like blood down the façade uninvitingly. No one is running down the hill, hurriedly trying to make the ferry to Manhattan before the doors close and they have to wait another thirty minutes. The bodegas are the only sign of life left, a small reminder that we are not alone, and the only place that still has toilet paper in stock. The way my grandfather would stockpile paper goods in his garage doesn't seem so funny anymore: it all makes sense now. That will be my generation forty years from now—stockpiling toilet paper, Clorox wipes, and non-perishables.

I am not a runner, but running has always felt like liberation. When I'd get drunk in college, I'd run down the sidewalk towards the green, giggling joyously as the world rushed by, and I felt free—free of expectation, of obligation, free from even myself, the person who held everything so tightly inside. When I felt overwhelmed with a situation, I would pull an Irish exit, immediately vacate the premises to keep myself from exploding into tears. Years later, I have matured and developed healthier coping skills than alcohol and bailing, but I still sometimes feel that same urge to flee from conflict.

As my feet make contact with the ground beneath me, I focus on the sensation of finding my footing on the different surfaces below—uneven sidewalks, packed dirt, wobbly cobblestones, and cracks in the pavement. I turn the corner aimlessly, pausing slightly to take in the view. A large flowering tree leans over the corner of the steep hill, sloping down towards the water and the horizon. The wind produces a snowfall of white flower petals, and I'm reminded of winter walks with my father. Then, we appreciated the gentle pause in city life, as people retreated inside, and the snow blanketed the streets in snowy silence. The pause we're in the midst of now is anything but gentle; it is sudden, scary, and uncertain.

Down the hill beyond the swirling pollen snow is the Manhattan skyline in the distance, unchanging across the sparkling water. Just out of reach, unattainable for living, but the place where many of us work and sometimes play. I head downhill towards the glimmering vista, thankful for once I live in a more boring borough, less densely populated and greener. I feel the incline shift beneath me, sloping downward sharply, so I adjust my pace accordingly. I struggle to breathe through my pink bandana, which I carefully chose over the red and blue ones I own.

I try to focus on the soft breeze and the sun peeking through the clouds, to shut out the image of my father's hazel eyes above his mask as they clouded over and I caught a glimpse of something I'd never seen before, the unmistakable pain at the loss of his best friend of over sixty years. Standing six feet away in my parents' driveway, I couldn't even hug him, and I swallowed hard to keep the lump in my throat from rising any higher. My numbness melted at this first close loss, three weeks into quarantine. On my way home from their house that evening, I sat in my car and cried, not wanting to burden my

roommate. We're all dealing with the same pain, so how could we comfort one another?

Later that night, I composed myself and reached out to the man who is not my man. He calls me a runner, but I haven't run from him after three and a half years, the longest romantic connection I've had. Without the physical nuances of close proximity, our long distance relationship wasn't easy. I had run to other men, ones who were closer, physically present, and ready to dive in. Those relationships never lasted. He has my whole heart, and no amount of running away can change the fact that I still run back to him. We rarely see each other in person, so our relationship in quarantine hasn't changed, as we continue to communicate through video chats, postcards, letters, and voice recordings. When I called that night, he was just beginning his day, finishing up meditation, and getting ready for work. His calming, gentle energy always puts me at ease, and he immediately sensed that I was off. He listened and somehow made me laugh, still present even as he had to log onto his computer to begin teaching English to his students in China. I told him how pleased he would be that my therapist was working on breathing techniques with me. I rolled my eyes and he laughed, nodded approvingly. Although time zones divide us, lately I feel closer to him. He appreciates the increased video calls, possible because I have more unstructured time on my hands than normal. This urgent and isolating time has forced our conversations deeper, into a vulnerability neither of us has ever known.

Breathe in emotion: it's okay to feel; breathe out the burden: you're not in this alone. As a social worker, I recognize my own trauma responses, but that doesn't make them any easier to deal with. Although my parents are only ten minutes away, I can't be with them. I worry constantly. So, I keep on running, letting my lungs fill with fresh air while I can. I know I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm healthy, young, and financially stable. I live and work in this community, and I know all too well that the color of someone's skin can determine their health outcomes. I cannot control the devastation this virus is unleashing on our most vulnerable communities, and I feel helpless. I signed up to volunteer for food delivery, to provide mental health support via phone, and to lead virtual therapeutic art classes. This ability to be useful gives me a sense of control, something much needed in this uncertain time.

I'd been planning to run from this place, to quit my job after my grant ended in several months, and move to Central America, where I could work on my writing and immerse myself in Spanish language learning. Now, there is nowhere safe to run. I have to face whatever it is I'm running from. I've recently hit my goal of traveling to twenty countries before turning thirty, and I was making moves to leave everything behind and just go, unusual for my Type A self. I had been following my 2020 intention of leaning into risk, and letting go of fear-based decisions. Now I'm stuck and unsure of what will

come next, and my plan to travel is null. I focus on the here and now. Breathe in, left foot forward; breathe out, right foot forward.

As I approach the busy intersection of bus stops, I map out a pathway around the familiar group of people hanging out on the corner, undeterred by the virus. Various substances cloud their judgment, and they likely do not have a safe home to shelter in place. I round the corner and pick up the pace to a sprint, following my feet as they lead me away. I know I'm privileged to have a job where I can work from home for the time being, and I'm thankful for the paycheck and purpose of my work. I wonder if this virus will cause people to finally listen to the health equity issues my students have been voicing all along.

I feel unsteady, but glide smoothly along the sidewalk. My path is no longer planned. I'm just focusing on one step at a time, as I move forward into the unknown. I stumble upon one of the many secret staircases in my hilly neighborhood and delight at the break in the monotony and added challenge to my run. At the top of the staircase is a path to several driveways, leading to large old houses, homes with turreted towers and leisurely porches and intricate gardens. There are hand drawn rainbows in some windows, clumsy colorful stripes drawn by children, a sign of hope after the storm.

The silence in the air is punctuated by sirens, even more frequently than we used to hear the cop cars rolling through the neighborhood to the precinct down the block. This feels different, a soundtrack of fear. The ambulances don't discriminate, they head down the hill towards the housing projects and up the hill towards the old Victorians; no one is immune from this virus. Living with the unknown has never been a strength of mine. My anxiety makes everything difficult. I live in a constant state of rumination, dwelling in the future and obsessing over the past. I am rarely fully present. Now, I'm forced to live in the moment, and I'm strangely calm. The stress that everyone else is feeling now is my normal, and I feel equipped to help others through this.

I squint, looking to see if neighbors are smiling through their masks. Is that a wrinkle around the eyes or a slight upward movement of a mask? I see the suspicion in people's faces, but I search their eyes for kindness. I remember how kind people were to each other after 9/11. The air was heavy with loss then, too, but it was one fell swoop. Now, the air looms with the uncertainty of an impending storm. We don't know when the downpour will start or who it will hit the hardest, but we know we can't avoid the raindrops.

As I run back downhill past my old high school and the "dirty deli" across the street from it, I'm amused to think the deli owners essentially imposed social distancing ten years ago. They limited access to a few students at a time, with a large employee posted in the doorway like a bodyguard, looking disapprovingly at the diverse group of kids hanging outside, all of us potential thieves. We waited patiently just to buy a twenty-five-cent cosmic brownie or

a bag of chips. We'd brush off a layer of dust from the packaging and the faint smell of mildew.

I keep running. Tune out the news, the numbers rising, a steady death toll quietly marching on. Breathe. How can I exhale when we are collectively holding our breath, waiting for the inevitable crash of the tidal wave that hovers just above us? How can I breathe when we are suffocating behind masks, between four walls, behind a computer screen? I need to breathe for those who cannot, as they cling desperately to life through ventilators.

As I run, I feel my shoulder pain sharpening, but I'm used to it. I remind myself to breathe and ease up instead of ignoring the pain and continuing. The one good thing about escalating pain these past few years is that it has taught me to slow down and be gentle with myself, to really listen to my body, and stop pushing through the pain. I decrease my speed as I pass the empty office buildings, eerily silent on a street usually bustling with city workers. There is no line outside the courthouse, no security guards by the Family Justice Center, no one getting married at Borough Hall.

Getting closer to home, I run faster, following my feet as they lead me away. I feel light raindrops on my exposed arms and eyelids. I've never enjoyed wet droplets on my skin or damp clothes clinging to my body, but I smile. The touch of rain grounds me in the moment, and it has never felt so good. I breathe in deeply, not knowing when I'll be out in the rain again. I know not to take this for granted.

I try to think of the little moments of joy like the sidewalk birthday party formed from a parade of cars as I joined with strangers and sang along from my window to a neighbor I had never met, the sand drawings and messages of hope along the shoreline as I watched the sunset over the bay. My roommate and I have shared many impromptu dance parties and joyous moments despite the pain, as humor has always been my go-to coping mechanism. We reminisce about our freshman year of college when we met, where we shared one small room and many big dreams. There was a time when we imagined our future selves as starving artists in Manhattan or Brooklyn, sharing a tiny apartment and eating ramen noodles. We laugh at the fact that the almost dystopian reality we had pictured had come true. We have upgraded our cooking skills slightly, and our apartment is blissfully sunny and spacious, thanks to settling in an outer, unpopular borough. Staten Island was more affordable, and we were thankful to have room to work and to dance in our old and open apartment.

The raincloud seems to dissipate, as the sun emerges from behind the gray. Shining beams of light illuminate the path. I'm glad I didn't let the rain deter me, or I wouldn't feel the warmth of sunbeams kiss my shoulders. I slow to a walk near my building, not yet ready to go inside. I see a familiar figure, a silhouette of a cowboy hat and a cane. It's an older neighbor, sitting outside on

the wall by the entrance under the awning just like always. He has his usual friendly demeanor, stately moustache, and clear appreciation for the day before us. I've never been so happy to see him. Usually I run out the door past him, late to work. He'd call after me to slow down, and I'd laugh and wave. Today, I slow down completely, stopping to smile at him as we acknowledge each other like old friends. Breathe in the wet rain on the pavement; breathe out hopelessness. I carefully create an arc around him, as I head back inside into the stifling air of my apartment. Taking one final deep breath, I remind myself of all the things I have to be grateful for, even the rain.

# Outside

Lisa Marie hadn't smelled a flower in four months.

The pink petals kissed her lips the way her mother was too afraid to. She thought it smelled sweet like cherry blossom or honeysuckle. She didn't remember exactly what those smelled like, but they were often the scents of the bubble baths and body lotions her mother bought.

Lisa Marie couldn't remember the name of these flowers, but they bloomed every year on a bush out in the backyard. Back when they were allowed outside, her brother Nicholas used to kick soccer balls into the bush on accident and the petals would drop. Mom always got mad.

The plant's leaves felt leathery. Lisa Marie pulled one off the stem and put it in her pocket. She would have to remember to take it out before Mom did laundry.

"I thought you weren't allowed to be outside."

Lisa Marie looked up, noticing Gavin, one of Nick's friends. He leaned his bike against the house and unbuckled a helmet from under his chin.

"I thought my mom said you couldn't come over," Lisa Marie said.

"I'm only not allowed to come over because you're sick." Gavin balanced his helmet on the handlebars.

"No, you're not allowed to come over because of the virus."

"No. My mom let me go over to Tim's house yesterday," Gavin said. "What's wrong with you anyway?"

Lisa Marie traced the leaf in her pocket. Her secret. "I was born too small. I get sick a lot. My mom says that I will get more sick than other people if I get the virus. So, no one can come over, and none of us can leave."

"How'd your mom let you come outside?"

"She's asleep." Lisa Marie picked at the grass below her. She liked the sharp tickle against her fingertips. "She sleeps a lot now. She usually just

makes breakfast for Nick and me and then doesn't come out of her room until dinner."

"That's weird. What do you think she does in there?"

"I think she's sad." Lisa Marie plucked a flower and put it behind her ear. "One day I think I heard her crying through the door."

"My mom's sad, too," Gavin said. He took a seat in the grass beside her. He began to pick at the grass too. "She said my brothers and I are driving her crazy and told us to go outside and ride bikes."

"She won't let you back inside?"

Gavin shook his head.

"Must be nice. I wish I could spend all day outside. I'm outside now, and I'm not sick."

"Lisa Marie!" Nick ran down the porch steps. "You're not allowed to be outside!"

"Neither are you!"

"I'm out here to come get you."

"No, you're not," Lisa Marie said. "You're here because Gavin's here."

"You're the reason Mom won't let me go outside. It's not fair that you're out here and I'm not."

"You are out here." Lisa Marie threw a handful of grass at her brother. The blades rained down and settled in the green.

"It's your fault Mom's always sad. It's your fault Dad can't come home anymore. It's your fault we couldn't go to Grandma and Grandpa's for an Easter egg hunt this year. You ruin everything!"

Tears budded in Lisa Marie's eyes. She ran back to the house, up the porch steps, and inside, slamming the screen door shut behind her.

Lisa Marie's mother ran down the steps. Her hair was wispy and messy, unlike the way she used to wear it when she drove Lisa Marie to school or went to one of Nick's soccer games.

"What's that in your hair?" her mother asked. She walked up to Lisa Marie and plucked the flower from behind her ear. She studied the bright pink petals in her palm before clasp them into a fist. Lisa Marie figured this wasn't the best time to ask her mother what the flower was called.

"Lisa Marie, go to your room."

Lisa Marie ran up the steps and into her bedroom. The same floral wallpaper lined the walls. It still peeled at the edges. Her bed still creaked when she sat on it. There was still a stain on her carpet from when Nick spilled grape juice last week. Nothing had changed.

She took the leaf out of her pocket. It was bent, and no matter how many times she flattened it, the creases would not come out.



# Mad Girl's Delirium

I wake up & check my pulse  
to see if I'm still alive. There's  
all this talk about war and disease  
and *suffering*, it's spring now, but  
I feel so cold. I cut my Baba's  
pomegranates, wince as the juice throbs  
in my papercuts, feed the extra seeds to  
my mother's koi. Baba packs his Iranian art  
away into a suitcase, I'll never see it again.  
I drop my sleeping pills in the crack between  
the wall and bed, scrape my fingers against  
the wooden frame. God, I just can't sleep.  
Knee-deep and alone in my mother's pond—  
algae hair burning, the water only a brief relief.  
Too quiet, too still, I fall back and listen the crackle  
of suffocated flames. I dream of arson to my  
childhood home, pretend it's an act of erasure.  
I tug at my little nightgown, the wool heavy  
under the night sky. I don't feel lonely here,  
floating with the koi. Frozen fingers caressing  
the neck, feel the thrum—I'm still alive.

# Salt Lake City

And I have much to say  
here in our small

silent kitchen.  
The dry plates on their shelves

the kettle simmers over  
low flame. Outside, chickadees

flit between branches  
and fences calling

out. Water accepts  
heat and boils.

In the bedroom you turn, waking  
in soft sheets. Remember the sound

the first warm breeze in March  
carrying summer into our nights.

We laid in the grass under the red western sky.  
Have we ever been younger?

# Litany in April

*"The prayers of all good people are good."*  
-Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

The cold draft from the windowsill dark is good.  
The morning is good and the sunlight  
is good. You, waking, are good, and the sleep  
in your eyes is good. The coffee is hot  
and the microwave is loud, and that  
is good. The dog, beside you  
studying the ground, and you beside it,  
studying the grass, are good. The smoke  
that vapors from the pipe on your roof  
into the gray sky is good. The churches  
are empty, the playgrounds bordered  
with police tape. Recorded bells chime  
the hour, the chalk fades into the sidewalk.

You bury people in good dirt. The price of gold  
and houses was good. Your job was good  
the shopping cart with the broken wheel  
you dragged to the ravine was good, and your clothes  
inside it were good. The coffee can that held  
the coals was good. The forest was good  
and the fire was good, the city burned good.

In the Walmart parking lot you put up good  
sturdy tents, and the food you shared

was good. The war was good, and their deaths  
were good. The words were good  
so the nation was good.

Your kindness was good, your anger  
is good. You were singing on the downtown bus  
in the clear noon light, and your leg dragged  
behind you like a shadow, and you were good.

You are home with the small, golden hours of the day  
where the light suspended in the dust shines good.  
Out in the street with a million others, working in the dark  
you sweat good: You simmer in the dawn.





# There is

a delicacy in a wine glass  
being flung at a wall,  
like a jet-propelled  
butterfly. There is

some serenity to light  
glinting, like fairy dust,  
off curved glass,  
like watching the sun  
peek in between  
trees on the highway,  
the pulsing light wishing  
you to sleep. There is

satisfaction in the crash  
that resounds in your soul,  
like an untamed child  
playing an untuned piano  
to an untold song  
of smashing all the highest pitch  
keys, following the urge you  
resist. There is

peace in the pieces  
of stardust that flutter  
down the wine-sprinkled  
wall. You've just watched it shatter

like my will  
on center stage—silent  
as I fall—leaving  
behind the thud of shards  
and footsteps as I hurry away.  
There is.



# butterfly tattoo

My collar is starched, preserved and pinned to befit black tie. I sit on white upholstery, upholding propriety the best I know how. Sweat collects on my shoulders as I shoulder what I so-call sophistication. Sweat under suit jackets runs black as ink.

I sit and I glance as you dance.  
 You are turned away from my eyes, faceless,  
 a butterfly tattoo emblazoned on your back. Motion  
 proceeds relative to another body,  
 and I stay motionless,  
 lost in the flutter. Scapula form lepidoptera  
 wings that writhe with each twist and rhythm  
 to escape the confines of skin.

|          |                        |                 |                           |                  |
|----------|------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Wings    | open                   | wide,           | on display,               | false eyes       |
|          | stare back with desire |                 | to fly, unrestrained      |                  |
|          | by cutaneous           |                 |                           | butterfly        |
| nets. So |                        | wings waft      | effervescent,             | up               |
|          | and down,              | push dust down, |                           |                  |
|          | rise up.               |                 | The reverse is true, too, | as the butterfly |
|          | flies:                 |                 | push breath               | up,              |

|                              |                              |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Oscillation as it levitates, | ambivalent                   |
| to hardwood dancefloor       | or high ceiling, indifferent |

|                 |                    |              |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------|
| toward struggle | or ease, tumbling, | crepuscular, |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------|

between fall and flight;

shoulder blades and life.



*Still Life* (oil on canvas), Hunter Celeste

# Dead Ladybugs on my Window

At 4am my sweat-drenched sheets smell like you.  
I'm jealous of the bugs because I can't sleep  
through a night. I'd grow an exoskeleton if I thought  
it would help but I'm worried it'd just make me look fat.  
Watered down coffee doesn't wake me, it sits  
heavy in my stomach wondering where you went—  
together, we watch the sky turn white. A wall of  
blackbirds come from across the street, all their wings  
in sync, and they're singing a song you once said reminded you  
of me. One I could never remember the name of  
but could always pick out if I heard it. Morning wanders  
in quietly, careful not to glare in my eyes while I wash my mug.  
Wet coffee grounds stain the sink—shades of brown  
racing towards the drain—stuck in stasis, just out of reach.

# Featuring: The Calamity

*I thought they were going to blow the whole fuckin' roof off the place. Seriously, I thought we were going to die. I hoped we would too, man, because if I'm gonna go, that's the way to do it...Rocked straight into a fuckin' casket and thrown off a bridge.*

*-Ameer Said, College Senior.*

## Amity

Irony is dead, and you need to get the fuck over it. Authenticity is in. Being real is in. Irony had its time. You ever see all those pictures, you know, of those bands in the nineties? Angsty musicians all wearing shirts with Madonna or Michael Jackson in a very “look at me, I’m wearing a Madonna shirt” kind of way, to mock her; to abjectly reject popular media as if that’s what makes you cool. Those days were when irony was in, maybe because the times called for it or some other intelligent sounding reason, but I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t there and I don’t really give a fuck. All I know is that I wear my Madonna shirt on stage because I actually really like Madonna. She was sexy and didn’t care what you thought of her sexiness. I also don’t wear it three sizes too large ironically; I think it’s a good look and the airflow is unreal. The last thing I would ever do is wear an image of Queen Goddess Madonna in an ironic way.



This is what I think about as I stand on the yet unfurnished basement floor—an empty pool waiting to be filled with ripping dissonance, sweaty concert goers, and bottom-shelf dollar beer. The idle chatter of the house proprietors and their friends registers as an anticipatory murmur. A calm before a storm. Soon, the floor will be filled to capacity and then some: a palette of tattooed young men with lip-rings, bohemian lesbians wearing dreadlocks, goths, gays, and hipsters—all joining together as one gelatinous new clique. I call these people Authenticists because despite their vast differences, they all represent a core truth about identity and what it means to wear yourself on your sleeve. In front of all these like-minded people, I will make our big announcement. Introduce the grand finale.

I notice Garrett appears by my side, though he may have been there all along. I look up to see his eyes are already on me.

“Shouldn’t we do a soundcheck or something?” he asks.

I laugh, not because of what he said, but because his hair is draped around the neck of the bass on his back, suspended three inches above his head. He looks like a goon. This is the longest I’ve ever seen his hair. “I already told them everything we need. Levels, mic placements, and everything else,” I say.

“That’s like, not what bands do...I mean, it’s a part of the whole thing to do a soundcheck. Every other band—”

“We aren’t every other band, Garrett,” I say. He’s getting annoyed with me, I can tell. I can always tell. I’d like to think it keeps our relationship human and sincere, almost like siblings. Except Garrett isn’t in rehab for cocaine abuse like my real brother.

“I’m going to do a soundcheck for us,” he says.

“Look at you, Mister Decision Man. Go ahead, but it’ll be useless. I already told them everything they need to know.”

Garrett grumbles something before turning his attention back to me.

“Do you know where Ezra is? They’ll help me,” he says.

“What am I, their babysitter?”

Garrett rolls his eyes and, I admit, this constant back and forth sarcasm could get annoying. “You know Ezra. They probably got lost upstairs talking to everyone, then they probably got offered weed or a beer or something, then they took it, and now they’re probably telling the story of the time they got your hair stuck in a blender and—”

“I get it, Amity. Are you still Amity?”

“I am. I’m offended you can’t tell the difference at this point.”

This exchange needs some context. I am as authentically Amity, twenty-year-old psychology major, as I am Casey Couture, one-woman revolution and front person of The Calamity—the greatest band that’s ever existed. Amity is opinionated, never keeps her mouth shut, and has a hard time making friends or keeping roommates. Casey Couture is opinionated, never keeps

her mouth shut, and doesn't need any friends or roommates. The qualities of Amity that Casey Couture has are much more refined, realized, and utilized with purpose, meaning, poise, and clarity. Casey Couture is everything Amity wishes she was.

I'm not gonna lie, though, she came to me one day during an acid trip. That's like, not cool or revelatory at all, right? Casey Couture was the result of a long mirror stare where I got so scared of myself I had to become someone different. I know it makes me sound lame, like those white dudes who take too many shrooms and talk to God and change their names to Shaheed or something. But, as part of the practice of being authentic—no matter the time, place, or setting—I lay myself bare to you.

Besides, she's more than just a souvenir from a psychedelic trip. For one, she's the greatest fucking rockstar who has ever fucking lived. Casey Couture isn't just a stage name. She isn't a mask I put on. Sure, our faces have similar bone structures, but when I *become* Casey Couture, I am no longer Amity. I have no memories of who Amity is. Casey Couture, though, she's a badass. She's a firework. As Amity, I get in fights a lot, but there's nothing badass about screaming at the man who gave you a hard time at work then leaving in tears. Casey Couture would never do that. She's a ball of grace covered in "fuck you" wrapping paper. Her lyrics are blunt without sacrificing poignancy. Her riffs can shred paper and massage the soul. She's so cool and talented.

"Hey, what if instead of playing drums tonight, I play the kazoo? And we can change the band name to Blue Kazoo and the Crew," I hear Ezra say behind me. I brace for their impact, as all at once I bear the full weight of Ezra. We've got it down to a science at this point; I position my arms in the same place every time, and Ezra fits their legs into the crevice I create. Their face comes so close to mine that I smell the weed and beer on their breath. I notice I haven't really moved since Garrett talked to me. Tonight is huge. It's worthy of a lengthy spell of dissociative reflection as Amity before I transform into Casey.

"Yeah, I love it. It'll be our most packed show yet, why not shake things up?"

"Let these bitches know what we're all about," they say, hopping down next to me, leaning on my shoulder. "What were you doing just standing here? Are you lost?"

"I'm just taking everything in. Letting my body soak up the energy, man. You know? This place is legendary. Fuckin' Banana Peel Yellow played here. Here! Right where we stand! And they just played South By!"

"Okay, hippy. I'm just excited to hit some shit."

"I'm excited to see you hit some shit," I say. "Tonight's gonna be perfect. It's gonna be lightning."

"It's gonna be a Calamity!"

The Calamity is, of course, the greatest fucking rock band that ever lived, and we've already proved it. We've slogged tirelessly through the basement circuit and even got to play a few dirty little dives, which was, like, a dream come true. We've released a single EP, hailed by the *CampusColumnist* as "really solid." I got recognized once as Casey Couture by a bouncer and had my fake ID taken from me. We are basically bigger than the Beatles at this point. And tonight we're playing The Slaughterhouse, the most exclusive basement in town, where acts like Fish in a Barrel and Quarantine have taken the stage and absolutely decimated. It's a big deal. A perfect night to complete our story.

Why sully a perfect thing by keeping it around forever? Every band, every TV show, every movie franchise ruins years of legacy by trying to hold our attention for longer than we have the capacity for. God, do you remember when *Cut the Crap* came out? I mean, I don't, I'm twenty, but I've read enough to know that The Clash went from being "the only band that mattered" to "the only band that mattered—with an asterisk." I can't live with an asterisk next to our name. We are an asterisk-less band. The Calamity released one perfect, compact, revolutionary EP, tactfully titled *Featuring: The Calamity*. We called it this because we want the songs to take on lives bigger than the people who played them. Song is king, and we are merely here to serve His Highness. Our EP comprises seven songs, all fueled by youthful angst, ice coffee, and a cold embrace of our mortality. Its penultimate track, "Rotted Dick," was the subject of Sue Kelling's junior thesis, "Navigating Young Adult Anxiety Through Music." We have said everything we came here to say, and we need to die to preserve our unadulterated authenticity.

Of course, this isn't the end of the road for Casey Couture. She's a star, and she knows it. Everyone knows it. I think of Björk, you know, who started as some random Icelandic girl in a punk band propelled to superstardom because she was weird as hell and didn't give a fuck what you thought about it. In the age of irony, there existed no ego, and I think that's bullshit. People go to see Björk, so Björk gives them something to see. Casey Couture may join another band, but it's more likely she will travel the world alone—untethered, unchained, authentic. A one-woman revolution. Tonight is the night to prove it. Tonight is the stepping stone to superstardom, and sometimes to birth things you have to let other things die, I guess. I don't know, that's probably stupid.

*I want Casey Couture to call me a bitch and kick me in the face.*

*-Angel McMullin, College Senior*

## Garrett

I love Amity; I love Casey. I do. She's my best friend in the whole world. She's just wrong about the soundcheck, that's all. And that's fine, I can do it myself. I can hit a drum, strum a guitar, and obviously I can chug at a bass. It would be hard to be a bass player for this band otherwise, right? I might be the worst musician in this group, and I mean that, but it doesn't bother me. I think I have the most sense—maybe—the most understanding of the norms of these things: a solid grounding for promoters, producers, label heads, or whoever, to come to when they need something more ordinary after meeting Amity and Ezra. The most technical sense, as well.

Of course, nothing Amity told the sound guy resembled anything accurate, but she doesn't need to know that.

Ezra's off upstairs again, and Amity's off in the corner changing into Casey. Over time, Casey's makeup and clothing became wilder, and their application takes up a substantial portion of her pre-show ritual. Tonight she's wearing a tie-dye tapestry she's cut into a top, which would drag across the floor if it wasn't for her silver platform shoes. Her eye makeup is done in wings and her lipstick is golden, sparkling. It's a pretty far cry from my Sonic Youth T-shirt, jeans, and Converse. It's just about the same thing every other dude in a band wears. If I'm being honest, I wish I had the confidence to wear something a little more flashy, but I think I'd just get laughed at.

I will say that Ezra and I wouldn't be here—in The Slaughterhouse—without her, regardless of how good I am at bass or Ezra is at drumming. Amity's got a spark, but she definitely gets on my nerves sometimes. Sometimes her Casey Couture persona takes over so much that I barely know where Amity stops and Casey begins. I think, though, our occasional bickering is just a result of constant proximity and extreme comfort with each other. The three of us playing music together has been the best time of my life, and I hope it never ends. Sure, it would be nice to write a song—or even a few notes every now and again—but I have to trust Amity on that front. Her songs are killer. I can handle all the technical stuff, but I don't really know if I can write a song. I'm slightly jealous but mainly I'm thrilled to be a part of these songs, because I'm not even sure she needs me. She once played me an acoustic rendition of "Rotted Dick" and it was so beautiful that I cried.

I'm comfortable with the sound but I still have to move all our gear out of the way to make room for the openers. Doing a soundcheck before taking the stage is a luxury only afforded to the headliners, meaning that this is the



first time I get to do this. Slowly, people are starting to file downstairs into The Slaughterhouse, but it's still too early for anyone to be anything but a wall hugger. From an outsider's point of view, it's just a basement, all gray everything, dusty, with open laundry machines in the corner. To an insider, though, however ordinary the basement may seem, it is completely elevated by its legacy. Everyone from Jaded Summer to the Gangrene Grandmas have played this room. It's the only house venue in the county that regularly reaches capacity. A good show here can be the springboard to a band's successful future career, which, obviously, is my hope. I'm sure it's all of ours. The Calamity is my life; I never want it to end.

I don't usually get nervous, at least, not like this. Our soundcheck sounded great and we are, I dare say, over rehearsed. But this feeling—like the future of the band rests in the hands of tonight—is pretty unshakeable.

Ezra trots back down the stairs, and I'm sure they'll go back up soon. They can't really stay in one place for too long, especially with so much social stimulation. They're not nervous, as per usual. Instead, smiling and laughing, they're now chatting away with Sybil Connor, a current renter of the house—and one of the many secret loves of my life. One that will probably stay that way: a secret. I think I just wish I was her, to be honest. I wish I could do something so bold and brash like dying my hair green and cutting half of it off, like Sybil does. Although my heart keeps beating like a Glenn Branca movement, I join them, hoping that casual conversation might alleviate my anxiety.

"Garrett, my man!" Sybil says, punching me in the arm, "It's a big night tonight! Isn't it?"

"Yeah, seems that way," I wince and rub the spot she punched, although, retrospectively, I wish I hadn't.

"Don't fuck it up," she says, laughing.

"We actually call Garrett 'Father Fuck Up' because of how shitty of a bass player he is," Ezra jokes. These kinds of insults are normal from them; it's how you know they like you. And you want them to like you. Tonight, though, that burn hits a little different.

"I'm just messing, you guys are always great. We've had some pretty major catastrophes happen over there," Sybil says, motioning toward the stage slightly obscured by the heads downstairs. "But, I mean, it's just a house full of drunk people. Not hard to make an impression. Speaking of drunk, you guys need anything?"

"Uhh, yeah, obviously," says Ezra, following Sybil back upstairs. "Garrett, Amity, you guys need anything? Beer? Shots?"

I shake my head no, but Amity gives Ezra a nod. I envy those two and their willingness to enjoy themselves. The future of our band, the way I see it right now, is at stake tonight. This is where we have a true chance to separate

ourselves from the many generic sounding, same shit, whiny bands around here. I've heard rumors that artists have landed record deals or booked some major opening gigs after playing a single night here. I hope that will happen to us, but I also couldn't bear knowing that a label head was here.

The speakers turn on, kicking off the party. Good. Something to distract me from my thoughts. Of course, it's stuff I know and like. Why wouldn't it be? Bikini Kill, Crass, Sleater Kinney. The Slaughterhouse is the coolest place in town. Ezra comes back downstairs, now on Sybil's back. Ezra is tiny, about four feet and eleven inches, and super skinny. Their skin is darker than Amity's and mine and they make fun of our whiteness constantly, but I never mind. It's funny shit, and painfully accurate. I am the whitest guy I know. But Ezra is just an adorable human being, in a pour-water-on-them-and-they-become-a-gremlin kind of way. Other people of this particular body type might be offended by others wanting to pick them up, hold them, and cuddle them. Not Ezra. I rarely see them actually walk anywhere. They hop right off Sybil's back and jump back onto Amity's, only knocking her slightly off balance. They reach around Amity's head and hold the beer to her mouth.

Amity laughs and isn't pissed. I never have the wherewithal to break her concentration like that, but I guess all Ezra and Amity have all the wherewithal in the world. Sometimes I do feel strung along with the two of them, until Amity has one of her midnight crises. Then I'm the one who gets the phone call. I have to remind myself that I'm her first choice in times of desperation, and that makes up for being the third wheel during times of fun, I guess.

Amity closes the mirror, and she is now Casey Couture. She likes us to loudly use that name before a show to "add to the overall experience that is The Calamity." She says we aren't just here to put on a concert but to "commit an act of domestic terrorism and convince everyone that's what they want." Because that makes sense. She doesn't always think too hard about what she's saying or doing, but it's impossible not to listen to her. I'm hoping her confidence will rub off on me.

Ezra comes over to me and grabs my arm.

"Are you hyped yet, Garrett? This is the hugest fucking night of our young lives!" they yell in my ear.

I smirk, but I don't really have a response. I know it's the hugest night of our lives, and I really can't handle any more emphasis on that fact.

The opener is doing their soundcheck. They're called Hello Heart; I've seen them a few times. They're young, and I'm pretty sure they're still in high school, but they're good kids. And they're a good band. It would be so much easier if they weren't.

*Casey Couture is my feminist idol.*

*-Lisette Claymore, Senior*

## Ezra

Absolute dream come true. I mean, I can barely believe it. The Slaughterhouse, man! I'm not going to say we don't deserve this—we absolutely deserve this! Have you heard Casey Couture play before? She's the fucking white girl Jimmy Hendrix, except way better and way less dead. I would listen to us even if I weren't in this band, you know? We totally capture everything I've been dying to hear my whole life. We're real. We're so real. Raw, powerful, an absolute massacre of rage and...and emotion and fire and anguish and happiness. Nothing can tether us! No chains can hold us back, man! It's total anarchy with The Calamity!

I wish I had given myself a stage name like Amity did with Casey Couture when I had the chance. I probably would have named myself something dope, too, like "Hound Dog" or "Thrasher." Just kidding, those are really stupid names. But The Calamity is more than just a band; we have a legacy to preserve. Now that we've started to gain some serious steam, I can't go from being known as Ezra on stage to "Clint Warlock" or something, even if Clint Warlock is the objective best name ever. We aren't just a punk band, we're a full-fucking-fledged experience, reliant on eons of ethos building.

Hello Heart is up there killing it right now, of course. They're still innocent, hardly out of the womb, but good goddamn can they play some music. They kind of remind me of the Ramones if the Ramones were good. Plus, there's only three of them, like us. They're tasked with the ever important job of warming up the audience, and the crowd is absolutely loving them. Barely more than three drinks in, I imagine, and everyone's already slamming into each other. This audience is a ticking time bomb, waiting to explode.

Hello Heart is playing this one song I like called "Ready Set" or "Ready Set Go" or maybe it's just called "Go." I don't know, but I really vibe with the message. I can't really hear what they're singing, but whatever message the music communicates is a message I can get behind. Even though they're younger than us, they're angrier to a pretty shocking degree, which I think really says something profound about society. I don't really know what, though.

Look at Garrett over there, back against the wall like he's reliving his high school dance years. I don't know if I've ever seen his hair longer, it's just below his shoulders. This Halloween, I pitched Cousin Itt as his obvious costume. I don't really know what the fuck his problem was, but he didn't even come out with us at all, let alone put on anything outside of the single outfit he owns.

“Garrett! Hey, Garrett! It’s me, Ezra!” I wave obnoxiously at him, jumping over the few heads between us. One side of his face curls upwards, like it’s trying to smile but doesn’t know what a smile is.

I smell his nervousness; he’s a nervous little baby, and all I want to do is go give him a hug. Amity is nowhere to be seen at this point. We’re on in fifteen or so, so of course she’s ghosting. Probably in front of a mirror somewhere, making sure she looks perfect. I don’t blame her. She always looks perfect, but when she tries extra hard to look perfect she looks even more perfect. Like an angel, or, better yet, a sexy demon. Either that, or she’s up there alienating someone new. I should go ease Garrett’s nerves.

“You look like you’re reliving your highschool dance years!” I say over the music. That was a good joke. I couldn’t bear to waste it by keeping it in.

“You look like...you look like a goth...or something,” he says, clearly believing that black eye makeup is the sole indicator of a goth.

“You really got me!” I yell back. Garrett shoves his hands in his pockets. He’s doing that thing to me right now where he’s not facing me directly or making any eye contact, like a dad at a barbeque discussing the Saints versus the Dolphins.

“Do you know where Amity is? Or Casey, or whatever?” he says, looking around to make sure nobody heard him call her Amity. Dammit, look at me when you talk to me, I want to say. It’s like we haven’t spent the last year joined at the hip.

“Oh, you know her...she’s probably looking in a fucking mirror making sure her top reaches the perfect spot on her legs just above the knee. Or she got sucked into a conversation where she was able to bring up her Karen O obsession, or her Yoko Ono obsession. She’s fine.”

“Yeah, but we’re on in fifteen minutes...”

“She knows, dude. Take a chill pill—seriously, I have some Xanax in my bag if you want. Wash it down with vodka! You always say you wish you were more like a rockstar,” I say, laughing. I’m a little annoyed, though, that he’s not laughing back. Whatever, we’ll play the show and be fine. Conversations aren’t supposed to be some fucking competition where you try to win over the other person. I can’t vibe with this negative energy, so I’m going upstairs for one last pre-game beer. I get to the living room and there’s a huddle of people near the door, and I hear some yelling. Whatever’s happening seems like a good adrenaline boost, and I’m pretty short so I usually get front-and-center privileges to these kinds of events.

I shove my way through the cattle, and who do I see but Amity, finger firmly planted in the divot of some lanky saltine’s chest. He keeps backing up toward the door.

“Who even are you? Do you think I give a single shit about your opinion? You wanna say it again, huh? Get the fuck out of here!” she’s screaming at this guy.

I have no idea what the situation is, but I gotta bounce in and start screaming at this motherfucker alongside her. “Too busy in highschool popping all your pimples to learn some goddamn manners, you slug? Trying to get smacked?” I yell, literally jumping to get in this guy’s face. He’s definitely nervous but still smirking, only giving our rage longer legs.

“Chill out! It was nothing! I didn’t mean anything by it!” he yells back, looking proud of his piss-poor, sorry-shit defense. I would never call anyone a cocksucker in a derogatory way—who doesn’t love the occasional dick in the mouth?—but, holy fuck, this guy is a cocksucker.

“Oh, you didn’t mean anything by it? Then why’d you say it, huh? Why’d you say it? Wanna say it to me outside? Let’s go!” Amity says.

“I’ll break my streak of pacifism for you,” I pile on. “You motherfucker. Come on!” If nothing else, I am a shit talk maestro. We are gonna play such a great show after this. A great anecdote for *The Calamity Memoirs*.

We keep yelling at this dildo until some huge, bearded dude intervenes and expends zero effort forcing this guy out of the house. We thank him because he seems cool and offer him a beer because we don’t have much else to offer. He declines but in a super chill way. Like, he said “no,” but he had this, like, really saucy inflection in his voice. I kind of want to be his friend but I think he’s thirty. He bids us *adieu* and I give Amity a wild hug.

“Dude, Amity...” I say, after the fervor has died down a touch. “What a hoot! Let’s find some other fucker to kick out!”

“Amity?” She responds, and I know what she means. I wish she knew that, as baller as Casey Couture is, she’s still just Amity the whole time. I mean, isn’t it better that Amity take credit for this rather than some stage name?

“What did he say to you anyway, huh? The nerve of some people, man...”

Amity gives me a sideways smile, “He told me that The Calamity wasn’t his kind of music. Why’s he here then, you know?”

“That’s it? Are you fucking serious?” Jesus, now I have to feel guilty. And I should never have to feel guilty for such a biting verbal smackdown.

“I mean, he was kind of a dick about it.”

“You’re being a bit of a dick about it yourself!” I say, backing off. “Kicking a guy out for that. I was ready to kill him for you! Seriously!”

She laughs, like maybe she doesn’t think I’m serious. That’s what I get for being so side-splittingly hilarious all the time.

“I could just tell there was nothing authentic about him. It’s an energy that you can pick up from a face like his,” she says.

I won’t lie, sometimes she’s super fucking annoying. “You’re fucking insane. Did you know that?”

“Of course!” She says, and now I laugh.

Eh, you know what, fuck that guy.

I hear Hello Heart finish on my favorite song which means it’s time for us to take the stage, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt we are going to blow the whole fuckin’ roof off this joint.

*It was way too sweaty and smelly down there...do people actually enjoy this?*

*-Derrick Dobmeier, Freshman*

## Casey Couture

It was a flash of heat, a bucket of water in a deep fryer. It could have been two minutes, it could have been two hours. It was profoundly violent and bloody, yet serenely peaceful. It was, after all, the death of The Calamity—the greatest rock band that’s ever been kind enough to treat this Earth with their presence. And now The Calamity will forever be buried in The Slaughterhouse, or perhaps cremated, or perhaps so decimated that all that remains is a photograph for the memorial.

We not only played our songs tonight, we ripped through them with a ferocity hardly seen since the days of Iggy and the Stooges or a young Karen O with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs (the second greatest band on Earth). Of course, I opened with my signature move: a true crowd pleaser, raucous and wild, where I chug an entire beer and spray the last mouthful up like a geyser while Ez and Garrett vamp on something new each time. Sometimes people ask us, “are they really making it up on the spot?” They are. Each time. The reaction is incredible.

Garrett, Ezra, and myself were locked into each other, bound by invisible chains, whipped by an invisible BDSM dominatrix until we were welted and crying with pleasure. We opened the night with a cover, an unprecedented yet carefully considered move, as we wanted everyone to start the show singing with us. A bonding strategy, a personal connection from artist to audience.

And no, it wasn’t an ironic cover. Garrett, Ezra, Amity, and I genuinely love Carly Rae Jepsen’s discography, which is why we chose to cover the canonical “Call Me Maybe.” Pop music doesn’t get enough credit at these kinds of events. I would even argue that, in spirit, pop is the same as punk: simple, three chord music more focused on feeling and physicality than some kind of mental trip. Music that makes your body want to explode in flurries of expression, to dance.

The crowd moved all at once, swaying back and forth, mouthing the words. We played it faster, naturally, and more hardcore, naturally, than the

original. It was the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar, it moved everyone to practice their authentic expressionism. Garrett chugged through the opening notes, introducing a flash of “I know this, but from where?” into the room’s consciousness. As soon as I threw the wish in the well, the cheers nearly drowned out the monitors. We couldn’t hear a note we were playing for a few seconds. Everything was going perfectly.

Of course, following this we played a few non-EP cuts to build the tension and get the crowd hungry for the hits: “Hopelandia” to “Grounded Forever” to “Death is Funny.” At the end of “Death,” Ezra dropped their drumstick, so I took it and hit Garrett’s low E string five or six times in an effort to be spontaneous, but mostly to make him smile (which he did). He was nervous, and I could tell. I wanted him to loosen up. I like him more when he’s loose. Pure musicality can manifest itself in infinite ways. Rigidity is not one of those ways.

Then, of course, we hit the opening power chord of “Can’t Knock It,” our EP opener, with such precision and force that I thought the gates to Hell were going to open up from beneath and swallow us right then and there. Of course, then we blazed through the rest: “Lustful Existence” to “Global Warming” to “Rotted Dick” to “Please the Police” to “Rock Hard,” finishing with, of course, our EP closer, “I Hate Myself.” Between “Dick” and “Police,” we included an improvised flourish, a jam so tight that it felt as if the three of us were melting together into a giant robotic musical being. I will miss that about being in this band, of course, that sense of complete and unconfused musical communication.

I would never say I’m moving on to bigger or better things. After all, The Calamity is the greatest band that’s ever existed. It’s time for me to move on to different things. Forever is an egregiously boring thing. Now the concept of temporary, of endings, of death, that’s beautiful. Death is beautiful. It provides a whole new significance to life. That’s how we stay the greatest band that’s ever existed. That’s why Nirvana never sucked, and why Weezer sucks hardcore now. I can’t stay in one place for too long when I have a whole world at my disposal. New people to meet and, more importantly, new people to wow and amaze and influence. The Calamity will be known for beginning the revolution. Casey Couture will be known for finishing it.

Ezra and Garrett will forgive me, I know they will. They’re mad now, but they just need time. They’ll get it. They’re smart.



*If The Calamity ends then life has no meaning.*

*-Greta Hartwick, Senior*

Ezra

This bitch.

"What do you mean, end of The Calamity? Is this some kind of joke or something? Why did you tell them that this was our last show after we just played the best show of our entire fucking lives?" We're outside, in front of the house. Amity is sitting on the curb, her face in her hands. Garrett is behind me, not saying much as usual. He'll tell me all about how he's on my side later, but right now he can't even work up the nerve to say anything. Whatever, man. Whatthefuckever.

"I thought you guys would get it," Amity says, through her hands.

I have no idea if she's herself or keeping up that Casey Couture façade bullshit, but I also don't care.

"Get what? How our friend is tossing us in the dirt for...no fucking reason? Because she's selfish and wants to be in the spotlight? We give you the fucking spotlight, Amity." She doesn't correct me, which is good. Casey Couture would be much more insufferable in this situation.

"But now the life of The Calamity means so much more and—"

"Cut that faux philosophical intellectual bullshit. It makes you sound way more stupid than you are."

She's silent for a moment after this, sinking deeper into her slump. Still dressed with all the makeup, she doesn't look like a star.

"Sorry. I should have talked to you guys," she says finally.

"Uh, yeah. No shit. We're called The Calamity because we're, you know, a band. Not a glorified solo act. What the fuck were you thinking?"

"It's for the future. Casey Couture is—"

"Casey Couture is YOU, Amity. A stage name. An alter ego. Say 'I am, don't act like this was out of your control. I'm sick of this shit. Childish.' I knew I had delivered a blow, but I wasn't proud of it like I was when we kicked that cock blister to the curb earlier. As hard as that was to say, that's one of the only ways you can get to her. Cut deep or else it won't cut at all. She starts to cry; a teardrop at first, and then all at once. She can't stop. I want to sit down next to her and punch her in the arm and give her a hug and then punch her again, but I can't.

"I just thought it would be the perfect end and we could focus on the future," she says between gasps, "and you guys are the most important thing in the world to me, and I feel like I lost you guys and—"

"It's not too late, Amity," Garrett finally chimes in, "there's no reason the band has to end...could have just been a stunt, or whatever. Part of the experience."

"No," she immediately replies, wiping away a tear, "it has to end like this. It's organic. Authentic. The fitting end." The sadness leaves her face and her eyes regain their intensity.

"Authentic how? Seriously, Amity, authentic how? Is Casey Couture authentic? Announcing the end of a whole band without letting the fucking band know is authentic? Do you even know what that word means? Because I don't think you do." I am going for the jugular. I have to. She has proved that for the two years we've been friends—best friends, I thought—I was just being strung along in the name of some greater vision that only exists in one person's brain.

She stands up. Wetness stains her cheekbones but other than that there's nothing about her to suggest she's ever cried. I think she might hit me. Do it.

"Casey Couture has more authenticity in one finger than either of you two have experienced in your entire lives," she says, pointedly.

"Can't you just be real for once, Amity?" Garrett asks, stepping forward. "We aren't fucking talking about Casey Couture. We're talking about you. You talk about being authentic, but neither of us feel like we even know who you are anymore. Did we ever?"

Amity steps back, and the tenseness in her muscles softens. I don't know if she'll cry again, hurl another insult, fight us, or what, but I don't care. I don't know why I ever cared. We obviously mean nothing to her. We stand in silence together, shifting slightly, mostly motionless. I'm sure, in all our brains, we're exploring options of what to say next, but nothing is landing quite right. I'm glad Garrett stepped forward to say something. I think he needed that, and I think she needed to hear it. Amity starts to tear up again but doesn't sob like before.

"Are you guys still gonna be my friends?" she asks, looking at the ground.

"I don't know. Are you gonna be ours?" I ask.

## Garrett

This open mic is going to be the first time I've played music publicly in a while. Some little coffee shop in town that only serves vegetarian food. It's only been a month or so since that show at The Slaughterhouse, but when my weeks used to be packed with a show or two—plus rehearsals—three weeks not performing is like an eternity. Ezra and I have a thing, I guess, just a bongos and acoustic guitar kind of thing. Neutral Milk-ish. They're singing, something I never even realized they could do, especially so well. As raw as the essence of Ezra is, their voice is, dare I say, pretty. A far cry from Amity's

Kathleen Hanna howls. I'm still the moody background, but unlike before, I'm not sure I want to be anything else. I'm very nervous.

I'd be lying if I said I don't hope every day that I'll get a text message saying something along the lines of, "band practice, now." That's usually how we were beckoned. We never did have a set time each week or whatever. That kind of annoyed me at the time, but, of course, now I miss it. It's like a breakup, or a death in the family. As much as I try to carry on, there's this dark cloud looming over me, only reminding me of its presence when things start to feel okay again.

I haven't seen Amity since that night, either. Obviously, Ezra and I are still trying to hold onto our relationship, but I'd be lying if I said that the majority of our conversation wasn't caked with shit talk. Shit talking Amity, the band, how annoying it was being in a band with Amity—anything we can say to convince ourselves that we don't miss the everloving fuck out of it. There's still something missing in Ezra and my dynamic now, some kind of awkwardness, almost like we're playing music with each other out of obligation. We're good, but we're not "gaseous," or "grotesquely nauseating," or any of the other weird things Amity would say when talking about how great we were. How great she was.

Everyone sounds the same at this open mic. A lot of dudes who look similar to me singing about some girl they saw across a room somewhere, once. *I noticed your shirt, it was covered in dirt.* Those kinds of lyrics. Apparently, creepy obsessiveness is okay when you sing about it. Some dude thinks it's a comedy open mic. He's funny like how shoving a thumbtack between your toe and toenail is funny. Ezra and I aren't going to make any waves, but at least we might be somewhat unique, I hope. There's one artist between this guy and us, then we'll go up to play a solid but forgettable set, then I'll go home and make pizza rolls and think about all the other things I could be doing. Oh Christ, he's singing about his ex-girlfriend. *She's a bitch, she's a witch, she never did scratch this itch.* He actually sang that.

When he finishes, there's some polite clapping, and Ezra looks at me and snickers. Neither of us are clapping. Now there's only a few minutes before we go up, so I grab my acoustic to tune it up real quick. The host of the event, some awkward fraternity dude in letters and glasses, steps up to the mic.

"Thanks Owen, that was great," he says, looking at his ripped sheet of notebook paper. "We only have a couple more artists up. Thanks guys, for coming in. We still have a lot of coffee left, so please drink it—it cost us like twenty dollars. Anyway coming to the stage is...Casey Culture?" To our mutual surprise, Amity steps to the stage, in full Casey Couture get up: gay pride flag as cape, winged eyeliner, platform shoes, the whole nine, with an acoustic guitar strapped to her back. We hadn't even seen her here. Probably because she spent the whole Open Mic dressing up.

“Oh God,” Ezra says, with a sigh, “here she is.”

“Couture,” Amity says into the mic, “Casey Couture.” She starts tuning up her guitar, even though we were explicitly told to tune before we hit the stage. Of course nobody is telling her no. Nobody knows how, apparently.

“Hey, Owen,” she says, back into the mic, looking at the last performer from across the room, “your ex sounds really cool. You seem like a dick, though.”

Ezra snickers, though I know they don’t want to. I look over at Owen, expecting some kind of outburst but his face just reddens as he tries to laugh it off. Casey Couture finishes tuning.

“This one’s called “Endings.” I hope you enjoy it.”

She strums the first chord, an open G. Very basic chord, maybe THE basic chord, but somehow she hits every string so perfectly that they bounce off the walls with a golden timbre. Her eyes shut tight as she plays, her upper half swaying back and forth in rhythm with the song. When she sings, it’s more melodic than I’m used to and yet, somehow, with an acoustic guitar by herself on a stage in a coffee shop, she still carries the same energy she did when we were playing loud punk in dirty basements.

I look at Ezra, expecting a scowl, or disinterest, but they’re just as invested as I am. Throughout the song they don’t turn to me and joke or say anything nasty, and I don’t either. She’s in full Casey Couture mode, and she’s never seemed more like Amity. She is laying every inch of her selves bare for us right now. The room seems like we may all collectively burst into tears. I don’t know if Amity even knows Ezra and I are here but I don’t think I even want her to. I forget we’re playing next, like how could we possibly follow her?

I don’t know if we’ll ever forgive Amity. I don’t know if we should, and I don’t know if she deserves it. I don’t know if The Calamity will ever come back, or if we’ll have any more of those late nights playing Mario Party and drinking way too much beer and smoking way too much weed. And that hurts, it really does. Knowing that what I’ve always considered to be the best nights of my life are over and never coming back. But I do know one thing for certain, and it’s maybe the only thing I’ve ever known: Casey Couture is a star.



*Dealer* (marker on foam), Erika Snyder



*Reaper* (marker on foam), Erika Snyder

# Can You Love the Same on the Moon?

you asked me to write you a poem. one where  
it doesn't hurt to read. you tell me too often i write  
with grief as the main character. sadness and loss  
as the supporting roles. you say my metaphor of love  
as a gaping flesh wound is so unfair. we kiss. i write  
you a poem. one where we end up together and  
live out our forever on the moon. where there is  
no fear, no grief, no oozing wound. where there is  
a weightlessness. like how you hold my heart so it  
doesn't feel as heavy. like how a peach melts in  
the sun and dribbles sickly sweet. i almost accept  
this idea of love. almost move to the moon with you  
and bounce around from crater to crater, knowing it  
was never about the hurt; it was about the release.  
until you leave. and my heart comes down with a  
resounding thud and opens up, spilling black into  
my chest. grief comes in and cleans the mess. i write  
another poem. one where the moon doesn't exist.





*Shape Shifter* (ceramic), Kailey Maher



*Ether* (cast bronze), Kailey Maher

# Sisters

I.

“Do you think I’d look good as a blonde?” I ask my sister Cassandra as we sit in parallel spa chairs at Grace’s Nail Salon. Toes tied in tissue to prevent us from smudging our freshly painted nails, we twist our upper bodies to face one another while staying still for the nail technicians.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Aliyha. Your skin tone is too tan for that. Plus, are you really going to keep up with your roots?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t go as light as Mom’s hair, maybe more of a dirty blond?”

“You’re sisters? But you look nothing alike!”  
The nail technician pries into our family situation  
as she paints a top coat on Cassandra’s toes.

She is right: my sister and I  
are both the spitting images  
of our own fathers.

Two opposing specimen  
that make others  
doubt our relation.  
Cassandra’s nose is pointed,

while mine rounds out at the bottom.

Her hair sprouts outwards like sun rays

while mine points straight to the ground.

Cassandria's mouth stretches  
across most of her face,

while mine stays within the boundaries  
of the width of my nose.

We look most alike in the summer,  
when she tans enough to match

my complexion, so long as I stay out of the sun.

Yet even with similar skin tones,  
our bone structures contrast  
too much to pass for more than cousins.

Our dissimilar faces  
emulate the same look of disgust  
at the nail technician's impolite question.

Her forehead wrinkles,

and my chin scrunches up.

## II.

"Sis, Marcos is at the door." I shake Cassandra awake from her mid-afternoon nap on the living room couch. We hadn't seen her dad since her thirteenth birthday. She is sixteen now. Cassandra orients herself, smooths her hair down, and asks me if I'm certain it's her father. Peeking through the curtains, I steal another look.

Same forehead-to-face ratio (though wrinkles run across his), same full lips (though his are pursed into a fake smile), same hazel eyes (though his gaze feels unfamiliar). I rearrange the curtains before he can notice me, then turn to my sister and nod to confirm his identity.

I always felt illegitimate  
when Marcos came around,

though he hardly ever did.  
Whenever he did,

he swooped in and showed  
my sister a different world,

one I wasn't a part of.  
Before my memory began to stick,  
I am told that Marcos

would take her away for whole nights.

I probably assumed she was going  
on a fun vacation  
and wondered why she couldn't bring  
Mom and me along.

This visit, Marcos brings Cassandra  
to the mall for a belated birthday gift  
that he believes will make up for  
all the other birthdays he's missed.  
They are only gone for a couple hours,  
yet the house feels empty.

A part of me wonders  
if she won't come back.  
*Would Marcos offer her  
a better life?*

*Would she decide to live  
with her other half-siblings?*

*We've had Cassandra  
for sixteen years straight.  
Maybe Marcos came  
because our time was up.*

It is hard to accept  
the fact that Cassandra  
has twice the number  
of dads and siblings.

DJ and I try to distract ourselves by playing games on the Wii but Cassandra's avatar pops up on the homepage. We scroll through the song choices on Just Dance, looking for any new songs we might've unlocked. After we

settle on “Eye of the Tiger,” DJ and I spread out on the living room carpet, swinging our arms to make sure we have enough space between one another. At the start of the dance, Cassandra’s high score flies across the top of the screen. Neither of us even come close to it.

Cassandra always comes back. This time, she came home with a purple iPod that was small enough to fit in her palm. We stay up all night downloading songs from the family computer onto her gift from her father. Cassandra sits on the front edge of the rolling desk chair while I sit cross-legged behind her. We download whole albums of Avril Lavigne, Taylor Swift, and The Jonas Brothers.

“Did you have fun today?” I ask Cassandra  
while we watch the loading icon pinwheel  
in the center of the screen.

“I guess.”  
She shrugs, scooching further  
back into the chair. I tell her

about how DJ and I played Just Dance  
and reassure her

that her high score was still intact.

Once all our pre-teen bops are downloaded, we tiptoe back to our bedroom. Cassandra untangles her earbuds in the dark so that no light can seep through the cracks of Mom and Dad’s bedroom door. I slip into my bed and dog-ear the blanket corner for Cassandra to join. We lay side by side on our backs, so that we can share the earbuds.

### III.

The sound of bangles clanking against one another draws me and Cassandra into the living room. We find Dad laying out silver and gold jewelry on the coffee table, which means Grandma Ruby sent us another glamorous package from Pakistan. As always, Dad hovers his hands over the table until we agree to be extra careful with his mother’s jewelry. I know only to touch the gold pieces since Cassandra will want all the silver ones.

Cassandra embraces my father’s culture as her own. Each week following a package from Grandma Ruby, we both show up to school in our Pakistani jewelry elbow-deep in rainbow bangles.

But as she gets older and begins  
questioning her identity,  
she stops  
getting excited about the jewelry  
and lets me claim  
all the pieces.

“Now, lean against the wall and look straight at the camera!” Cassandra instructs me as she turns the dial on her radio. “Too Cool” from the Disney movie *Camp Rock* fills our bedroom as Cassandra rushes to get into position. She holds her iPod Touch horizontally and makes sure I am the focus of the camera before she begins to film our music video. I mirror my sister’s movements as she shows me what to do behind the camera. *Strut away from the camera, look over your shoulder, wink.* Whenever I forget the lyrics and mouth something completely different, Cassandra assures me she’ll be able to edit it out of the final cut.

“I’m going to upload this music video to YouTube and we’ll go viral!” Cassandra exclaims, so confident in her shaky, middle school camerawork and my awkward elementary school composure. Cassandra sifts through her wardrobe and hands me in her trendy Mudd jeans and a cheetah-print over-the-shoulder top for the next scene. Although she never does end up posting any of the music videos we make together, we still enjoy our roles as director and star.

The three of us lay on our sides one night; Cassandra in the front, then me, then DJ at the caboose of our train. We are only thirteen, nine, and six, respectively. DJ traces intricate pictures on my back with his pointer finger as I do the same to Cassandra. She pretends that she’s deep in concentration over the lines I’m sketching, trying to guess what image I’m massaging onto her back. But I know she’s dozing off to the free massage she has earned as the older sister.

We are all small enough to all fit in Cassandra’s twin size bed, which is across the room from my own. Occasionally, my fingers drift to Cassandra’s armpit, and I tickle her to test if she’s still awake. She groans and kicks me, but soon she’s back to guessing what I’m drawing.

“Quit moving! You’re gonna ruin your eyeshadow!” Cassandra scolds me as I sit on the bathroom counter. Cassandra’s grip on my chin tightens while



I continue to fuss over the eyeliner she draws on my eyelid. Eventually, she makes nearly symmetrical lines on both my eyes, despite having to start over multiple times because I teared up.

"There! Aren't you glad that *I* did your makeup?" Cassandra steps back to get a better view of the complete look.

"If I had let Mom do it, I would've shown up to the eighth grade dance with blue eyeshadow up to my eyebrows!" I tilt the handheld mirror at different angles to truly appreciate my smokey eyes and blood red lips.

"And bright pink blush caking your entire cheeks!" Cassandra and I laugh about Mom's outdated makeup look.

"You're turning into a slut, just like your sister," Dad says from the bathroom doorway, gritting his crooked teeth. He doesn't like that Cassandra wears makeup to school, and now he finds her painting my face just like hers. He retreats to the living room before Cassandra can think of anything to say.

#### IV.

"Stop, don't hurt DJ!" I shout to Dad right before he flings one of DJ's WWE action figures in his direction. I don't remember what he did to make Dad angry, but I'll never forget the gut-wrenching clap of plastic on DJ's bare back. Cassandra and Mom are still unpacking the car from our family beach trip, but Cassandra runs into the house at the sound of her siblings' screams and finds my father shuffling around the wobbly coffee table while I try to outrun him on the other side.

"Get away from them!" Cassandra declares through her braces, standing between her siblings and her stepdad. Although she is only sixteen, her commanding tone is enough to stop my dad in his tracks.

The car trunk slams shut and Mom  
assesses the damage  
as she joins us  
in the living room.  
She finds us each  
frozen in position:

Dad crouches on the edge  
of the couch and holds  
his bald head in his hands;  
Cassandra acts as a wall  
with her hands on her hips  
standing between her stepfather  
and DJ, who sits against the wall

and hugs his knees against his chest;  
and me, still in my defensive stance  
on the other side of the coffee table.

Dad “tsks” at us kids  
and escapes to his room.  
Mom follows him once  
she sees that Cassandra  
is assessing the extent  
of DJ’s injury.

Cassandra kneels beside DJ, who rubs his own back from the brash impact of the toy. The outline of a ten-inch action figure is stamped onto his back in red, surrounded by a swollen ring of purple. I hear Mom yelling at Dad behind their closed bedroom door. Her words sound wet, like she is crying as she speaks. Before I can hear the bulk of their argument, Cassandra turns the TV on to Disney Channel on the highest volume setting.

V.

Cassandra looks down at the grocery list on her phone as I push the cart through Stop & Shop. I direct us toward the cold cereal aisle, but Cassandra tugs on the cart to redirect us towards the fresh produce.

“You need to eat more vegetables, Aliyha,” Cassandra reprimands me, making me roll my eyes. We agree on getting salad for tonight as long as I can also pick up a roll of cookie dough.

After looping through the aisles for the rest of our list, we wheel the cart to the cash register lane with the shortest line. Cassandra lets me through first so I can bag the items while she swipes Mom’s card to pay for the groceries. I bag pasta for DJ, fruits for Cassandra, and candies for myself.

“Crap! We forgot to get Mom’s coffee!” I say to Cassandra after bagging our last box of cereal.

“You’re sisters?” the cashier questions us  
after overhearing my comment.  
The two of us paste polite,  
yet fake smiles on our faces.

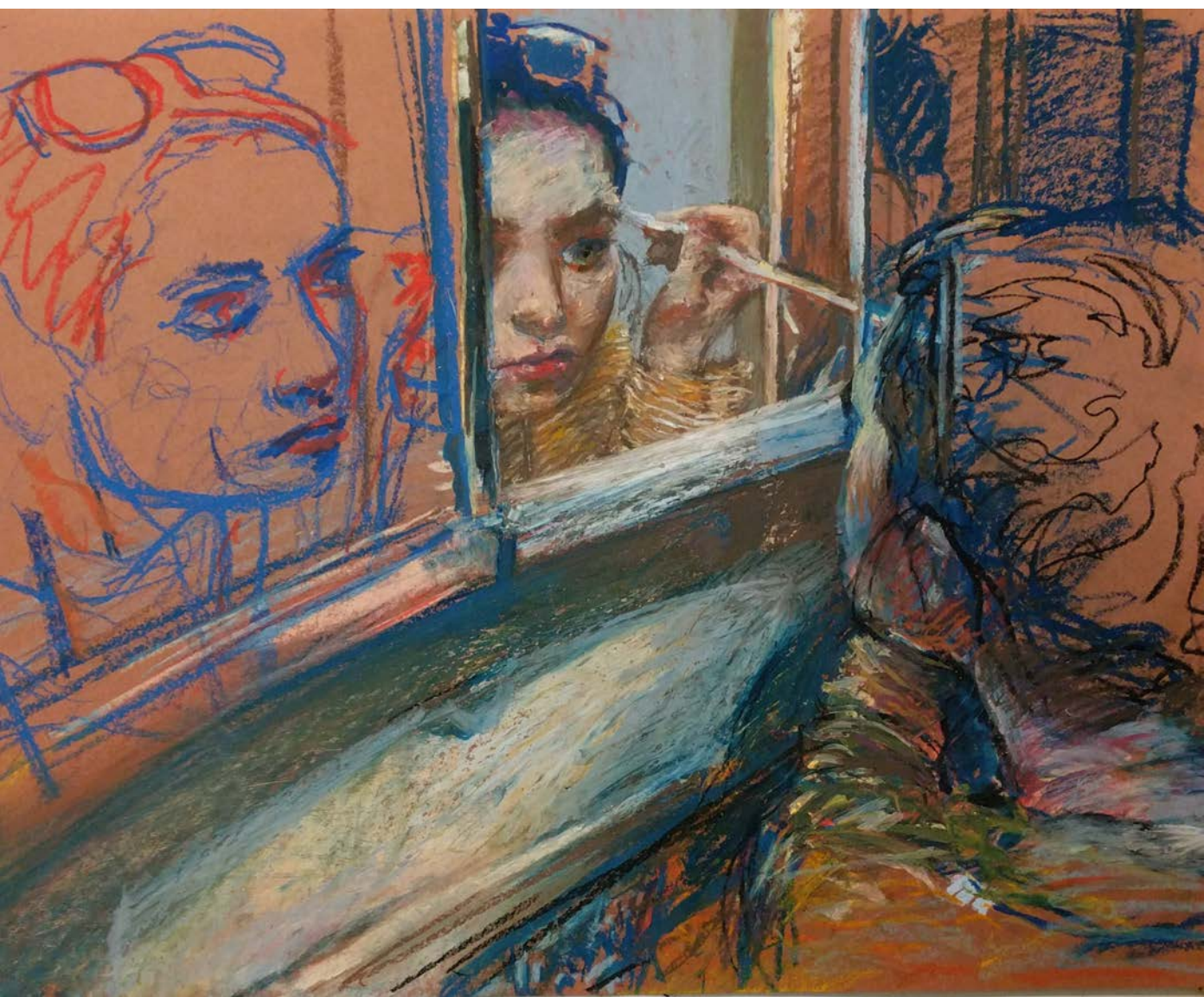
The ends of Cassandra’s lips point  
upwards to her furrowed eyebrows,

and my eyes look down

at my flip-flopped feet as I  
snap the hair tie against my wrist.

The cashier seems taken aback  
from our confirmation of relation.  
She continues to interrogate us,  
as people often do  
when stumbling across half siblings.

*Yes, we're sisters. No, we don't have the same father. Yes, we're still very close.*



*Make-Up & Reflections* (oil pastel on canson), Hunter Celeste

# Resting Wings

On Valentine's Day, it snows and you ask me to walk across campus to Naragansett Hall, because you want to see me even though we're not dating. I must've lost my spine in the holiday rush, so I say I will and walk one mile through the windy cold to see you. I'm numb by the time I make it to the dorm, and when I text you to say that I'm standing outside waiting, you tell me you're not there but you're coming, that I should wait. I do—two words I used to want to say to you.

Fifteen minutes go by. Snow gathers on top of my head, melts, and gathers again. I'm shivering on a bench that grows wet underneath my body. I don't go anywhere, because if I were strong enough to leave you, I would've done it two years ago, the first time you left me alone in your room while you went out on a Friday night, got drunk, and threw up in the recycling bin. We are semester-lovers, a convenience that distracts from the fact that we are far from home, and there is physically no one to say "I love you," except us to each other. Words easily formed on mouths but so rarely meant nowadays, especially by me.

I tell myself I'll leave if you don't show up in the next five minutes, but of course you materialize. You have a strange habit of appearing when you sense my patience waning.

Hello, gorgeous, you say. Your smile isn't as white as snow—it's yellow like the tobacco you smoke. I taste THC on your tongue; on your lips, a hint of cocaine grit. A cocktail of drugs, though you prefer keg beer found in basements or that barn down on North Street, the one with the space heater near the entrance.

Hey, I say. And I know I'll be around you for the next couple of hours, until I get hungry, or we disagree about something, or you want to go smoke.

Then we'll go our separate ways until you text me, and I misplace my spine again.

I have something for you, you say. From the inside of your jacket, you pull out a yellow rose. I blush, returning heat to my face. I saw some Alpha Chi Omega girls selling roses in the college union when I went to get my mail this morning, and I secretly hoped you would buy me one, because I feel like you owe me that much.

Thank you, I say. I hug you because I know I should, but also because I want to. The idea that you thought of me today is enough to make me forget the times you left me alone to get high or drunk or meet friends who happen to be girls. All those cool girls you tell me about, the ones who smoke and drink while I stay inside during cold nights—I forget all of my petty jealousy, and perhaps my better judgement, as I hold the rose in my hand. The stem is strong and waxy on my fingertips, the petals unfurled in maturity. Something beautiful to act as candlelight in the places where you rest.

You're welcome, you say. I stole it from a bouquet in the chemistry office.

Oh, is all I can think to say. The glow around your gift fades away fast. In the next few seconds, the cold finds a way to chill my bones even through my new winter jacket. As you pull me into Narragansett Hall, I look down at the rose and wonder if I want something that doesn't belong to me.

The rose winds up hanging upside down on my wall with sticky blue tack, the kind kindergarten teachers use to hang up arts and crafts. A week passes, and the stem begins to collapse. Then the petals wilt and crinkle until they are nothing but a ball of dead yellow. The rose is better this way—present, but non-functioning. Not that a rose ever has any other purpose except for aesthetics. Still, killing the rose makes me feel like I have some type of control over you, the who conducts this relationship that's not really a relationship, but used to be, back in the summer.

Now, we just hole ourselves up in your room for hours, doing nothing except lying on an uncomfortable mattress and watching comedy shows that are pungent with cruelty—your humor, not mine. Your arm wrapped around me and my head, a head filled with thoughts of being elsewhere, on your chest. Would if I could, go back two years, when I first met you outside Putnam Hall by chance, introduced by a guy in my dorm who happened to be showing me around campus. Back then, the light in your eyes had nothing to do with the sun but the way you saw life: a playground full of obstacles that you could overcome. Would if I could, go back to the night you held my hands and told me that life is a beautiful thing that needs to be shared with someone.

These days, your eyes are dulled by smoke. You've become jaded because being a senior chemistry student in college is harder than being a sophomore, and you're constantly struggling with what you want to do—party—versus



what you need to do—study. Your vices always win. You are a predictable creature of habit, but your temper is unexpected. When I see you, I never know who I'm going to meet: a figure made of smoke, or someone stressed because he didn't do the assignment that was due two days ago.

When I'm with you, I feel the restlessness everywhere in my body. My muscles ache to move, but I'm afraid if I do you'll get the impression that I don't want to be with you. Even though this is true, I can't tell you because you're far away from home, too. Psych 101 has me thinking that your drinking and drugs is a way to express self-hatred. I'm afraid to pull away, afraid to give you a reason to try to find ways to numb the pain of a separation. Because if nothing else, I've become a habit to you, a semi-solid fixture of your life. And maybe I'm clinging to you because I've accepted you as a part of this college campus, and I'm afraid something would be missing without you. I'm as responsible for wallowing in our toxic nature as you are.

It's the middle of March, and I've begun to hate you. I've started talking to someone else, a quiet and gentle person who loves writing but not reading, a sin I forgive because when he kisses me, he holds the back of my head as if he's afraid to let me fall away. The first night we're together, you're at a party. When I saw you earlier, you'd taken a capsule full of powdered mushroom, and told me you wanted to begin a new world order without money so you can end homelessness.

I'm not thinking about this when I first kiss him. In fact, I don't think about you at all, and when it's over and I'm resting my head against his chest—so different from yours—I don't feel any smudge of guilt. In the morning, I wonder if I'm sociopathic and realize I'm not. My emotions and patience are like a suicidal jump: an expansive, wind-rushing headspace until something snaps. Skull against ocean rock.

It's been six months since the summer, and it's hard to remember the way life was when it was warm. But I remember what the summer was like, waiting for a beheading, waiting for our relationship to die. We killed it together one night in July over FaceTime, decided we couldn't keep screaming at each other—our throats were sore. I was stupid to see you the first day back on-campus of our fall senior semester. I should've pulled away when you went to kiss me in the elevator, but I was lonely, and starving for the gentle touch of a hand that wasn't mine. To feel a heat that wasn't mine, someone outside of myself. So now we exist in gray light, an afterlife. If nothing else, we persist because it is impossible to kill something already dead. It is impossible to say, I'm breaking up with you when there is nothing to break.

April comes and the cold weather starts to break just enough to remind me that I won't be on this college campus forever, and neither will you. In May, you will graduate in a morning ceremony, and I will graduate a couple hours later in a ceremony dedicated to the arts. Our separate ceremonies are



just the beginning of a larger separation. As I begin to realize the temporary state of our relationship, I get more restless. You fall to the backburner as I begin to think about life outside of college, the next step.

It's easy to see the distance between us when we were once so close. We worked to occupy each other's space by laying on top of one another, sharing breath. You guess the reason. Your old intelligence shines through when you ask, Is there anyone else?

If I had less cushion between my bones, I would've said yes. Believe that I think about telling you, about ending this stupid merry-go-round of a relationship. Trust that I want to be honest with you, but think about the ways in which you could be cruel to me. I think about how small campus is, and the fact that this one mile stretch of academic buildings isn't the real world, that you'll know where I live because college is just an incubator for old teenagers and young adults, a stagnant place with moving fixtures. I think better about opening my mouth to tell you I've been visiting someone else in my head, heart, and body.

No, I say. I lie to you, a person I once let sit in the cavern of my ribs. I don't feel bad about lying because you don't believe me anyway; you just don't have any evidence. I've been careful about keeping myself safe and guarded. At the end of the day, what right do you have to be mad at me? We both see the way girls teeter-totter to parties with their makeup glowing, dresses skin tight. We both know I don't sleep over on Friday or Saturday nights when you go out, and we both know how promiscuous you are, and the way I haven't been letting you in lately. That I've been pushing you away when you reach for me in the night, an action I can't recall but feel a small swell of relief over when you tell me..

You use your suspicion against me, again and again. After we're done playing pretend-relationship, as you're leaving to go smoke, you say things like, "Are you going to suck his dick now?"

No, I'm going to be alone, is always my response, and it's always what I do, after I take a shower to rinse off the feeling of your fingernails. There is nothing sweeter than to just have a moment to myself, a real breath without anyone wondering who I'm breathing for.

April ends, and May comes with seventy-degree weather and flowers, as if it's apologizing for the colder months and just wants to make things right. I spend time with him while you're out at parties on Fridays and Saturdays.

He comes to my dorm room, and we make ourselves drinks. I swallow mine fast and collapse onto the bed, where he circles my body. We fit together like filigree on lace.

I'd like to come back and see you, I say.

That would be nice, he says. When I graduate and leave, we'll text a little, meet up once and then fall from each other's contact lists. There is no

budding relationship here, and I will come to resent him and myself for not trying harder to make something like our gentle moments last. But for now, I have hope that I will see him again and this makes it easier to leave you.

A few days before graduation, I want to press fast-forward but experience each nano-second of campus life because I know this phase of my life is about to end. The night before graduation, I let you sleep over out of respect for an old tradition. You come in at two o'clock in the morning and sit outside my dorm room composing a love letter that I will find three weeks later in a box of my books.

The letter makes me cry for old reasons because you sound so gentle in the words rounded by your hand. But I also cry at the irony of your wishes for me: find someone who respects you; remember that you are worth so much. I cry because I'm angry at a past self who stayed silent for too long, who couldn't help you. I cry because the girl—the woman I am now—can hardly stand you. Yet, I almost feel like I should thank you. My reserve for trust is shallow, my patience crescent moon thin, except when it comes to myself. I'm patiently awaiting the moment I forgive myself for not walking away from you sooner. I trust that I won't make the same mistake in trusting another person like you again.

We graduate, you in the morning and me in the afternoon. When I'm finished with my ceremony, I leave with my family in a caravan of cars. You text me: I want to take pictures with you. When you call me, I don't answer.

I'm gone, I text. Sorry.

Only I'm not. With my leather folder in my hands and my graduation cap still on, I feel nothing except a glow inside my ribs where you once sat. I lose the rose you gave me in the move, a rose that was probably grown in a nursery and artificially pollinated by botanists and not insects—the winged ones who land on petals and then take off, some of the pollen sticking to their fur.

Flowers and insects.

Butterflies are sometimes tethered by scientists and placed in wind tunnels for observation. Flowers are used as sweet bait, an incentive for the butterflies to keep flying. The exhaustive lengths butterflies will fly for the chance to taste something that is more than food, something that is close to the essence of life.

I understand butterflies in wind tunnels following flowers. I understand the pointlessness of flapping in one place and still hoping to move. I know, I know, I know that I'm not the butterfly, or the wind, or the flower, but if I've learned anything from this sick experiment, it's that being tethered happens to all of us.

# About the Authors

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

HUNTER CELESTE is a senior in the art program at SUNY Plattsburgh. Their concentration is design with a minor in web design and programming, as well as minor concentrations in drawing and painting.

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CLAIRE CORBEAUX is a senior English (literature) major at SUNY Geneseo. She enjoys talking about interdisciplinarity to anyone who will listen, explaining the plots of her favorite movies in great detail, and daydreaming about the Long Island Sound.

ERIN DOESCHER is a senior art major with a focus in ceramics and painting. Through her abstract ceramic works she discovers ways of combining figurative forms and gestures with thrown vessels and familiar shapes.

GABRIELLE ESPOSITO is a recent graduate from SUNY Geneseo's creative writing program. She was a fiction editor for *Gandy Dancer* in Fall 2018. Her work has been published in *The Manhattanville Review*, *Aurora*, and *ZAUMXS*. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Library Science at SUNY Albany.

HANNAH FAHY is a senior English and adolescent education major at SUNY Geneseo. She is very involved on campus as a Safe Zone trainer, a member of Musical Theater Club, and a writer for *Her Campus*. When she isn't in class or at a club meeting, she can be found juggling on the college green (weather permitting).

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.

HANNAH FULLER is a sophomore English (literature) and psychology major. When she's not furiously scribbling away, she enjoys hiking and baking.

ALIYHA GILL is a psychology and English (creative writing) double major junior at SUNY Geneseo. She is opinion editor for *The Lamron* and assistant editor for *MiNT Magazine*. She frequently writes for both publications and aspires to publish her own poetry collection one day.

EVAN GOLDSTEIN is a writer and photographer living in Salt Lake City, Utah. He will be attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop for an MFA in poetry in fall 2020. Evan grew up in the Hudson Valley: He misses trees, corner delis, humid summers, New York City, and John Prine.

KIEL M. GREGORY lives in Sackets Harbor, NY, and studies English literature, philosophy, and creative writing at SUNY Oswego. His prose and verse appear in *Lips*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Furrow*, *Gandy Dancer*, *Great Lake Review*, *Black River Review*, and elsewhere. In addition to writing, his interests include skydiving, cooking, and reading classic and contemporary speculative fiction. Connect with him online @kiel.mg.

ASHLEY HAJIMIRSADEGHI's work has appeared in *Into the Void Magazine*, *Corvid Queen*, and *cahoodaloodaling*, among others. She is a poetry reader at *Mud Season Review*, attended the International Writing Program's Summer Institute, and was a Brooklyn Poets Fellow. She can be found at [ashleyhajimirsadeghi.squarespace.com](mailto:ashleyhajimirsadeghi.squarespace.com).

D'ARCY HEARN is a community organizer from Staten Island, NY, who is passionate about youth empowerment and using creative arts as a vehicle for social change. She holds a BA from

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DANY KEAGAN is a non-binary student at SUNY Oneonta. They are majoring in adolescent education with a concentration in English. This is their first fiction piece to be published, an exciting start to a life of writing.

KAT JOHNSON is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo. She is majoring in English (creative writing) and minoring in women's & gender studies. In addition to poetry, she also writes and performs original music.

KAILEY MAHER is a BFA artist in ceramics and sculpture at SUNY Plattsburgh. Her pieces reflect the effects of time—shaping and reshaping—not in minutes and seconds, but a living lifetime of transformative movements of contractions and expansions.

BRIAN MENIA is a senior at SUNY Plattsburgh studying graphic design. His sculpture is inspired by classic Americana and features objects from across the world that he's collected. He believes that there's plenty of beauty in this world, thanks to our ancestors, and that we ought to be putting this beauty on a pedestal rather than discarding it.

JULIA ROSE MERANTE is a senior English (creative writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. She studies poetry and has two minors: biology and human development. You can find her work featured in *Equinox*, *30 North*, and *Glass Mountain Literary Magazine*. Next year, Julia plans to attend law school to use

her communication skills in forever righting wrongs. She wants to keep telling stories, learning new words, and watching crime movies with her mom.

AMY MIDDLETON studies creative writing and graphic design at SUNY Purchase. She likes the color green, talking to bugs, and being called “Thursday.” Connect with her online at @thursday.poems.

DONGWON OH is an international student at SUNY Geneseo from South Korea. He graduates in May 2020, and in the fall will enter a graduate program in screenwriting, where he plans to produce his short stories and see them on the big screen.

ALEX T. SIMMONS is graduating with a video production degree from SUNY Fredonia. He’s been writing and creating his whole life just to make himself laugh. When he isn’t writing, he can be found telling people about something he would like to write but probably never will. This will be his first ever published story, hopefully beginning a long-lasting trend. If not, look for his name in the credits of some Hollywood blockbuster.

ERIKA SNYDER is a senior at SUNY Plattsburgh graduating with concentrations in drawing and sculpture. Her mixed media drawings are interpretations of fear and the repercussions they serve. Through color, space, and form, she is able to convey the mental process. Her sculpture induced the feelings of attraction versus repulsion. She uses materials resembling human anatomy; such as fat, blood, and muscles.

CARLY SORENSON is managing editor of *Italics Mine*, a literary magazine at SUNY Purchase. She has interned for Melville House Books, Langtons International Agency, and Montez Press Radio. She works part-time as a bookseller and writes frustrated love stories.

KAYDEN MICHAEL STRAUSS is a 20-year-old conceptual photographer and currently attends the Fashion Institute of Technology. Their work focuses on telling a story or sending a message by exploring social issues, alongside their own personal experiences. Kayden aims to show their unique perspective on life and uses it to encourage others to think critically about what’s going on around them. They are currently based in New York City and have been showcased in several galleries across New York.

JACK WHITE is a junior at SUNY Brockport studying English. He is from the small town of North Bangor, New York. He spends his time listening to music (specifically hip hop) and sleeping. When he is not doing either of those, you can most likely find him hyperventilating over the current state of the country, and using his *Gandy Dancer* bio to encourage people to go out and vote in every election they can.

MISTY YARNALL wrote a five page story in third grade, and never stopped writing. Growing up in northern New York, she obtained sixteen awards for her short fiction and poetry, along with a publication in *Thousand Islands Life*. She is currently a Creative Writing major at Monroe Community College and is working on a novel.