



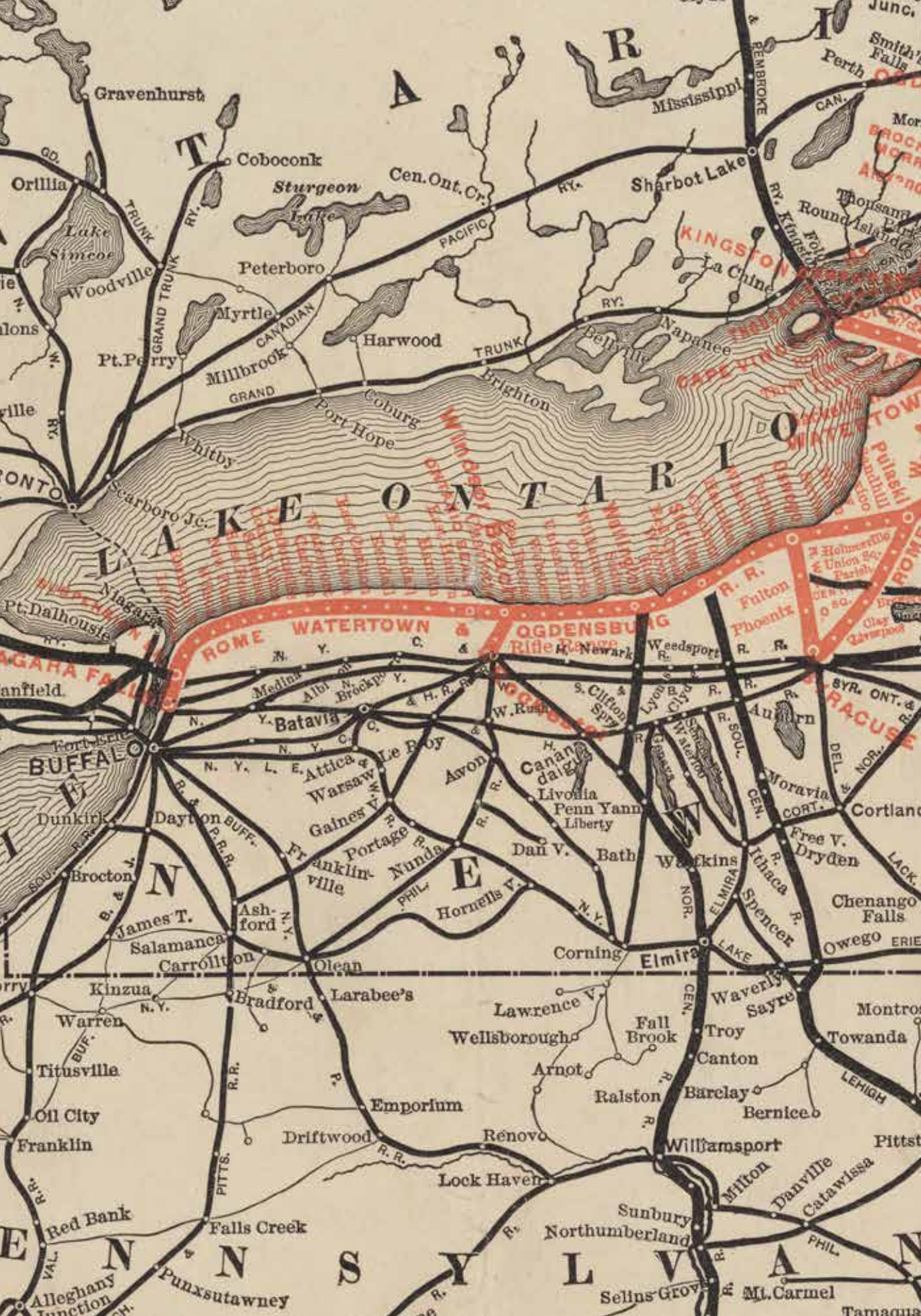
Gandy Dancer

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

Issue 9.2 | Spring 2021

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.





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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, 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 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. 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, or scan the qr code below.

Questions or comments? Send us an email at gandydancer@geneseo.edu



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Special thanks to: The Parry family, Albert Abonado

Dear Readers,

It gives us great pleasure to present our Spring issue. More than a full year has passed since the COVID-19 pandemic began, and we managed to work entirely remote once again this semester. Perhaps later issues of *Gandy Dancer* may be able to produce in-person soon. Until then, we are still extremely proud of the work that our staff has done and the art we've accepted for publication. We've learned that the sophistication of our journal and talent from our writers persists even remotely.

This issue examines various themes—from body image, to gender identity, to connection and misconnection. Rosalinda Valeri's piece "disappearing act of a secret" highlights the suffocating internal monolog of those struggling with eating disorders. The narrator writes, "some days when you look at yourself in the mirror, you feel reintroduced to your collarbone, your ribcage, your hip bones; everywhere there are bones you haven't known for years." Aliyha Gill's poem "White Wash" also considers our preoccupation with the body and certain prescriptions for beauty. The speaker says, "to my younger self, I wish to cradle you in my arms, / brown and beautiful as can be." We were enthralled by the imagery and understated tone used to convey loss in Nick Partilio's story "A Perfect Day for Caiman Hunting." Partilio describes a family who still sets a plate at the dinner table for their dead child, revealing how grief continues to plague this family.

Similarly, "grindr musings #1" by Kristian Grant also highlights loss, specifically what it's like to wonder about a past relationship: "when i think about us crossing paths / the edges of our circles brushing against each other / electrifying." In "midas touch," Kat Johnson explores the liberation of moving on, most notably through the lines "sometimes i remember the way liberation looked / when it was in someone who never gave me the time of day." We were moved by the honesty and newly claimed freedom. Likewise, Mollie Ward's exuberant paintings express freedom with their vibrant colors.

While reading this issue, we hope you will be similarly enthralled by the powerful voices and visions of these artists and writers. They claim control over their identities, exploring the agency that is granted through a keyboard, an oil pastel, or a pen and paper. We feel lucky and honored to have their work in our journal despite the challenges that came with this year. While we may be moving on from our roles co-managing editors, we know that *Gandy Dancer* will remain a safe space for creating.

Cheers,
Sara Devoe & Rebecca Williamson
May 2021

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Cover photo: Flow — Kailey Maher

Gandy Dancer

Escape

We stood in the yellow light
whispers spread to close companions
Fenced into bubbles, timid as a tulip's bud

We saw the potions being poured
the amber and teal and sunset pinks
liquid gold encased in red

We laughed as joy poured down our throats
and watched the cool dew descend
and the moon start to breathe

We danced out of unison
in the pulsing lights to the
melodies that leached off our blood

We remembered our origins
when each of our earths were sent on a
crash course into each other and rejoiced

We turned our heads and shunned
the temperature's rising in our fellow revelers,
from hearts to heads to fists

We closed our eyes
when we saw the river girl's eyes set aflood
as they do each springtime celebration

We brushed off the quiet smoke and whips
so carelessly flung at us from
her sneaking, smiling maw

We refused the shadows
as they tried to slither through our eyes
to slip ice in our veins and consume our minds

We ran away from the orange light that
stretched over the concrete

We resented the stars
for falling asleep and leaving
their shadows in our eyes

We wanted to return
to the heights of separation
of flesh and cloudy hearts

We were not done with the noise

Secondhand

I. Somewhat Nadia

I am Nadia today. Well, mostly Nadia. She is beginning to wear off. The smell of her citrus perfume is already fading, and I breathe it in while I still can. I wish that I could always be Nadia. Nadia doesn't hesitate when someone asks her a question; Nadia laughs so *so* easily, and smiles at people she doesn't even know. Nadia is a faded name written in black pen on the tag inside a color-blocked denim jacket. The jacket is pink, white, and gray, and there's a red stain on the inside against the white that I think must be wine. Maybe that's why she got rid of it. If it was blood, she probably would have thrown it away.

But Nadia is beginning to wear off. I wore her for picture day and everyone noticed me. They said that I should wear her more often. They like who I am when I'm Nadia. I like who I am when I'm Nadia, too. I'm wearing her today while I'm at work. I work at Pale Moon Vintage on the weekends, and that's how I got the jacket. Nadia dropped it off, alone. She's come in before, but it had always been with one or two of her friends. College friends. She's a college student.

The bell on the door rings and I straighten up. Mrs. L. doesn't like when her employees have bad posture while customers are in the store, so I always make sure to pull my shoulders back when the bell rings. I'm behind the register, so whoever walks in will see me immediately. The girl who walks in smiles at me, as she comes through the doorway. I smile back. I begin to idly sketch the outline of a face on a rejected receipt. It isn't a drawing of her. This girl is the type of person that you forget as soon as you look away from her; her brown hair is straight and somewhat greasy, and her clothes envelop her with their slouching hugeness.

She's probably a college student. Most people who come in here are. Mrs. L. always says the only reason she's still in business is because of the students. Her shop is fifteen minutes away from the liberal arts college and when they're on break, barely anyone comes to the store.

"Hi, welcome to Pale Moon! Is there anything that I can help you with?"

"No thanks, I'm—I guess I'm just looking," the girl says, giving me a small smile before quickly walking over to the cluttered racks of clothes to the left of me. She's definitely a college student. From what I've seen, liberal arts students always seem to be "just looking" for something. Or at least they want me to think that. And this girl is no different. She has that same faraway look in her eyes that they all have; it looks as if she's thinking about something that she thinks is important like the weight of existence or the possibility that life is a simulation, or maybe just her GPA.

I would never wear anything that used to be hers. I tried a few times with people like her when I first started working at Pale Moon, but when I put on their clothes they were far too heavy and spiraling and desperate. After that I became more careful about who I wore. I never want to be them.

Nadia is a college student too, but she's different from the other ones who come in here. Everything is easy for her: her laugh, her movements, her voice. She isn't trapped in her own mind. I'd hoped for ages that she would sell something instead of just buying. Every time she came in, she bought something—some piece of clothing that she would caress, her fingers examining the fabric for imperfections. Even if it wasn't in perfect condition, she would usually still get it. I do the same thing.

If it wasn't clothes, she would still look through the assorted sunglasses, rusted necklaces, and other worthless trinkets that Mrs. L. has amassed. When Nadia sold us her jacket, she bought a tiny bronze heart that opens and closes with a matching tiny key for three dollars and ninety-five cents.

I saw it happen. She was in a hurry, I think. But something about the bronze heart caught her eye and she stopped and picked it up, smiling slightly as she opened and closed it a couple of times. She grinned when she noticed me watching, then laughed quietly, and placed the heart on the counter. I don't think that even she knew quite why she wanted it. Maybe its smallness attracted her to it; maybe it was the fact that it had been lying, dejected, next to a somewhat cross-eyed plastic bust of a woman with ivory skin, cropped black hair, and red lips, topped off with blue sunglasses shaped like triangles. Maybe Nadia couldn't bear to see it left there all by itself.

"Excuse me?"

I look up and a forgettable face is floating directly in front of me. I need to stop getting distracted. Mrs. L. has already caught me twice, and she doesn't like having to catch people.

"I just wanted to buy this," she says, shyly sliding a nondescript blue sweater onto the counter. The sweater looks almost exactly like the one she is wearing. I wonder if her closet is just a dark mass of fabric, each item congealing to the next so that you can't tell where one ends and another begins. I smile at her, taking the sweater in one hand and shoving the receipt I was drawing on into my jacket pocket with the other.

"That'll be \$11.95." She pays with cash. "Also, if you're interested, we have a raffle for a \$25 gift card." I gesture toward the mason jar with raffle tickets next to the register and drop her change into her hand.

"Oh, uh...yeah! I guess I'll do that."

I give her a raffle ticket, showing her where to write her address and phone number. Her handwriting is small and neat. Nadia entered the raffle too. She seemed so excited about it and about the little bronze heart, even though she was in a hurry. I could still smell the bright lemon of her perfume for a few moments after she left.

I wish I knew why that heart caught Nadia's eye. Even now, when I am her, I don't know what she was thinking at that exact moment. If I knew that, maybe I could be completely Nadia and not just somewhat Nadia or almost Nadia. I wouldn't need her clothes or her perfume to make me her. She wouldn't wear off in a week or so. I don't want her to wear off. But for now, I am mostly Nadia, and for now that is mostly enough. The smell of her citrus perfume is fading, but I breathe it in while I still can.

II. Real Nadia

Real Nadia is running down the stairs. She is going to be late for something; she can't find her perfume, and she is sure that her housemate Kaylie was using it the day before. Kaylie says that she wasn't though, and now Nadia will have to leave without it. She hates doing that, because I don't think she really feels like herself when she doesn't have it on. But she's leaving anyway, deciding not to push it any further with Kaylie. There's a very small possibility that she'll make it on time if she leaves now.

She has gathered all of her things and is rushing out the door, pausing only to yell a quick goodbye. I don't know how long it will be until Kaylie and Zoe—Nadia's other housemate—will be gone too. Kaylie is still in pajamas in the living room. I can't see Zoe, but I assume that she's still sleeping. Nadia is starting her car now, and she backs out of the driveway, her tires bouncing slightly as she runs over the curb in her hurry to leave the white and red paint-chipped house behind.

The walls of the red and white house are thin, and I wonder if it stays warm in the winter. But that doesn't matter so much now; today it's hot so they have all their windows cracked open. Hopefully Kaylie and Zoe have somewhere to be soon. I have work at 2:00 p.m. and even though it's only

9:24 a.m., I'd rather not be sitting here all day. There's also the possibility that they don't have anywhere to be and that would mean waiting here again all for nothing.

I move slightly in my seat, gripping more tightly onto the branch in front of me. The sun is beating down on my skin through the foliage, and I'm suddenly glad that my mom forced me to put sunscreen on this morning. I told her that I was hanging out with Lily today; she was happy since I haven't hung out with Lily for a really long time. To be fair, I haven't hung out with anyone for a really long time.

I told her that I was meeting Lily at the strip mall that has Pale Moon and a few other stores. It's only a fifteen minute walk from my house and I always walk there for work, so my mom wasn't nervous about me getting there. Nadia's house is a thirty minute walk, so it isn't that much further. My mom won't ask any questions or check up on me because she's just so glad that I'm supposedly talking to Lily again.

Lily was my best friend in elementary school and she stayed my best friend until eighth grade. I don't think that she purposely stopped talking to me, but it just seemed like she was busy all the time. I asked her to hang out a couple of times in the beginning of eighth grade, but she was always either at tennis practice or had a lot of work to do. And she never asked me to do anything, so I stopped asking. Lily wouldn't have stopped being friends with Nadia. No one would ever want to stop being friends with Nadia.

Now, Lily and I smile at each other in the hallway, but that's about the extent of it. And my mom doesn't understand that just because we *were* best friends it doesn't mean that we even talk in high school. Things have changed, obviously. It isn't like before when Lily and I were united against everyone else and made fun of the girls who dyed their hair blond and wore clothes from Hollister. We had always talked about working at Pale Moon together, but by the time we were both old enough, only I applied.

I applied in the summer before ninth grade, and I've been working there for a little over a year now. A few other employees have quit while I've been there, since they say that Mrs. L. is hard to work with. She does expect a lot, but I think that she just wants people to care about the clothes that she sells. She always says that I understand the clothes just like she does; she's the one who told me about how clothing retains a part of the person who once wore it, that it holds onto a piece of their soul.

Other people say that Mrs. L. is crazy and old, that she never stops talking. I think that I'm the only one who listens. Mrs. L. likes when clothes become hers when they used to be someone else's. I never want the clothes to become mine. So, I don't really feel the exact same way about that. And I think—

I jolt forward as I hear a quick rustling, and then a white and gray bird lands on a branch directly next to me. I slowly turn my head toward it, and

its beady eyes fix on mine, unmoving. Its eyes are black with a ring of yellow around them. I take a shaky breath and try my best not to move. If I shoo it away, someone might see a sudden movement from this tree and check if there's anything strange in it. I take another breath. The bird is small, but up close, its beak looks sharp, and I hope that it isn't thinking of poking my eyes out. Is that a thing that birds do? It opens its mouth and my heart almost beats out of my chest, but it just lets out a strange, grating cry and then becomes silent again.

It turns its head away from mine and just continues to sit, shifting its feet every so often. Looking at it again, the bird's body is all soft lines and feathers, completely opposite to its beak, but I avoid thinking about that. I almost wish that I had brought my sketchbook, or even just a piece of paper. I reach into my pocket where I still have the receipt half-filled with the featureless face, but I don't have a pencil. I tear my eyes away from the bird and realize that the two cars in front aren't there anymore. Kaylie and Zoe must have left while I was distracted. I start to let go of the branch in front of me, but the bird cries out again as soon as I do. It sounds kind of familiar now that I hear it again.

I look at it and it gazes back at me for the second time; I have the distinct feeling that I am being reprovved. It doesn't matter. I don't care about what a bird thinks of me. I begin again with the process of carefully climbing down the tree, and as I swing my leg to the side, the bird unfurls its wings. After some more quick rustling, it's gone. Good. I make it to the bottom of the tree safely, but not without cutting my left hand on the trunk. My hand is all scraped up now and there's blood, but I was careful not to make any noise.

I got blood on the sleeve of Nadia's jacket and I hope that it'll wash out. It doesn't matter so much to me now though. The jacket is barely hers anymore, and I'll have something new of hers soon. Then I'll be able to figure her out. I won't need her clothes anymore to stop her from wearing off. It'll probably be some old shirt that she won't even miss. I open the gate at the side of the house, making sure that no one is around.

It is 10:47 a.m. on a Saturday morning and the streets are empty. The only place where that makes sense is a college town. There is a window on the side of the house which has a busted screen. They need to get it replaced; bugs must keep getting in. Since the window is open, it's easy to pull away the screen and to push myself through, head first.

I'm in the house again. I cringe slightly at the smell of vanilla air fresheners and beer that hits me as soon as I walk in. I doubt that Nadia chose vanilla. It seems far too heavy for her. I walk up the stairs, and the smell grows a bit more bearable as I get closer to Nadia's room. I stop in front of her door. She has her name written in colorful, bouncing letters on a white sheet of paper that is held up with scotch tape. I smile at the simple loudness of it.

I open the door.

III. Two Nadias

On her desk, there is a framed picture of Nadia in the jacket with a few other friends. In it, she is laughing at something, and her curly brown hair is falling over half of her face. The jacket complements her olive skin perfectly. It will never look as good on me as it did on her. I look down at my own ghost white skin and frown. Maybe that's part of the problem. My skin will never look like hers, just a pale imitation. And my hair looks so washed out and dead; I tried to curl it, but after an hour it just fell back into its usual dull straightness.

The walls in her room are covered with pictures strung up with fairy lights and her blanket is blue and white tie dye. One of her pillows is on the floor. She didn't have time to make the bed this morning. I consider making it for her, but I think she would probably notice that. I walk over to the nightstand next to her bed and sitting on it is a silver domed alarm clock, pink heart sunglasses, tangled bracelets, a little bronze heart with a key, and a tiny silver ring with a glossy green serpent on it. I suppose it couldn't hurt to have something other than clothing too.

I pick up the ring with my unhurt hand and hold it closer to my face, examining the way that the silver meshes with the snake, trapping it in a pretty cage. Its mouth is open and I'm not able to tell if it is screaming for help or merely showing off its formidable fangs and tongue. It doesn't look helpless though; it looks as if it's incapable of fear. I wonder how the serpent came to be caught in the silver. It almost looks as if it has—

"Umm...hello?"

My heart drops into my stomach, and I shove the hand with Nadia's ring into my pocket. There's a crinkling noise as my fingers make contact with the crumpled receipt. I can feel my heart crawling up my throat as I slowly turn around, already knowing who must be behind me. Nadia. Her eyebrows are stitched upwards in a look of confusion, and she is holding three textbooks. She doesn't seem angry that I'm here.

"Did Kaylie or Zoe let you in? This is my room, not one of theirs. Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." She smiles at me and walks into the room, dropping the three textbooks onto her bed. I look down. The book on the top of the pile is blue and green and says *Behavior Modification: Principles and Procedures*. I know that I should say yes, but instead I just look back up at her, my hands beginning to shake. She is wearing black bike shorts with an oversized orange and yellow T-shirt that has a bleary-eyed sun on it. Her smile begins to fade.

"I"—My mind is blank and I have forgotten her question and my left hand is really starting to hurt.

"Are you...did they let you in?" This time her voice is less sure and she backs away from me slightly. "Wait, that's my jacket! Well, not my jacket anymore, I guess, I sold it to"—She looks intently at my face and her eyes narrow in suspicion. "Wait, you—you're that girl who works at—what are you doing here? How do you know I live here?" I open my mouth but no words come out. "What are you doing here?" she repeats, slowing her voice down as if she thinks that I don't understand what she's saying.

"I just"—My voice cracks, and I pause as I hear how weak I sound. I squeeze her ring and then desperately hope that she doesn't notice.

"Just what? Did you follow me home one day or something?"

The words are slow-acting venom. My whole body begins to shake. "No, I didn't follow you," I say. "You wrote your address down for—for the Pale Moon raffle."

"What? Like that's so much be—why are you here?" Her voice shakes on her final word.

"I just want to be y—like you. And, if I have your clothes"—

"You want my clothes?"

"Yes!" I almost shout it. She understands.

"You're trying to steal my stuff?"

"No! Well, I just need"—

"You know, you could have just asked me where I got something from. I would've happily told you. But you can't just steal"—

"No, please, you don't understand. I need *your*—I have your jacket but—but it's wearing off, and if I could have one more thing I would"—

"What?"

What can I say to help her understand? "I thought that I could change my skin but I know"—

"Your *skin*? What—what's wrong with you? Are you high?"

"No, I—"

"You need help," she says, shaking her head slightly. "Get out of my house."

I curl my fingers even more tightly around Nadia's ring, my bleeding hand beginning to drip onto her floor. Her mouth is open, and she stares at the blood on the ground, her eyes wide. I don't think that she noticed my hand before.

"Nadia, I"—

"If you don't leave right now, I'm going to—I'm going to call the police."

"Okay, I'll leave. I'm sorry. I'll leave." I can feel my throat tighten and I look down. I want so badly for her to understand, but I can't get arrested. My parents would kill me. I look back up at Nadia. She doesn't look angry. Not that she looks happy, either. Her eyebrows are furrowed, her jaw tense. I try to make eye contact with her but she avoids it, turning her head away. I can't

tell what she's thinking. I turn my head away too. I walk out of the room as she gestures toward the door. She follows behind me as I walk down the stairs, keeping at least a five feet between us. I reach the front door of the house, and I hear her footsteps stop.

"Don't come back," she says. The finality in her voice makes me wince. "Or I will get the police involved."

I turn around, my heart trailing at my feet, and look back at her. She averts her eyes again. For a second, I think that maybe she feels guilty. But as I wrap my bleeding hand around the cuff of her jacket, I think I understand. Nadia's eyes aren't guilty. They aren't apologetic. They aren't beginning to understand. Nadia just pities me.

"You should fix the screens on the windows," I say.

"What?" I can tell that she heard me.

"That's how I got in," I explain. The jacket feels rough and itchy now, and I have a sudden urge to rip it off, to throw it to the ground. As I put my hand on the doorknob and open the door, the serpent ring falls out of my hand and hits the ground with a tinny scream. I don't look back at the red and white house. I don't look back at her. A squeaky gate mimics a gray and white bird. I leave.

IV. Not Nadia

I'm lying on the floor in my room, the sun streaming from the window onto my ghost skin. My dad calls from downstairs that dinner is ready. I don't answer. I burrow myself deeper into her jacket. My jacket. My dad calls again, louder this time, "Sophie, dinner's ready!" I don't answer. I'm repulsed by my very being, by that look on her face, by bronze hearts, by birdsong. I'm not at all Nadia anymore. I sprayed her citrus perfume all over my body but it sits, heavy, on my skin as if it knows that it doesn't belong there. I can't be her. I can never be her. I will go to work tomorrow and maybe someone else will come into the store and they will be even better than her. Maybe they won't wear off. No. I won't let them wear off.

Drink If

drink if you've fucked someone in the room
you counted the pennies in the wishing well, hoping it'd end up being a sign
you took the wrong exit on purpose because lately you've been knowing where you are far too often
you choke every time you see his name written in sharpie on the back of your hand

you stumble down the stairs, always try to keep up
you try to catch your breath when he calls to tell you his mom won't come home
you never go home
you blame the stars, stare at the constellations just to believe there's something bigger
something to steal your breath when you wonder where he is
the piano chords feel a little too much like that stairwell by the vending machines
where you cried because he wouldn't come back

time is suffocating like a bag of sand tied to your throat
like a lipstick stained mug of release and promises
like the way you beg for thirty seconds of euphoria just to claim him as the same damn casualty
it's something on the low, behind bars and shovels and caskets and all the times it could've been
it's all the cracked mirrors and shards of glass, all of the bleeding out you had to do
just to remember life.

midas touch

far beneath the patter of rain on empty glass
are the sounds of a million voices, some who resemble my father more than others, i tell them:
i could have loved you but you left me before i had the chance.
i sometimes think i still love you when you choke me out and never hold my hand.
i loved the way you felt on my body but i never wanted to say the word.
i loved you from so many thousands of miles away but it felt cursed.

sometimes in my sleep i visit with the faces
of ghosts who taught me to love:
in our old haunts, messages in familiar fonts
like hands intertwined hidden behind bleachers
or the warmth of an overpriced latte and clean white sneakers
or cliché stanzas in composition notebooks
with promises to never actually read the words,
just grade for completion &

sometimes i remember the way liberation looked
when it was in someone who never gave me the time of day;
someone who always seems to remain just a face and a name
or a letter to a dead girl and a game by her grave.

we kept our secrets beneath our teeth,
each dance with the devil a different shade of greed
eyes gashed [by the daggers of our lost sleep]
and sometimes when i wake up tangled in my own sheets, can't even
breathe

i am reminded of the way his breath felt warm on my shoulder
the nights he forgot himself and lay next to me.

cheeks flushed a different color when i tried something new
like i broke through a lock or some sort of cocoon
(she turned the music off so her lips on my body were the only sound in the room.)
but it took countless drinks at a bar i'd never been to: we broke promises
to ourselves and forgot ours to one another / she threw up on my floor while i slept
under the covers.



Vanity (digital photograph), Aliyha Gill

disappearing act of a secret

if you live in an unwell body that bears no visible markers of being unwell, (un)wellness can be an alienating and complex thing to grapple with. your body mirrors the secret you keep; it sits latent beneath the surface; people might know, but they say little to nothing.

you walk around with a disappearing act of a secret.

your ex-boyfriend might say *have you been eating ok?* he might follow up with *I don't mean to be annoying like that, sorry.* you'll want to scream through your iPhone screen *please never stop asking; please save me; please tell me I'm not disappearing.*

some days when you look at yourself in the mirror, you feel re-introduced to your collarbone, your ribcage, your hip bones; everywhere there are bones you haven't known for years. you feel that you've never looked sexier. you haven't been this thin since high school; there is pleasure in this. lurking beneath the pleasure is the threat of disappearance. you feel skeletal, but sexy? you think about scales, tape-measures, counting calories; you consider each avenue of worsening, of further disappearing.

your friends might ask *have you eaten?* your answer is almost always *no.* you find yourself being fed by those around you. you wonder if they see you as incapable, as unwell. *at least they see me.* you realize you cannot eat unless those around you eat. one night your friends might show up early, or more likely you put off eating for too long, because their foodless arrival means your meal ends.

it is a paradox: eating feels too visible, yet not eating spells your disappearance. it is everything and nothing at once to you; food becomes all-encompassing yet unimportant, and the hours go by unfed with little attention.

some people might even see your (un)wellness as positive; they don't recognize the fact that you are unwell. an acquaintance at the bar where you work might greet you as follows: *wow, you look great—so skinny*. when your response is wordless, she'll re-engage fifteen minutes later, *have you been working out?* you might shrug, begrudgingly whisper a *no*. she'll catch you off guard: *what, not eating?* you disappear and blend into the bottles behind you, finding refuge at the hurricane machine whose gears scream as they grind ice, tequila, syrup, triple sec: feeding itself with the sustenance of others. despite this noise and ample distraction you will meditate over the comments of a pseudo stranger; you might think about food and what you've eaten for the rest of the shift, but you won't eat.

sometimes your stomach starts to grumble—not as often as it used to—mainly around dinner time, seven or eight o'clock. it is at this point that you might start to wonder—*how much have i eaten today? have i even eaten yet?* when you really start to fixate on the day's consumption, winding back the hours of the day to nine when you left your bed first, your vision might start to blur, the room might spin ever so slightly—you go dizzy, you drink some water, fill your stomach with invisible contents, make disappearing easier—snap out of it. walk away, walk toward the kitchen, feel lighter, too light, lifting.

you seek out food in people. you might be texting a good friend when you insert your secret into dialogue, exposing it: *should I eat something?* you start to realize that the people around you always answer *yes*, you might start to wonder *are they telling other people no; can they see my unwellness; am i visible to them?* you might make excuses, *oh, but it's late; it is past 10:00 p.m.*, and they might say *so what?* you start to think about what 10:00 p.m. means if you've eaten nothing yet.

you think you hear the guy you're fucking say *damn baby, you're so thick* while he has his left hand gripping your hip and his right on your throat. you might have misheard him. *thick* reverberates around your skull while he slams into you before gliding out. you think about moaning, *call me thick again; tell me i have a fat ass; assure me that i'm not disappearing*. your knees are on your shoulders now and your hands are pinned against either side. he brings himself in from above: deep. he's in your stomach now; you wonder about what else might be in there. you were good that day: two full meals, and ample snacks. you start to feel yourself get nauseous. think about moaning, *you fill me up; i feel full*.

Midnight Catharsis

A crow flutters out of the streetlight's glow as none of us knows
its silhouette from the blanketed sky.
We're a block away from your house and your hands tell me
you don't love me anymore. When I reach
for you, I collect more self-pity and pocket it for later.
You look at me over your shoulder
and disappear through the door. I walk away slouched and sluggish.
I am the history of losing my identity
while trying to remember you. We call it blossoming—the separation
of the self from what is destroying it.

The last thing your fingers touched was the red thread tied
around my thumb. It won't unbraid
itself, so the thumb begins to plump. And pulse. And clench
nerves to their death. A scissor's blade:
too thick to cut beneath ridges of skin. The kitchen cleaver:
a saint. The time is 12:34. The time
is now. Palm against cutting board, blade at the ready:
thwack! Clean cut against bone.
I can't stop it, the sputtering of crimson onto white walls—
Somehow, I still feel the phantom touch of you.

Slide

We've been fighting over
the side of a slide on the playground about yesterday
afternoon. My boyfriend and I broke
into an abandoned house and fucked
up the wooden paneling with
a hammer in search of treasure, but found
insulation that smells like suffocation. A snuff
of a drug like a hat that comforted me, until the high
faded, and I saw
the hole in the wall and I crawled inside,
and coughed into the abyss. I smacked him.
He kissed me and together we
leave.

A child screams,
chased around on the ground, I look down
from the top of the equipment. I sit in silence
and slide
to the bottom of the structure into a cluster of gravel stones
where my boyfriend greets me. He grabs my
wrist and we kiss under sticky sunlight, woodchips
stuck in my sandals I can't bear
the taste of his spit.

Smudge Painting

An oil pastel glides softly
leaving charcoal grey smears across papers
and something of its churning gloom
reminds me of
the twirling smoke of a smudge stick
drifting through the air and fading
away from the sparkling orange embers
and I blend
my blots of ash with fingers
long since stained brown from multicolored oils
remembering grandmother with her russet skin
arms flowing
sinuous smoke trailing after like a salmon through a stream of whirl-
ing silver
prayers falling from her lips
warbling joyfully and strong
eddy with smoky wisps gracefully



Influx (soapstone), Kailey Maher



Fruitful Darkness (stoneware), Kailey Maher

How Would You Have Him Understand Her?

In the middle of adolescence, at the apex of his foolishness, Carlo thought he knew himself. He thought that his understanding of himself was thorough and complete. To him, the world seemed to make sense; he was so sure of his path, his future, and his sense of self at that time. To that, his future self would like to offer these words with all the love, care, and pity one could offer their past self: Bitch, you ain't seen nothin' yet.

It was here that Carlo would find the language for new feelings, such as romantic, sexual, and platonic love. Among the styles of love, Carlo would discover the love of oneself. He would find these monikers of love in Greek terms, such as *Philia*, deep love in friendship; *Pragma*, a mature, developed love in long-term reciprocal relationships; and *Eros*, love affiliated with personal infatuation and physical pleasure. Among them all, he would discover *Philautia*, either pronounced as fee-lau-tee-a in Romantic terms or more commonly as fee-lau-shuh in modern U.S. English. *Philautia* is understood as a healthy form of love where you recognize your self-worth and don't ignore your personal needs. Self-love begins with acknowledging our responsibility for our well-being. No one is going to care more about you than you do, and no one is more responsible for your happiness and wellbeing than you are. Keep this in mind; this will be plot relevant.

Most pertinent to this writing, Carlo would acquire language for discovering and understanding what it means to be born a different gender than what one wishes, hopes, and believes oneself to be at their core. Carlo would come to find out what the term *trans* meant, and more specifically, he would discover the phrase *trans-female*. The phrase, as per literal definition, means one who experiences being a woman but was assigned male at birth. Another bit of language that came as a package deal with *trans-female* was the term *gender dysphoria*, defined as the distress a person feels due to a mismatch between their gender identity and their sex assigned at birth. These words shook Carlo to his core. He wasn't sure why these words felt so daunting, so heavy. For a while, and potentially during the present day, he would wonder why these phrases felt right, tasted right when spoken, yet seemed to expose and spotlight an uncomfortably genuine, vulnerable, and unknown piece of himself. These words made him feel more than seen. These phrases and terms made him feel exposed.

Third person pronouns are fun, don't you think? For example, this assignment could have had the words *he*, *she*, and *they* in equal measure and refer to a single individual. To make good on that idea, it was here, in Carlo's adolescence, that *He* would wish. *Oh god*, he would wish. He wished, over and over, unending to this day, that he would be, and would have always been, *She*.

It was here that Carlo would wish to be Jade.

But despite this new language, this new understanding of herself, Jade couldn't understand what being trans meant to her at the time. Hell, she's still trying to figure it out to this day. How would Carlo understand himself as *herself*? How would he understand Jade? How would you have Carlo understand the implications of wanting, begging to have been born female, begging to be referred to as a daughter, not as a son? How would you have Jade understand the ways this would inform and influence the way she meets new individuals, inwardly feminine, outwardly presenting as masculine for a multitude of reasons. She wanted to adhere to a status quo, have stability in her household and create existing social life.

She didn't want to feel like a bother or a new anomaly to those who knew her before she was Her. She was afraid of making an unalterable, potentially dangerous, decision that would shift her norms to their core. With that in mind, can you imagine the sense of freedom and new possibility Jade felt when she left for college and met people who didn't know her old life and persona? That sense of freedom was intimidating, yet welcomed. She felt the need to get this right, but the idea that she could essentially build herself from the ground up in this new place, in the eyes of new people, felt unreal for a time and still does to some degree.

So, how would you have *Him* understand *Her*?

Would you have Him understand Her by the way society understood His wish to become Her? To break this down, even if being trans isn't a societal norm in many places—or any place—there is a stigma and a standard trans individuals face. Society expects many trans individuals to model themselves after and conform to this expected standard. Some may believe conforming to the societal ideal of the trans individual is the journey of “passing” as their genuine gender through the process of transitioning. Jade would come to find that not all trans individuals go through this process nor should any trans individual be expected to want this process. There are many ways to express one's self and gender; the societally expected norm is merely one option. Jade found the idea of seeing gender not as something we *are* but as something we *perform* to be both cathartic and healing. She likes to fashion herself a good(if not great) pretender—in more ways than one.

Would you have Carlo understand Jade in the way Her parents may never see, by the way she may have to act as He around Her loved ones, by the guilt she felt for throwing away Her name, so lovingly crafted and given by Her mother? Despite their wonderful care for Her upbringing, he could never be the son Mom and Dad wanted nor the child they thought they had this whole time, despite their wonderful care for Her upbringing. After some time, His name, given by loving parents, felt viscerally wrong. Repeating it to herself felt like a lie to her nature, a falsehood, but a necessary one. It felt necessary, so she endures its use from Her loved ones, more afraid of them knowing than being jabbed and stung by Her own name. At least, she could get used to the jabs and stings. She could get used to acting as He. Over time, Jade has come to mind even less, making cognizant changes to Her understanding of its use, not just as a name, but as a title Her loved ones use for Her. If Jade thinks of *Carlo* as a familiar title, it hurts less when that name is used to address Her.

Would you have Him understand Her by the way she rejected an incredibly healthy male body? Jade wakes up daily, blessed with a body that holds no physiological abnormality, no biological impairments. She's healthy, hearty, and hale as could be, yet she couldn't accept this gifted circumstance, for it felt clumsy, clunky, and wrong. There was nothing faulty with Her physiology. In fact, she is fortunate in that regard. She felt guilty for not being able to accept a body so functional and sturdy, a gift many would kill for, when she couldn't find stability and comfort in one detail that has become so key. Don't get Her started on Her voice.

Would you have Carlo understand Jade by the way cis-females would see Her? Jade would never have had to experience fundamental parts of being born female or what many female individuals have to face day to day, from birth until death. Jade has the advantage of being assigned male at birth. With that in mind, she is much less likely to be objectified or discriminated against in terms of gender. Jade would never have to experience the menstrual

cycle or the ways society makes female struggles invisible and unheard. To this day, Jade feels a certain amount of guilt that she doesn't deserve the pronoun if she hasn't gone through any of that same struggle. This is a detrimental mindset and, bluntly, bullshit, as she would come to find out through the support of others. But even with the knowledge that Her experience is real and valid, she would still lament that many of Her sisters would experience what she could not understand in completion.

Would you have Him understand Her by the way she would play video games, read literature, and identify with fictional characters? Jade would, from that point of discovery in adolescence, play almost exclusively female characters if she had the option. In this way, for a few moments, in a reality detached from her own, Jade could feel the experience of these fantasies reflect more closely and clearly the experience she wished she had for her real body. Jade would feel the need to find connection with many female characters she admires, on which she would hope to model herself. Jade's experience of fiction and literature has been fundamentally changed by this aspect of her existence, as Jade now tries to find ways to relate to, and become more like, female characters she deeply admires. Jade's procural of language was the first step to her understanding of self, and without it, she may have never found the right word for *Trans* even if the feeling was still there, nameless, without a word or term to define it.

Would you have Carlo understand Jade by the way Jade uses *Dungeons and Dragons*, as well as other role-playing mediums, to understand herself more thoroughly? Fun fact: Jade's *Dungeons and Dragons* characters have all been named Jade, either as her foremost name and title or in some other capacity. She did this because, for a few hours, every now and then, everyone would refer to her character, and thus her, by her preferred gender and name, when she didn't have the heart, or trust, to be more authentic about herself to her close friends. At the Table, she could be Her. She could be Jade. No one batted an eye, and every few weeks, for a few precious hours, surrounded by good company, she was called by her preferred name, by her preferred pronouns, even if it did involve some deception and sleight of hand. Through role-play, through being a pretender, she could get a feel for her own sense of gender and identity, often displaying aspects of herself through all her characters.

How would you have *Him* understand *Her*?

Amongst all these thoughts, amongst all His discoveries, Her struggles, Jade's journey, she would come to remember, and be reminded of, another lesson before Her fated words of *trans-female*. She would remember to take days off from physical training when Her body ached for rest, fatigue clinging to Her marrow, bone dry from more than Her physical needs. She would remember to eat after forgetting to do so in trying to finish up assignments

ahead of time to feel deserving of something, the soon-to-be burned out fool. She would remember that, despite Her thoughts of needing to achieve and achieve, to impress via success, to work harder for the sake of better, to earn Her place in this game, to feel like she's not just here because of too many good chances lined up for Her, to earn this pronoun from some higher knowledge of being, some authority of permission, she was, and will be, *enough*. As unbelievable as it sounds, as much of a lie as it feels to Her ears, drunk with self-deprecation, she was acknowledged by Her loves as *enough*. Despite Her nerve deep need to improve, to be better because she can be, to do good by the fortunes that favored Her among so many deserving others, she would remember that, somehow, for many, and for herself, she was enough.

She would remember Philautia. She would remember to understand Her needs and allow herself some glimpse of that forgotten self-worth. Among all, she is fortunate to an ungodly degree to have beloved individuals there to remind Her, beat it into Her head when necessary.

He doesn't have to worry about understanding this much. He, and so too, She, though rarely, would understand that Jade was enough. At least in this way, He would come to understand Her. Now let's hope to fuck that she doesn't forget this lesson anytime soon.

From the Nook of the Fig Tree

“From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked.”

—Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar

From the nook of the fig tree,
I watch myself split
by my life lines, branched paths on my hands

grow infant white buds
swell to scarlet and gold stars
into fruit as purple
as clotted blood.
Spring is just a shuffling of the tarot cards.

*(“A summer calm laid its soothing hand
over everything, like death.”)*

Countless people dangle
like figs from the branches:

A young up-and-coming writer
hangs green and impatient
for her words to be tasted,

Sun-soaked yellow splotches
dot an artist's body
with remnants of painted labor,

A cosmopolitan woman speaks
honeyed tongues:
figus carica, ich bin du.

In this balmy hollow I sit serene,
eye figs as they ripen

and wait,

and wait,

and wait.

I forgot no God can stop
the turn of the season.
Yellow leaves bury
a waste of fallen bodies,

a shallow grave filled
with fig wine, blood
red vinegar.
But still I wait

for the final card to flip,
for the sweetest fig to plop
into my outstretched palm.

*("Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of
snow, should numb and cover them.")*

Between frostbitten branches
mocks the immortal moon.

Which fig do you illuminate?

ach du, The Fool.

Signs of Persephone

I was driving and a black ram stopped my car. I almost hit it, and I honked trying to move the creature. The ram stared back as if waiting for me to do something. I have the sudden urge to eat pomegranates. I changed my perfume to a lavender scent because the Chanel I wore before it became toxic, and the lavender became intoxicating. I have the sudden urge to eat pomegranates. The willow tree in my yard and the ivy that grows on my home look like art. I stare at it for hours, transfixed, until my eyes burn from looking for something I cannot find. I have the sudden urge to eat pomegranates. There's someone in my house. Her hands brush hair from my eyes, torch in hand, leading me to hidden parts of the world. I have the sudden urge to eat pomegranates.

Old Friend

There, on the side of the road—
an old friend
stands. Pull over. Stop
the car. He smiles faintly, saunters up,
always knew you were weak.
Just past the back doors, his hand is reaching
out. Punch the gas. Swerve
back into traffic.

Wipe the sweat off your face.

There, in the bar—
an old friend
leaps out of a hand.
Burns a cigarette, joint,
back of the spoon. Flames
dance across the scarred, black
bartop.

Set yourself on fire.

There, the backyard—
the green car, cruising down your street
an old friend
waits. Lock the doors, yank the blinds.

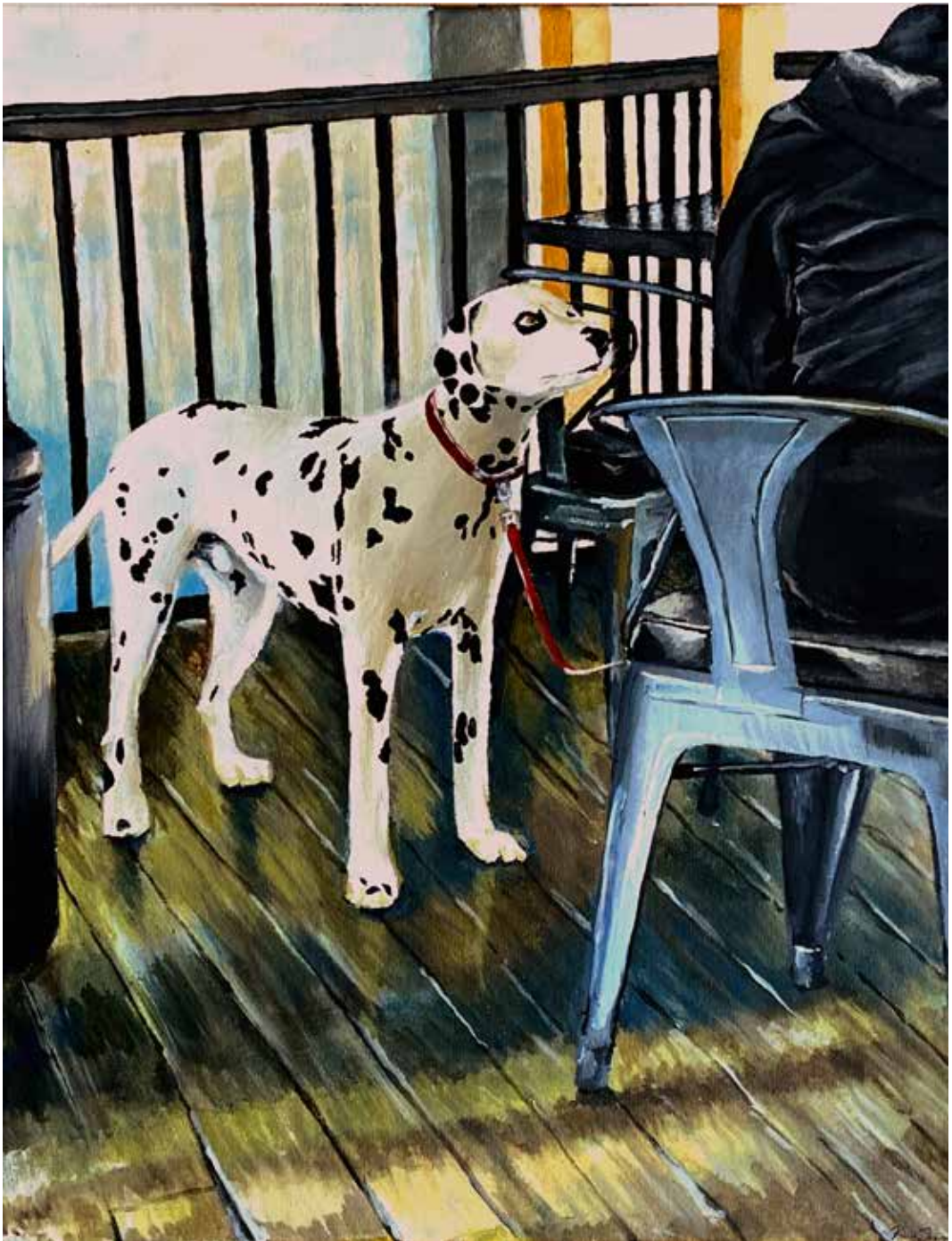
Call your momma
even though she doesn't ever answer.

You mean it this time.

There, on the sofa—
an old friend
kicks his dirty sneakers up.
You clutch a Colt .45, remember
the call to Suicide Hotline.

Don't let them win.

There, in little white baggies—
an old friend. A spoonful strong enough
to start an avalanche.



Dog Wants Something (acrylic on canvas), Mira Jaeger

A Perfect Day for Caiman Hunting

The sun was blistering by midafternoon. It was the kind of day you would beg us to drive down to Galveston to play on the beach, then stop for ice cream at Bob's on the way home. I haven't been to Galveston in almost fifteen years now. I parked the truck on the muddy path right beside the lake. I got my catch pole and ice chest out of the bed of the pickup and started walking down to the lake. I passed the patch of bright pink lotus flowers that you used to run to as we were walking to the lake; the same ones you would cut and bring home to your mom after our day was through. My cap started to slip off the back of my head and my Ray-Bans down my nose; my neck was already drenched in sweat, my skin already beginning to turn red. I made it to the edge of the lake and readied my catcher.

The caiman were all strolling along the pebble and sand deposits where the water met land, unsuspecting and unquestioning. I snuck up behind one, slipped the loop around his neck, and snagged him. He started to squirm; he was definitely a fighter. I wrangled with him to get him in the ice chest, and finally I was successful.

Hours passed. I waited for more to come out of the lake, ready to snatch them. After my tenth catch, I decided to pack up and head back up to the truck. Right about then, is when you would start to whine and complain of boredom, ready to let your imagination run rampant elsewhere. I chuckled as I thought of you lighting up when I said it was time to go home; running up the hill, back passed the flowers, jumping up and down on the narrow dirt path, eager to get back in the truck. I gathered my pole, the ice chest, and our lawn chairs. I still put yours out. The drive home was always my

favorite part. You sat beside me in the truck, wiped out from a day in the sun, slouching peacefully against your seatbelt as we cruised along the long stretch of highway that would take us back to our front door. The sun would start to sink, leaving behind brilliant tangerine and lavender hues in the sky while a staticky Glen Campbell sang to us through the radio. The drive feels long, now. They don't play too much Glen Campbell anymore. Next to me, the passenger seat is empty.

I stopped along the causeway in my usual spot. I broke out the old cardboard sign that you helped me write out years ago. This was your favorite part of the day, if I remember correctly. We were just about to be home, but we first had to say farewell to all of our catches and send them off on their way to their new homes. Afterwards, you would beg for pizza, just about every night, and I would be able to hold you off until right before we got home, when we passed Pizza Palace in the shopping center on the corner before our street. I was able to get rid of all but one of the reptiles today. I was packing up, when a gentleman pulled next to me and offered me \$80 for the caiman. I couldn't believe it. Before I could tell him I only charged \$45, he stabbed four holes into the lid of his own ice chest and sped back down the road. I tossed the sign in the back of the truck and started home. When I walked in the door, I could smell garlic coming from the kitchen.

"Hello, dear," your mother called out to me from the kitchen. "Dinner will be on the table in just a minute."

"I'll be right in," I called back. "Just going to wash up."

We sat down at the table, three settings out.

"How was it today?" she asked. "It sure was a hot one."

"It was nice. Perfect day. Caught ten of 'em." I could only offer punctuated answers in between the huge bites of the pasta; I was starved.

"Ten? That's gotta be at least \$400."

"Almost five. Some guy stopped to buy the very last one—gave me eighty for it. He didn't stick around long enough for me to tell him I only charge forty-five."

"Well, he must have been in some hurry then. Almost five, you said?"

"Mhm," I responded, in between my chomping.

"That's lovely," she told me.

She smiled, but I could still see the hurt in her eyes. It never gets easier.

After cake and coffee, your mother heads to bed. I step into the office and sit down at the desk. I write out my weekly check to Dr. Roberts and Clearwater Medical Group. You loved Dr. Roberts. Every time we left his office, you said how much he made you feel better. He always offered you a lollipop on our way out. I remember you always went for the red ones. Dr. Roberts is moving along in his research now. "Any day now," he says. Fifteen hundred for this week. I place the check in an envelope, seal it, and turn out the lamp.

As I walk up the hallway, past your room, I listen for the creaks in the floorboards, the same creaks I would hear on Christmas morning or when you would sneak out to the kitchen for a midnight snack. I miss waking up in the night to the sound of the creaks in the hallway. It never gets easier.

Spring Onions

When I was young I
would pick these small
white bulbs, with long
green hair, from the
soil of my grandpa's yard.

When I was young I
would pick these ripe
red apples, from the
crooked limbs of the
dying crab apple tree.

When I was young I
would walk along the
slippery sides of this
great big pond and
hunt for frogs and fish.

When I was young I
would pick the emerald
beetles off the weeping
willow and stuff them in
pockets for my mother.

When I was young I
felt the Earth below my
feet and its seed between

my soft careful fingers that
grabbed for more and more.

When I was young the
world was full of blue and
it was full of yellow.
It was full of songbirds
and sweet purple meadows.

When I was young the
spring onions were my
gift from God and the
sun a sitter to watch me play.

Hair Monologues

Hair is personal, political, and particularly salient to people of various marginalized identities. Whether we cut it, grow it, pick it, braid it, dye it, shave it, cover it, or lose it, hair plays a big part in our identities. Likewise, our identities influence our hair.

As part of the Geneseo's 2021 Diversity Summit, students performed their own hair monologues. We're thrilled to showcase two of those unique hair stories here.

The Crown Act

Do you remember the night you and I learned to fear hands? A Tuesday at the sports bar I worked at as a hostess, coiling my way through crowds made thick by drunken people, laughter, and spilled drinks. I found my body walking one way with my head caught going the opposite. Trapped in you were five fingers as if you were a public excavation site followed by the drunken whisper that tore down my shirt, *I wish I had hair like yours*. At fifteen, I wondered how I had been caught with a smile on my face and ice in my bones, unraveling you from a man and his friends and the eyes of fifteen others who would never bat an eye at a Black girl stuck at the end of a thirty-something white man's hand. I laughed, *Thank you. Thank you, have a nice night*.

I used to think that you were funny like that, you know? That you couldn't help but draw people to you. You were beautiful and enticing in the way that people thought you weren't—in a way that they liked to turn you inside out: *How do you manage that mane? Is that really yours? What did you do to get your hair that curly? No, but really—that can't be yours! Let me touch it. Can you feel me pulling it? Do you even brush it? Let me touch it. Let me touch it. Let me touch it.*

Burning you quieted the questions and the picking and the cold eyed disapproval that you could be so big and just so *you*. The first time I straightened you when I was nine, you were watered by the looks and the compliments and the fingers grasping at silken, pin straight strands--and yes, I would say, they are my strands and yes, it is like I am a totally different person, a beautiful one who beautiful words are said about--just a beautiful girl, with beautiful hair and the constant nauseating lingering scent of fire licked plastic. How beautiful.

And on the days that you couldn't muster beauty, at least you could be funny. At twelve, I thought that if God blessed me with gravity-defying hair then so be it. I will wield it, and I will make those white girls wish that they

had a comedy show attached to their heads. I would make you stick up, down, diagonal, this way, that way, and whatever other way that kept me in front of the joking and you behind it.

My father always said “you can’t take yourself too seriously.” I needed to be able to laugh at myself, and in turn I laughed at you. With the teeth of the comb to my throat, I had to admit that you deserved better.

Last year, I bought you your first bonnet and then a second and a third, and two durags, and a few scarves here and there, and braiding hair--so much braiding hair! My first time doing box braids on a Tuesday in August, not counting the two and a half hours that Monday spent parting, and twisting into bantu knots and doubting whether you and my arms were up to the challenge, was an act of love. And not the kind that makes you want to smile and sing out, but the kind that breaks you down and builds you back up again. Eight hours of just me and you until me and you became a we, a realization that we always were and we will always continue to be. Two days, ten hours, six bundles of hair, a cup of tears and carpal tunnel and the nagging feeling that that was only the beginning.

At twenty-one, I realize most of our years have not been kind to you. I have not been kind to you. If now my words and my gifts don’t make up for the years of burning and screaming and earthquake tantrums of pulling and yanking and crying and calling you ugly and wanting to kill you, then hopefully my hands can make it up. Make it up in the way I wash you, section by section, curl by curl, in the way I hold my body still when we can’t seem to work. In the ways I let people touch you, and in the ways I let myself. In the winters that leach us dry, I will house the sun for you to make up for the cold and the rancid perspiration from memories of prickling palms when people turned you away, when you were prodded like an animal, when men sank their claws into you for a turn of head.

And to every unwelcome hand and every hairdresser that laughs at the thought of dealing with you and to every label of *unprofessional* and *messy* and *unkempt* that you receive that not so cleverly disguises what they really mean, that we are too black and too big and too bold, I wish the sweetest fuck you. I do not exist to appease and comfort fragility and antiquated tastes for monotony. I will never be their blonde-haired, blue-eyed American baby doll because as Maya Angelou once said, “Your crown has been bought and paid for. Put it on your head and wear it.” And I intend to do just that.

We Are Burning

For years and years and years and *years*, I relaxed my hair.

As a kid, when I looked at my natural hair in the mirror, my young and impressionable brain said awful things to me. “Your hair is so disgusting. You’re so weird. Why is your hair so messy? You look gross.”

I asked myself again and again, why won’t my hair act like my white friends?

I grew up in Oswego, New York. And if you know anything about Oswego, you know it’s white. And if you don’t know about Oswego, let me tell you. It’s whiter than the lake effect snow that buries us every winter.

In Oswego, I was raised in a single parent household by a white mother. Neither of us knew how to handle my hair. It was long, thick, and impossible to brush.

I remember once, my mother was trying to comb out my hair. It was so knotted that every time the comb caught another knot, my breath would catch in my throat.

Every knot, another deep stab into my scalp. Another sharp sting and another moment I couldn’t breathe. Every knot, another of how different I am, how no one around me understood me.

It was easy to believe that me and my hair were the problem. I know now that the problem was just ignorance. Neither of us learned how to take care of my hair. But for so long, I thought the problem was me.

It didn’t help that all my friends were white, pretty much by default because of the demographics of the area.

I stuck out like a sore thumb. And sticking out apparently repeatedly being asked to be pet like a zoo animal. They tried to run their hands through my weird, tangled mess while I stared in envy at their long, light, silky locs.

They could do anything they wanted with their hair. They could do anything they wanted with their lives. I imagined their mothers combing through their hair with ease, laughing at the lightness of it all.

How could I be anything but ugly?

And every time someone wanted to touch my hair, I felt more and more isolated. More and more different.

And so I relaxed my hair.

If you don't know what it's like to get your hair relaxed, you're lucky. Relaxing is basically putting chemicals on your hair that strip the texture from it and turn curls into pin straight hair. When I made the decision to relax my hair, I was so desperate to have perfectly straight hair and to get rid of all my curls that I wouldn't tell the hairstylist when the chemicals were starting to burn my skin.

I remember once in middle school I let the chemicals burn me so badly that I had scabs on the back of my neck for weeks. I may still have scars there. I damaged my skin and hair like this for years.

Then, I started high school

I started to question why I kept doing this to myself instead of just embracing my natural hair. But every six weeks I went back to try to achieve the long, straight hair that I saw my classmates had. Without fail.

Then, during my senior year of high school, the pandemic hit. Everything shut down. I was alone more than usual. I had a lot of time to think.

"I'm going to go off to college at the end of the summer," I'd think. "I'm going to have a fresh start, the beginning of my new life." A chance to express myself in ways I never had before.

Again, I considered letting my natural hair grow out. I still couldn't take the plunge. But the next time I sat in the salon chair, it didn't feel the same.

Then, I watched George Floyd die on TV. I watched him suffocate to death under the knee of that cop dozens of times.

Then, I watched the protests that started in Minneapolis, spread across the country, and then across the world.

I saw hundreds of thousands of people my age in the streets fighting for racial justice and equality. I saw the speeches, and the protest signs, and the vigils.

I'll be honest, I felt most empowered by watching the things others condemned: the burning buildings, the smashed windows, the damaged police cars. And as I watched those buildings burn, I thought of all the years I let my neck burn to erase the part of myself that I never embraced. I wanted so badly to support those in the streets that were willing to risk physical harm to fight for racial justice, but how could I do that when I wanted to hide the part of me that wasn't white?

So, I made my decision.

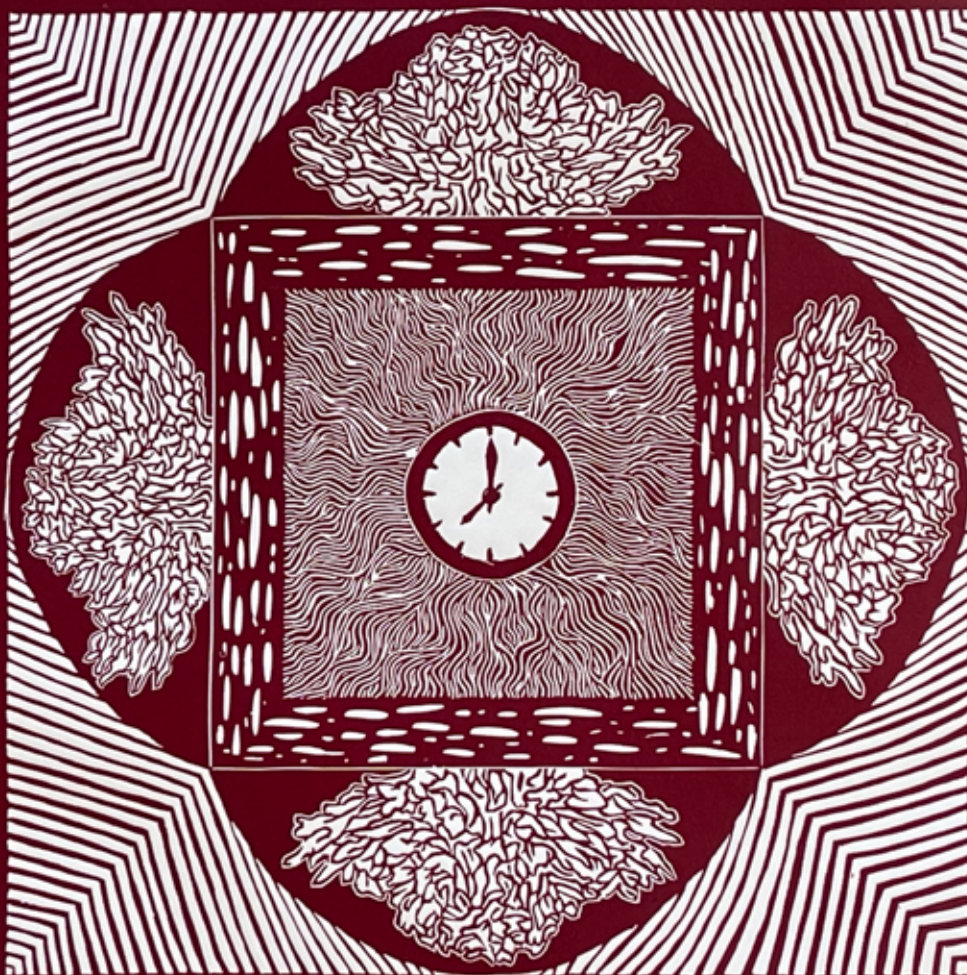
On August 7, 2020, I got my first protective style.

And now, every time I wash my hair, every time I look in the mirror, every time those curls I once called weird and messy stare back at me, I feel... sad.

I wish that my head was full of those curls. I want so badly to see how they'd frame my face, thick and bouncy, full of the part of me I was never comfortable showing. How funny it is that I now want nothing more than to be able to flaunt what I was once so insecure about.

But because of my choices for years and years and years and *years*, I have to wait.

At least now, I'm excited about what I'm waiting for.



Away (relief print), Jocelyn Acosta

tetanus

we saunter through
the suburbs i wish to be reborn into,
glass rattling in our pockets & purses. she is the only one who knows i hate my mother,
yet she cares very little.

what i think of her now doesn't matter.
under that blue evening we are
a single *thing*,
jangling with adrenaline
as it passes through summer-glazed yards.

it trespasses, briefly.
my shoe seizes the fence—
i dive, retrieve—
skin catches—i swear i have tetanus.

someone i swore i could love had a needle driven through their arm two weeks ago. i
waited by the phone as if they gave a damn, as if my digital affirmations would release
them from some divine bacterial will.
my own scratch is long, thin. deep as an eraser shaving. i nurse it like a bullet hole,
tear through her cabinets to find bandages for a wound that doesn't even
bleed.

i don't drink. she does.
when i'm finally satisfied with my medical hand she's vomiting
in the kitchen sink. it is 8 p.m. & my friends surround her like apostles.
i part the hormonal crowd. turn on the faucet.

they leave.

cherry punch sinks into her mother's carpet.

i'm kneeling with my wounded leg as i scrub.

the red spot turns to white. i've never been more proud.

i climb the stairs to see that someone with another.

i am not surprised.

i am sixteen, sure yet flimsy, betting on an underlying flaw

which will make sense of all this. that the talents i harbor

in notdrinking & stainremoving

will amount to a whole kind of love.

& some time later

i will realize that i did get tetanus;

it slithered through me that night, an internal leech, curving my hips into something

worth loving, instilling in me the desire to be desired,

no longer craving

a whole love but the surface of it: a pool of glass under my bare feet.

they will follow me, trailing my intrigue. that someone will call me first. i will receive enough love to fill an open wound.

Celestial Bitch

I use stars as a talking point at parties.
Not that they're dead, everyone knows that.
I talk about Orion and Cassiopeia
like I know them personally
& light pollution & the constellations I think I can see.
Did you know that Venus is the brightest planet?
Of course you do, but you play
into my game lest you spend
an evening with just you &
your hands.

I note your reactions,
bury them between my legs,
expose my rotting tongue,
force your return.
You can call me a bitch, I don't mind.
You're at your most attractive
when coerced into hostility,
calling me like I am
so I don't have to call myself.

I revel in it,
brand myself:
bitch when asleep,
bitch when awake,
bitch when dead.
I want to be the bitch

that rocks the cradle,
the hand that slaps your previous notions,
Tuesday bitch who studies until morning
and flaunts herself at night,

midnight bitch,
dreary as I open my mouth
& cough myself up
like an oversized pill;
& when you look down on me
your vision will throb
with darting eyes &
upturned lips swollen
from kissing myself in the mirror.

My favorite bitch
you'll think,
my favorite means to an end;
celestial bitch
who knows all the right words to say
& planets to discuss.

feast

he waits patiently, a hound: heaving, stirring,
warming my body with contrived breath.
saliva pools where porcelain meets skin.
i am chicken liver with a beating heart and undone buttons:
nubile nightmare in crusted pink lipstick.

his plate is sterile and serene, trimmed with rope
dripping merlot along exposed thighs.
i'm twitching with expectancy, shivering
and aware of gelatin flesh wrapped in a bow—
easter dinner madonna, the icon i've become.

with knife and fork he dines, ignoring
the steam building atop my taped mouth,
broiling skin, like strawberry jam, nails pinching, pulling;
teeth against flushed neck, hands reaching into dry throat:
daylight surrendering to disarray.

yet i am
gamy and determined
to make my flesh useful.

i am
a good beast.

i am
the night in its prime
serving my lone purpose:

girl

in curls
and knee-highs,

pleasing you

while i dissolve

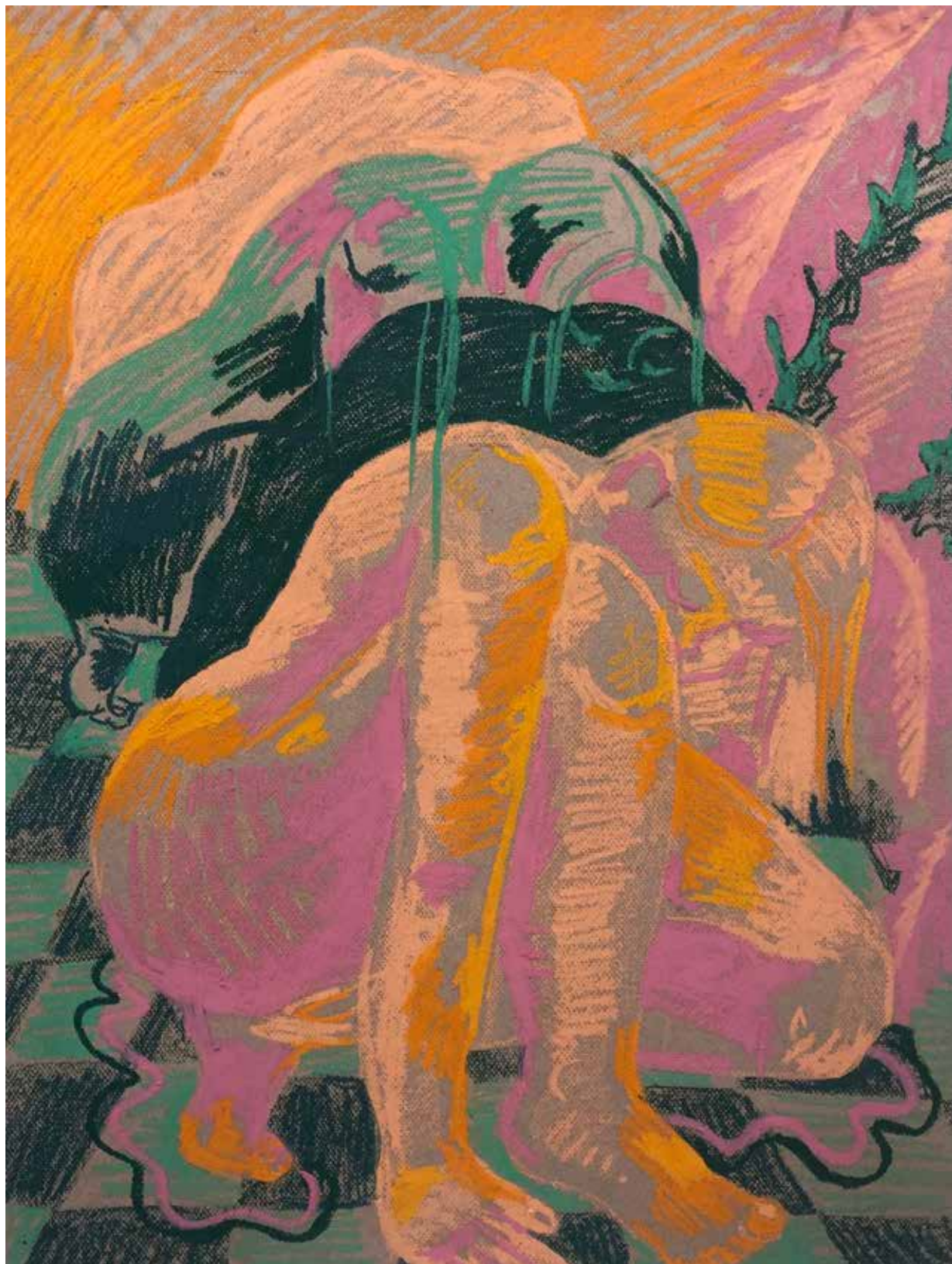
into the floorboards
and come

of age

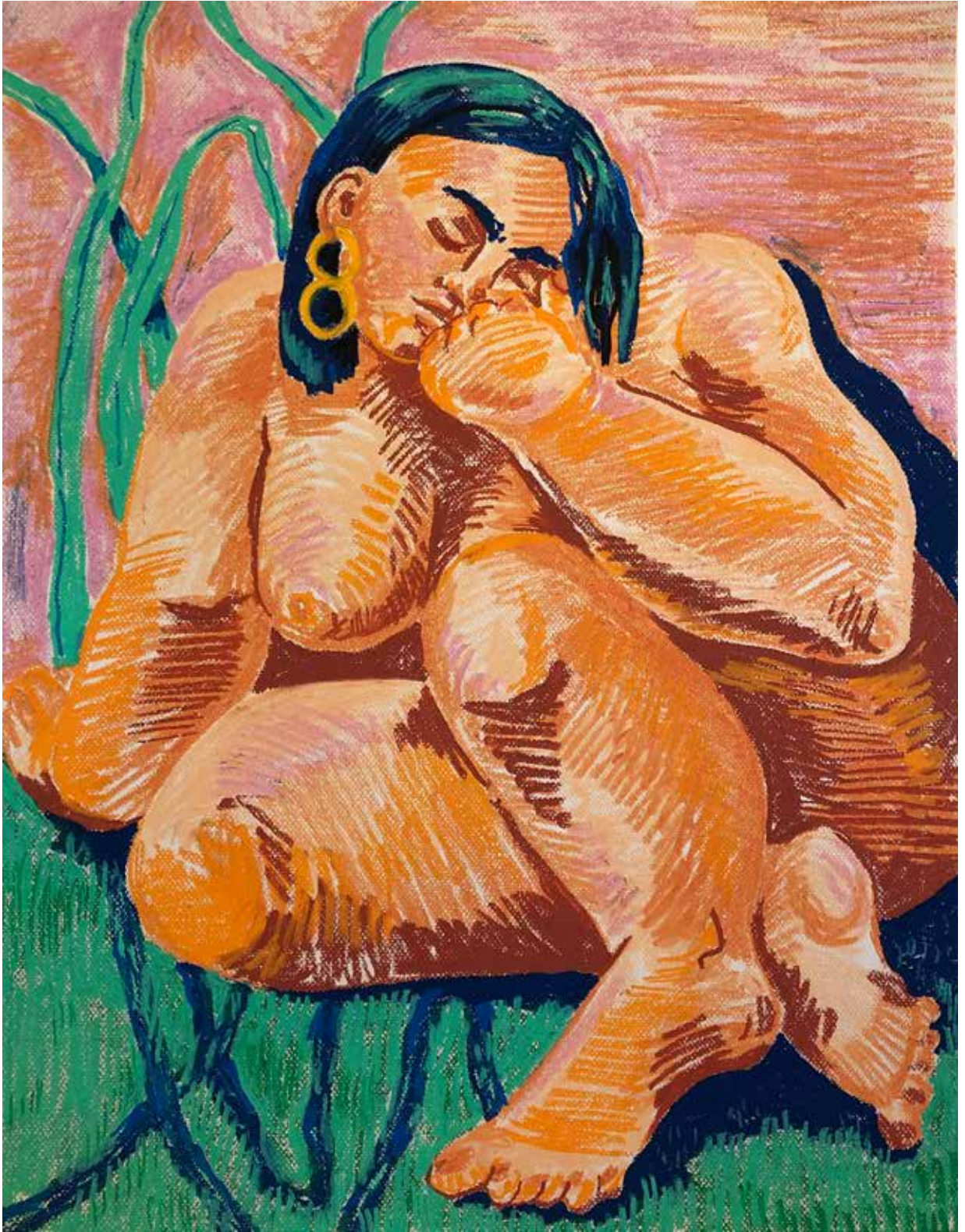
into cold hands

raising body parts

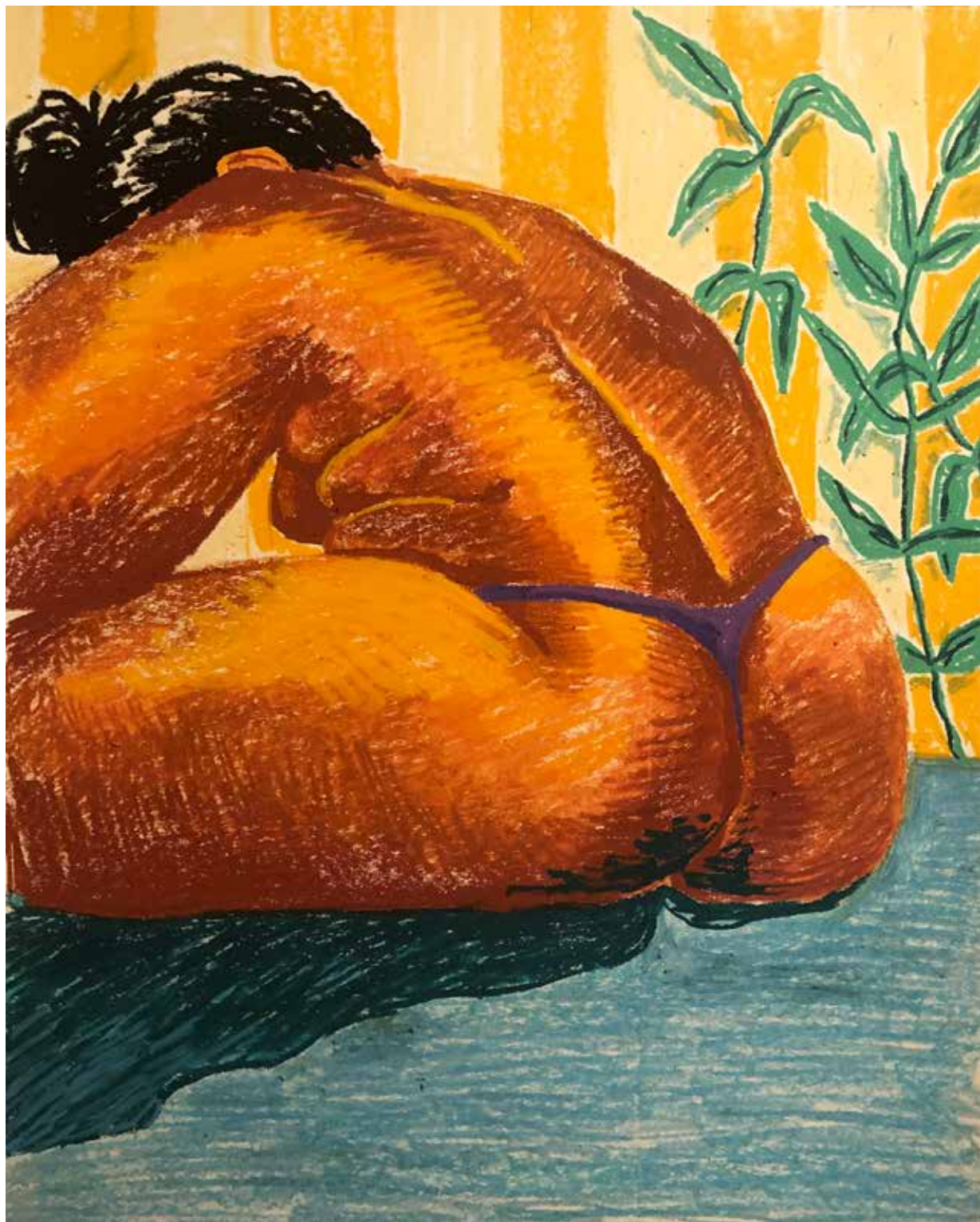
like children



Amass (oil pastel on paper), Mollie Ward



Without a Form (oil pastel on paper), Mollie Ward



To Yourself (oil pastel on paper), Mollie Ward

don't collect \$200

i pass
but just enough
a solid 65 straddling the line
best not buck them hips
cuz that's one ferocious animal
ready to throw you to the wolves
staring mechanically through your misery

i pass
but just enough
not enough to collect \$200
but enough to make it one more round
oh what a life
running to begin the cycle anew
you're cheating!
go directly to jail.

i pass
but not by my own efforts
dragged out to sea by a wave of perception
then pulled under by the wrath of those chaotic waters
and in those final moments
when air cries out in my veins for release
seeking to desert me like so much else
i ponder if camouflage was the only gift
the only blessing my maker saw fit to bestow upon me

grindr musings #1

when i think about us crossing paths
the edges of our circles brushing against each other
electrifying
i wonder if by blue light will i transform once more
cinderella i am not
my glass slippers are baby wipes
crumpled in my bag because your trash was so hard to find
but still so obvious to the rational mind

i was following your directions
quiet as a church mouse
in a house where i was going to sin
LORD SAVE MY SOUL
but first, save mine eyes
for in this light, every man could be my savior

lord make my body clean,
lord make my body
nevermind
i sin on my own.

i smell a smell, i dream a dream

The Freshman 15

Skin stretched too thin

ripping at the seams, begins to fray
Encased in lard, O gluttonous sin

Barcode engraved next to belly button
says product is near its expiration, watch it decay
Skin stretched too thin

Oakwood-grain contrasts against cheerio-sand skin
Gelatinous stomach fat scored like clay
Encased in lard, O gluttonous sin

Jagged zig-zags, ragged pin
stripes go every which way

Skin stretched too thin

Puckered, inflamed ribbons
shorelines torment a beached castaway
Encased in lard, O gluttonous sin

Inner thighs a page of wavy symbols foreign
hips enthroned in withering bouquets
Skin stretched too thin
Encased in lard, O gluttonous sin

White Wash

After Sylvia Plath's "Face Lift"

I sneak in a bottle of skin-lightening oil from the drug store,
tucked behind my back, discarded box and directions
in the parking lot: I found my new night routine.
When I was four, a woman
stood behind me and my mom in line. She was shocked
by my mom's white hand holding my tan one. Told Six Flags security
that my mom snatched me from my real mother.
O my mother was sick.

Things didn't change. After swimming
pale as Snow White in my suit of sunblock,
dizzy from the stench of sunscreen,
I dry off under an umbrella while my sister
basks in the sun. She makes me feel something shameful
peeks out from my Banana Boat cloak. At a quarter past two
she flips onto her belly like a pig on a spit...
She doesn't know a thing.

For five months I apply whitening treatments in secret,
pinch rubber bulb, drip serum onto skin, its excess stains sheets and pillow.
Even my peers think I'm adopted.
Complexion doesn't reflect my roots, chemical peels do a better job of that.
When I shower, skin cracks. I grow sensitive. I'm fourteen,
flaky and in immense pain in my childhood bathroom, my cheeks

screaming as I slather more whitener on them;
I hadn't self-love yet.

Now (six years later) she's done for, the judgmental bully
I heard shouting, day and night, in my ear—
Family outcast, tried so hard to lighten me that she erased herself.
She's trapped in my teenage diaries.
Let her collect dust, or catch fire in a blaze,
writhing and howling as flames eat her paper-skin.
To my younger self, I wish to cradle you in my arms,
brown and beautiful as can be.

The High Place Phenomenon

Rushing water carries logs down the creek. I force myself
not to shout out as the reservoir soaks up my reflection.
Blushed pink cheeks coated in misty air, I
never want to be pummeled,
crushed by the insurmountable weight of the falls.
Nowhere else to go, it releases a saturated
gush of waste and debris. I
don't speak, just picture myself tumbling in the mix.
Hush, hear a log's soft whistles and cries.
 No one will notice her absence amongst the
 brush; many branches take her place.
 She's gone.



Trucks (digital photograph), Sarah Brown



Pads (digital photograph), Sarah Brown

I Am Not a “Koreaboo”

***Koreaboo** /ko ree ah boo/ noun:*

Someone who denounced their own race and calls themselves Korean, genuinely believes that they're Korean or wishes they were Korean... They may use small parts of Korean in their sentences without caring about learning the language. They could think that all Asians/Koreans are beautiful gods who are above the human race.

—From *Urban Dictionary*, “Koreaboo”

You could say I am obsessed with all things Korea. It's the kind of obsession that has crept in slowly, like water settling in the cracks of a sidewalk. It started with pressing play on a Korean drama that popped up on my Netflix recommendations, which led to watching a few more series. Eventually, my Netflix history faced total infiltration, with *Friends* and *The Office* being booted out in favor of *Crash Landing on You* and *Immortal Classic*. Somewhere along the way, I stopped craving cheesy pizza and chocolate and started longing for bubbling hot *soondubu jjigae*, Melona pops, and *samgyeopsal* off the grill. Even long car drives have stopped sounding the same—my favorite playlists of American indie and pop morphed into a strange compilation of Red Velvet hits and Kwon Jin Ah's acoustic jazz album. Before I knew it, the trickle of interest that began with a Korean drama had slowly impeded my daily life and cracked it open like a sidewalk in winter.

Last March, when I was discussing my newfound love of Korean music and dramas with a friend from college (white), he jokingly told me that I was turning into a “Koreaboo.” I wasn’t completely oblivious to the offense of the term’s implications, but I just half-laughed and moved on. I figured there was no point in starting a row when my only comeback was the most visually obvious statement I could possibly make: How can I be a “Koreaboo” if I’m really Korean?

It’s an interesting experience being the international diplomat of your own identity. It’s a constant state of conflict negotiation and mediation, complete with periods of alliance, neutrality, and sometimes, warfare. Growing up as a Korean child who was adopted by white parents as an infant, it took me a while to realize that there was any conflict at all. I knew that most kids looked like their parents and didn’t go to Korean school on the weekends, but I didn’t think much of it at the time. It was only when I began elementary school in a largely white school district that I experienced the first stirrings of a conflict that would escalate to all-out warfare in my high school years.

One of my earliest memories of racial awareness is from first grade, when our teacher, Mrs. Coomey, thought she would be creative and line us up by middle name rather than last name. While half of the girls in my class lined up with their matching “Elizabeths” and “Maries,” I stood alone in the “J” section of the line with the boys whose middle names were “John.” My middle name, Jung Hee, is my Korean birth name, which I was proud of until that day. I hated telling it to anyone for the next ten years after the boys in my class said it sounded like the word “junkie.”

I went to Korean school from the age of five to eight. In Korean school, which took place at a Protestant church on Wednesday evenings, both children and parents took classes on language, culture, music, games, and cooking in order to learn more about our (the kids’) Korean heritage. All of us, except for one girl that I remember, were Korean adoptees—Korean children brought to the U.S. at a young age who had white parents, and whose white parents thought it would be beneficial to educate us and themselves on our culture. But the Korean school did have one problem: its high turnover rate. As much as the parents nagged us to continue our studies and as much as the teachers begged us to stay, none of us wanted to be there, and nothing could change that. Looking back, it makes a lot of sense. Almost all of us came from a primarily white suburban area, went to stable and highly rated schools with majorities of white students, had white parents whom we adored, white friends, and white Barbie Dolls or superheroes. Why the hell would we care about Korean culture?

One of the biggest ironies of it all is that Important, Educated people now tell me about the immense cognitive and practical benefits of being bilingual and multiculturally educated—a global citizen, so to say. Bilingualism is seen

as the future of the globalized world—it broadens job prospects, strengthens resumes, shows intercultural competence. At eight years old, I was just thrilled to finally be able to do the fun stuff that normal white kids do, like dance classes and soccer leagues. Eleven years after dropping out of Korean school, I am uncoordinated, unathletic, and monolingual. Talk about a lack of foresight.

For sixteen of my nineteen years of life, I wanted to be white. I didn't want to be visibly different, visibly Asian, growing into a separate standard of Eastern beauty that could never match the blonde-haired, blue-eyed dolls we had learned to worship when we were young. In high school, I desperately wished that I would grow into my looks like the other girls did, but I soon realized that “glowing up” wasn't even possible for me in the same way it was for others—I couldn't just dye my hair and lose weight and put on some makeup to look how I wanted. I would have to change my DNA or get as close to it as I could. I would have to sew my eyelids up to widen my eyes, bleach my hair from the root down, bleach my face to match. I wished so ardently that it would happen but realized that it wasn't physically possible, and so I looked to other modes of whiteness.

It is a common story, among Korean Adoptees, and in general among Asians who just want to fit in. It starts young, with friends and family and books and movies. We learn to love them—our mentors, our favorite characters, our heroes. Naturally, we want to be like them. Often, this starts with how they look, but this is impossible by the sheer force of genetics. So instead, we turn to acting like them and mimicking their behavior. Learning the classic songs like “Brown Eyed Girl” and “I Want It That Way,” wearing ripped jeans and college hoodies, laughing off the occasional racist comments or awkward inquiries into where we are really from. There's nothing wrong with embracing American culture when you live in America. It only becomes a problem when American culture becomes mutually exclusive with your own to the point of blatant rejection.

Why were we so eager to quit Korean school? Why did we blush when we were asked to say our Korean names? Why did we wish for big blue eyes instead of a puppy on Christmas Eve? And above all, why did our love for the people around us have to sharpen the blade of hatred for ourselves?

As the “model minority,” it's easy for Asian people to keep their heads down and blend in with the crowd. Sometimes we're even able to pass off as white, or act so “normally” that our faces blur in the minds of others to the point of whiteness. Oftentimes, this works in our favor. But what many people don't understand is the deep wars that we wage within ourselves because of it. Whiteness, in its power and supremacy, is aggressive. In the way that it pervades the consciousnesses of people of color, including Asian people,

it attacks people at the core of who they are: their names, their bodies, their languages, their traditions.

I often think of those who lost themselves in battle. The girl in my high school class who was gorgeous enough to win Miss Vietnam, but still told me that she wished she was “at least half-Asian-half-white because mixed Asians are prettier.” The boy majoring in business who had a distinctly Chinese name and told me he’ll change it to something American when he’s older to seem “more professional.” The friend who told me he hopes his kids inherit his girlfriend’s white looks to save them the trouble of looking Asian.

This isn’t to say that our wars are the fault of any given white person. It is our fault, as an American society, for failing people of color time and again. It is also the fault of history, though there are certainly people to blame behind that as well. To put it in the context of my Netflix list, the last episode of *Crash Landing on You* (a wildly popular Korean drama) aired February 16, 2020. Lana Condor, a Vietnamese-American actress, became well known for her role as Lara Jean following the release of *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* on August 17, 2018. Earlier in the same month of the same year, *Crazy Rich Asians* blew up the box office and gained critical acclaim for its all-Asian cast, an iconic first for Hollywood. On June 19, 1998, Fa Mulan became the first and only Disney Princess of East Asian descent.

For Asian people, it’s been a very long road to seeing and being seen on screen. I often wonder what would have been different if the Asian Americans of my generation had grown up adoring protagonists with names and bodies like our own. What might have changed if the people around us knew more about our cultures and lives? If we weren’t exoticized and poked and prodded and asked what it’s like to “see through small eyes?”

In 2020, I don’t know if I would say that America has treated us kindly as a people, but at least we can find solace in entertainment that includes us, features us, and sometimes even does us proud. When I watch Korean dramas, I might not understand the words they are speaking or pick up on the subtleties of their humor, but at least their faces look like mine. For the ninety minutes of the episode, I can see my country’s culture and life on full display, shameless and unaware of its own mundane beauty. I can whisk back hundreds of years in time to the Joseon dynasty, and watch women wearing *hanboks* and living in *hanoks*. I can peer across the ocean in the present and watch young men complete their mandatory military service, watch high school students cram for their college entrance exams, see them fall in love and get married in traditional dress. Sometimes, I can even pretend that I also live in a world where it is normal to see people who look like me, rather than glimpsing them across campus and feeling like I’ve spotted some rare bird that could take flight in a second if I approach too enthusiastically.

So am I a “Koreaboo” for loving Korean Dramas? For listening to “Talk to Me in Korean” to try to scrounge any bits of language I have left? For eating kimchi and rice for breakfast? What about for announcing myself as *Anna Jung Hee Lynch* without ducking my head in shame?

“You’re turning into a Koreaboo,” he had said with a snicker. I laughed along with him and jokingly got mad, telling him that I can’t be a “Koreaboo” if I’m really Korean. A pause. I could feel the words hanging off the tip of his tongue: *You’re not really Korean though. You act white.* He was smart enough to leave them inside his mouth, but the heavy pause was enough for me to catch the gist of the message. I quickly changed the subject and tried to move on.

I am no longer upset about my friend’s off-key joke, but the word itself still fills me with a feeling that I couldn’t put words to for years. The word, which serendipitously is Korean, is *han*. It’s more of a concept than a word, according to scholars of Korean culture. The definition is strikingly summative—“In the most basic sense, [*han*] is understood as rancor or grief, which is a consequence of a persistent injustice due to asymmetric power relations or an inability to take proper means to solve the suffering.”¹

The term “Koreaboo” fills me with *han* in every way. I wonder, in the moments when I am consumed by my *han*, what more white people can take from me. How much more can they mock my identity, batter it relentlessly, and toss it to the gutter like a cheap mask I only wore for a Halloween party? How was I supposed to react to being seen as white, when it took me, *us*, so long to finally be seen as Asian people?

I love many white people. My parents, best friends, trusted teachers, and classmates are white. But in moments like these, when I read the usage example of “Koreaboo” on Urban Dictionary which states, “*Jackie is such a Koreaboo, she’s American but she shouts ‘OPPA’ at random Asian men and tries to look Korean by gluing her eyelids down,*” I wonder what kind of pain I would have to inflict to make them understand, when words aren’t enough, when intelligent discussion is just another form of holding my *han* back.

As a college student picking up the pieces of the Korean identity I shattered in my youth, I look to “all things Korea” as a tool of learning, entertainment, reclamation, and healing. I am obsessed with all things Korea. I use Duolingo to learn Korean in my free time. I make white people jokes. I complain to high heaven about the lack of Asians at my college. I eat kimchi unapologetically, even though it stinks like death. I search for cute Asian boys at parties because I just want someone who understands what it’s like to live in this body. I jokingly tell my friends to call me *eonni*, because they should respect their goddamn elders.

But I am not a Koreaboo for doing so. I am just plain Korean.

1 “From Oldboy to Burning: Han in South Korean films” by Bjorn Boman



Donatella (photograph), J.S.

Albert Abonado's *JAW*: A Review

The mouth is crucial to our identity. It is vital for our most basic need of eating, but it is also essential for language, love, and song. It's with our mouths, after all, that we form our most important and difficult questions: who am I? Where do I belong? In *JAW*, poet Albert Abonado, a first-generation Filipino American, explores identity, family, and culture. With attention to the human body—specifically the various parts of the mouth—Abonado probes what it means to be both Filipino and American. In poems that are both serious and funny, Abonado tackles the question of identity and reveals the challenges of sustaining one's cultural heritage.

The collection begins with “America Tries to Remove a Splinter,” a poem about assimilation. Despite America promising it will be quick, the reader understands there is a cost to the extraction:

you will not notice how
I have put my hands inside your bones which are hollow
which are your father your mother I have your hand
on my palm how does this feel

The person who has the splinter never responds in this poem, but the following poems provide some answers. In the poem “How to Unbend the Tongue.” The speaker admits he has tried to learn Tagalog, but can't fully

master it. He wishes he was comfortable “to say / blood and dick with sincerity” in Tagalog but can’t do so. In the end, he is unable to unbend his tongue to speak the language of his family. Another poem that explores language is “The Greeting,” where the speaker dreams about his father’s tongue, “how it contracts, isolated, / enters the world already heavy / and blackened.”

Family history is also examined as a way of understanding what it means to be Filipino American. The second section of the collection is focused on Tito Manuel, who Abonado said in an interview on The Sundress Blog is based on his deceased Uncle and his stories of surviving World War II. In “Tito Manuel Escapes the Death March,” the speaker says:

No offense to the man whose
body I hide beneath, but I am good
at being dead

regardless of what
my urine soaking
in the ground might suggest.

The image of the speaker—Tito Manuel—burying himself under a dead body to remain alive is harrowing and reveals how significant experiences of inherited trauma might become woven into one’s identity. Tito Manuel’s story becomes another layer of what it means to be a Filipino American, especially how such identities are heightened during war.

In *JAW*’s third section, Abonado turns to popular culture to further explore identity. Through poems that address Harold and Kumar, the Asian characters in the buddy film *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, Abonado questions the losses of immigration, the challenges of assimilation, and the damning effects of stereotyping. In the poem, “The Darkest Sugars Are Always the Sweetest,” the speaker says:

Kumar,
you and I are great Americans. We have great American
Hands and great American hair. Great American American holes
in the elbows of our button downs and great American
teeth with great American coffee stains.

Here, Abonado seems as if he is persuading Kumar of their shared Americanness, the proof is the love of Coca-Cola, that most American of beverages, and the rotten teeth it creates. Indeed, the speaker “cannot stop singing about its virtues to [his] wife.” In “The Mercy Suit” we are again confronted with

images of the mouth, though here it stays closed: “Kumar, I have watched my loved / ones do this, leave behind holes / where their voice should be.”

The final section feels like a reconciliation of the Filipino and the American within the speaker. “Someday I Will Love Albert Abonado” acknowledges that the name—Albert—had belonged to the speaker’s grandfather’s. Albert is told “learn / to love your spine, which is a collection of your mother’s / spindles, love the fingers that break each time you use them / to count.” Here, our speaker returns to the body to plead with Albert to love himself. He encourages Albert to see the name as “sweetened,” a bounty, “harvested again.”

JAW is about family, identity, immigration, and what gets left behind. As the collection ends with “Self-Portrait as a Wisdom Tooth,” the speaker says, “I collide against myself, recoil from / my ghostly hum. I do not own / the blood that passes beneath me, but I threaten its alignment.” *JAW*, a moving and resonant collection, is a reckoning with the past and the future as the speaker in “Idle” says:

They followed a star here

They came looking for myrrh This is an old story

Maybe you’ve heard it before

An Interview with Albert Abonado

Albert Abonado is a poet and essayist currently residing in Rochester, NY. He received his MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars and teaches at The State University of New York College at Geneseo and RIT. Abonado's work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *Colorado Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *Hobart*, *Waxwing*, among other publications. He has also received fellowships for poetry from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

GD: *JAW* is split up into four parts. It is clear there are different themes and motifs that compliment each section, can you describe your process of assigning each poem to a part, and what defining factor you would give to each part?

AA: To be honest, the sections were probably the hardest part for me to decide when putting the book together. Should it be two sections? Three? What if I just did the book as one continuous series of poems?

I wanted that first section to be a kind of thematic primer. These are my concerns. This establishes the voice you will hear for the next however many pages. Family, loss, identity—these are my obsessions and I wanted these up front. I think of the subsequent sections as being threads that all come from the first section.

I really wrestled with the Tito Manuel and Harold/Kumar poems. I'd toyed with trying thematic sections where the series were integrated throughout the book, but ultimately, concluded that they deserved their own sections. I felt the momentum of the series gets lost when distributed through-

out the collection. Here, among their siblings, the poems have more push, more propulsion.

I wanted to give some sense of an arc in the book, wanted the reader to feel as if they have been on some kind of journey, examining concerns that were historical and immediate, which explains the choices for many of the poems in the final section. I think of the final section as being more forward looking. Actually, my opinion of that final section changes daily. Sometimes, I feel that this is where the book opens up, explores possibilities that lie ahead. Yes, there's death, but also a sense of things to come. Other times, I think, no, this section is really a meditation on loss and grief, about the need to preserve through memory and story. My feelings about the sequence of sections reflects my feelings about the poem. I shouldn't end up in the same place I started. I want to be transformed.

GD: Some of the motifs I noticed that carried through the entirety of the book were that of fish, mammals, insects, and of course—teeth. How do you tie in these motifs with some of the overall themes of this book, like heritage, family, race, and existentialism?

Honestly, I think my obsessions with teeth has to do with all the years in high school that I spent in braces.

I wish I understood the connection. If I had to guess, many of the motifs, fish for example, have cultural ties. My family is from the Philippines and fish was a staple in our kitchen. I was never much of a fisher, but every summer, my family would make trips to the beach or to the piers and fish until dark on a Saturday. In that way, the fish becomes a place where family, culture, and identity might intersect.

When I explore those themes, I latch on to something to ground them, something familiar, at least to me. We all have idiosyncratic relationships with objects, unique associations with animals, mammals, and insects and what-not, and sometimes those relationships collide on the page in absurd ways. The logic of the poems can be slippery, can slide from one theme to another with the fish or the teeth acting as conduits, a means of opening up new ideas, discovering intersections. A friend once said that my poems have trap doors that I open up halfway through the poem and crawl into just to start the poem again, which was such a delightful gift of a description, and I think captures the ways in which those motifs work in the poems. The associations that I make through images or sentences are in many ways a record of me processing an obsession: family, race, death, culture, faith. I return to those obsessions again and again, no matter how hard I try to resist them.

GD: I found there were several poems in this book placed next to each other that I considered to be almost "sister poems." Some of these include the placements of "In a Field Called Vietnam" next to "On Citizenship," "Bear Suit"

next to “House of Birds” next to “Brother Octopus,” and of course the six Tito Manuel poems. Can you talk a little bit about the process of how you wrote these poems, especially in terms of revision?

Oh, I love this idea of sister poems. I do think of all the poems as being related to one another, some more clearly than others. Each poem has its unique biography, but they largely start the same way: I’m curious about an image or phrase or story. I ask myself what happens if I put these words next to each other? And this happens again and again until I feel I can’t sustain it any longer. For example, the Tito Manuel poems emerged from the stories my mother would tell me about my uncle. My uncle passed away when I was pretty young, so I never had the opportunity to hear these stories directly from him. I wanted to bring those stories to life. I wanted to hear his voice, and in doing so, reconnect with my uncle, that history, that cultural heritage. I pieced together what I could, drew from other sources to assemble my uncle.

With the exception of the poems in the Tito Manuel series or the Harold and Kumar series, the poems were largely born independent of one another. I certainly have my obsessions and that accounts for the similar themes and the repetition of motifs and patterns. After all, I can’t escape myself in my writing. I’ve learned by now to trust those obsessions, to follow them down the rabbit hole. I’ve learned that repetition does not have to mean redundant. It can suggest urgency. It can be a deepening relationship. The poems could be collectively telling me that I am not done with this material yet.

Once I assembled the poems into a collection, I had to reconsider the function of the poems. Before, the poems operated independently, living in magazines or on my laptop without worrying about any other poems, but now I had to think about their relationship to one another, think about the bits of language that might clash and adjust the poems for that. I had a lot of help, too, from my editor, whose perspective helped guide many of those revision choices.

GD: There are several references in these poems to past relatives, movie figures, and poets. What made you decide to address Harold and Kumar from the movie *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* in this collection?

Every April for National Poetry Month I organize a little writing group that writes a new poem every day, and we exchange those poems via email for the whole month. Many people do something similar, which is why April is sometimes also known as National Poetry Writing Month, or NaPoWriMo for short. The Harold and Kumar poems began as an exercise for one of those months, a little experiment. I wanted to see what would happen if I wrote poems to Harold and Kumar.

When it comes down to it, I just really loved the movies. They are brash, fun, and bizarre. Qualities that I, in many ways, love seeing in poems. There’s

a little more to this, though. Right now, we are witnessing an increased representation of Asian Americans in the media. I just finished up the series *Warrior* on HBO Max and marveled at the complicated Asian characters. At the time those poems were written, however, I hadn't really seen many examples of such subversive or complex Asian American characters. Harold and Kumar felt fresh. They were silly, horny, ridiculous characters and I wanted to pay homage to that. Of course, I recognize the unfortunate irony of this increased representation arriving at time when a Filipinx woman is brutally attacked in broad daylight and world leaders carelessly refer to COVID as the kung flu, which is to say there is still much more work to do.

GD: One of the most prominent literary devices I've noticed throughout these poems is imagery. There's the repeating images of children, animals, living things having their guts torn open like in "House of Horses"—can you outline your creative process in terms of conjuring these images?

I love the use of the word "conjuring" in your question. Poems are like spellcraft, aren't they? We try to make the abstract qualities of our experiences into something tangible. I value the image in the poem not only for its ability to immerse us in experience, to ground our poems, but also for its versatility. The image can, among other things, transform, connect, reimagine, subvert, underline, and sometimes all of these at the same time.

The image, also, is important to my process. This may sound familiar to some of my former students, but the image acts as a springboard. I use one image to lead me to another. They become the engine to the poem. What memory or emotion or animal or color or shape or sound does this image evoke? There's a certain thrill in those discoveries, like tumbling through the wiki-pages of your brain, finding connections you never expected to find.

I know myself enough by now that I need to interrogate those choices: Did I push this image far enough? Was I lazy and did I settle for the easy, more obvious choice? If so, is there something more that I can do with it? Are there more interesting places I can take this image? I try to hold myself accountable for the choices I make in my poems, and this is true of the images. I want those images to be more than window dressing. They need to be a dynamic part of the poem.

GD: It's clear there is a lot of family history and cultural ties that appear, such as in the poems about Tito Manuel. What was your research process like for this book of poems?

In terms of research, much of it was asking for more stories from my family. I wanted to devour these stories, verify some of the details, confirm the timelines, and build on the stories they shared. I did a little research to clarify some questions I had about historical events, but mostly, the poems drew

from a reservoir of experiences. Many of the stories, the jokes, the history are things I grew up learning and knowing.

GD: The first section of the collection seems to tackle a lot of themes about race and privilege in America. For instance, in “Frederick Douglass: A Triptych,” it seemed as though the poem was tackling how the work put in by Frederick Douglass has to not paid off—we are still battling the same issues with racism we were back then. Would you consider this to be one of the overarching themes in this section?

I think that’s an astute reading of the first section. My concerns about identity, racism, American-ness, and privilege are certainly at the forefront of many of those opening poems. As I said before, I think of that section as a thematic primer, a kind of thesis, for lack of a better word, except it’s not so much an argument as it is an interrogation. What does it mean to Filipino American? What does it mean to be the son of immigrants? What does it mean to have one’s identity flattened by whiteness?

GD: Many of the poems in this collection seem to be in conversation with each other. For instance, the scenario in which Tito Manuel meets a relative on the Death March in “Tito Manuel Meets a Cousin Drinking Water on the Death March” is brought up again in “Idle,” but in a much softer, sweeter tone. If you could pinpoint a few main events that inspired this collection, what would they be, and how did you go about sacrificing other memories and events?

I think there are some formative experiences that act as a kind of nucleus for the book, so I love that you asked this. Many of the poems tie back, in one way or another, to this brief period of time in my life where I found myself returning to the Philippines. I hadn’t been back to the Philippines in maybe ten years, and then suddenly, I found myself going every year for a wedding or a funeral or an anniversary. I feel that so many of the poems I have written speak to those events, particularly the funeral of my grandfather.

But choosing the poems was a real struggle. What rubric can I apply here? How to compose a collection in which the poems “speak” to one another? I had to read through the collection several times to get a sense of the thematic threads that hold the book together, and from there, began a process of winnowing the poems out. In the end, I was mostly intuitive about the choices. Did this or that poem feel right for the collection and the themes I was exploring?

GD: Is there anything you’re currently working on or having coming out soon we can look forward to?

I’m working on a new manuscript. Many of the poems explore a terrible accident my parents experienced a few years ago. Only now do I feel I have

a perspective on those events, and so, I find the more recent poems explore the mortality of our families, my relationship with my Catholicism, and how I have turned to poetry to fill my spiritual needs. Some of these poems have been picked up in magazines here and there, so those should be appearing in the relative near future. The book, however, will take a little time to finish.

The Grammar of Paradise

In Tortola, when you go, they bury you
under a white concrete slab which,
for good measure, they top off with
two or three more slabs,
smaller but equally white:

an oblong ziggurat, topped
with a cross. Your visitors can sit
on you or one of your neighbors
and lunch on a roti or sandwich as they
remember and discuss you
and then move on to other topics,

looking across to low houses
and shops, their doors, roofs,
and window shutters in
gleeful toybox colors and
overhead, coconut palms and
the magenta blooms of bougainvillea.

The sun smiles down, as it does
most of the time. The sea surrounds
and laps at the rocks like a lover
at your feet. Slowly the sun shifts.

Slowly the sidereal nighttime sky rolls around,
the moon, planets, constellations.

Boats sway on their moorings.
Americans dream in their moving berths.
Back home, for weeks in the future, they will rock
in their timeless dreams, their beds afloat
on lapis and turquoise inside
their quiet-colored northern houses.

But if, as I say, you have come to rest
in the glowing blue and green of the islands,
your swaying and rocking time is over.
And it seems nobody has anything but time here
where, all day, roosters step down the road
and crow in the knowledge of announcing God.

The Grammar of Traps

Starfish sees the trap of fractals, the decorator's rule of five, Japanese flower arrangements, the pruned branches of privet, yes, and tributaries back in their banks.

Memory sees the trap of logical, longitudinal, linear progression.

Trash can sees the trap of closure.

Ring sees the trap of whose diamond is biggest. And, infinity. Again.

Grid sees the trap of city, cemetery, supermarket aisle, cropland, parade.

Artist sees the trap of disorder, the entropy of life, the spinning-out into shambles of her process, the partly-filled notebooks, paper clips corralling scraps of extra lines, erasures and elisions between.

The Grammar of Stasis

So, self-portrait as a windmill.
Sing, one-pointed desire, Dona Quixote repeating
I want to do right but not right now.

Stand, the stiffness of my dress,
all cedar shingles ruffled in East End gales.
Stir, the groaning arms that lift to greet
such intimacies. Yes, wind came to me
and I welcomed its handling, was built for it.
Straining, spinning, I only knew
one dance. Oh, sigh all around me,
why was I made to wait?

Stuck, I fought against
the salty air, looking out,
never up. Stay,
Mrs. Married and Safe,
sails snapped off, my canvas
rotted from stillness and sun.

Sting, world blowing past me.
I always did what I was asked.

About the Authors

JOCELYN ACOSTA is a student at SUNY Plattsburgh.

JADE PAGASA BACONCILLO is a student attending SUNY Albany, studying psychology, English, and counseling. She hopes to improve her writing on a technical level, while also using her writing as a vehicle for self-reflection and self-understanding. The writing of others has had a positive impact on her, and she hopes her work does some amount of good for others.

SARAH BROWN will graduate from SUNY Plattsburgh this May where she has studied sculpture and digital photography. She enjoys capturing images that show the passing of time as well as how things change and stay the same. She is always pushing for meaning and mystery in her art and discovering new ways of expressing herself.

MIA DONALDSON is a freshman at SUNY Geneseo double majoring in English literature and political science with a minor in the Edgar Fellows program. She plans to continue her English studies into graduate school, and can typically be found around campus reading or staring wistfully into the vast Geneseo farmland. Their interests include, but are not limited to: women, anything written by Ottessa Moshfegh or Thomas Hardy, Mitski, stompy boots, and matcha lattes.

ALIYHA GILL is a psychology and English (creative writing) double major senior at SUNY Geneseo. She is the opinion editor for *The Lamron* and the copy editor for *MiNT Magazine*. She appreciates all forms of art and aspires to publish her own poetry collection one day.

KRISTIAN GRANT is a graduating senior at FIT who can often be found dodging public perception by tending to their villagers on Animal Crossing. The hottest non-binary femme on two legs to grace Laurelton, New York, Kristian is an avid lover of pop culture and unapologetic queerness. Their love for writing stemmed from innumerable childhood trips to the public library. Since then, they have found immense beauty and joy in crafting, poetry, and writing fiction.

JULIA GRUNES is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo, studying English (creative writing) and psychology. When she isn't writing, she's likely enjoying the fresh air, singing with friends, or falling off her longboard!

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KAT JOHNSON is a junior English major on the creative writing track at SUNY Geneseo, also minoring in women's & gender studies. She primarily writes poetry. She also loves writing and performing original music, which you can find on Spotify. When she isn't writing, she loves singing with her all-gender a cappella group, Between the Lines.

NANCY KEATING's poems have been published by *New Letters*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She has an MFA from Stony Brook University and teaches at Farmingdale State College when she is not knitting.

KILEY KERNS is a junior at SUNY Oswego, double majoring in psychology and creative writing with a minor in expressive art therapy. She intends to attend graduate school for clinical psychology while getting her writing published on the side. She spends her free time romanticizing everything and making Pinterest boards. If Kiley could get brunch with any author dead or alive—it'd be Anne Sexton.

LIANNA LAZAROS is a junior at SUNY Purchase studying creative writing. A poet from the Bronx, they love to study astrology, play the guitar, and collect scented candles. Their work has previously been published in *Italics Mine*.

ANNA LYNCH is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo studying creative writing and intercultural and critical studies through the English and communication majors. She is from Liverpool, New York, and enjoys exploring issues in social identity and injustice through both of her areas of study. She hopes to

one day become a clinical social worker after collecting a handful of memories from travels abroad.

KAILEY MAHER is a BFA student in ceramics and sculpture at SUNY Plattsburgh primarily working in stoneware, alabaster and bronze. Her pieces reflect the effects of time—shaping and re-shaping—not in minutes and seconds, but a living lifetime of transformative movements of expansions and contractions.

MELANIE NORMAN is in the process of earning her BA in English with a minor in anthropology from SUNY Brockport. She's in the process of publishing her first novel, and was also the recipient of the Mary Louise White Award from the University of SUNY Fredonia in early 2019 for both poetry and short fiction.

NICK PATTILLO is a junior choral music education student at SUNY Fredonia. He is also the President of the Teacher Education Club and a campus tour guide. When he is not studying music or writing, Nick enjoys going on walks around campus and is on a quest this year to listen to a new album every week.

ELLA PEARCY is a freshman at SUNY Geneseo. She is an English and creative writing major, and a women and gender studies minor. She plans to continue her studies in Europe, and get her masters in creative writing. Her interests include: fashion, archery, Studio Ghibli, and reading everything she can get her hands on. She aspires to be an author, and hopes to one day have a published series of her own.

MIRANDA PHILLIPS is a senior studying creative writing at SUNY Oswego. She plans to move to Wyoming after graduation where she will continue her novel-writing career, ride horses, and watch the snow pile up with her blind, rescue dog, Bear.

J.S. is a senior psychology major at SUNY Geneseo. They have always had an interest in fashion, photography, and art. They often pull inspiration from pop music as well as fellow queer artists.

ROSALINDA VALERI is a senior double majoring in English literature and women's and gender studies. When she isn't working on classwork, she is writing and creating art in her apartment.

ELLEN WEBER is studying graphic design and creative writing at SUNY Oswego. She is currently developing

her first novel, as well as continuing to work on her poetry. When she's not writing, she is working on her illustrations, reading, or relaxing by the lake.

MOLLIE WARD is a BFA student at SUNY Plattsburgh, concentrating in drawing and ceramics. Her work focuses on her relationship and understanding of soft bodies, specifically her own body, in conversation with femme bodies in classical art. Ward's drawings are often an amalgamation of her face merged with her sister's face, creating her own version of a classical archetype. This exchange between classical art and her lived experience has influenced her recent body of work.

MISTY YARNALL is a creative writing major at SUNY Purchase, with minors in screenwriting and playwriting. She is currently working on a one-act play and is outlining a novella.