



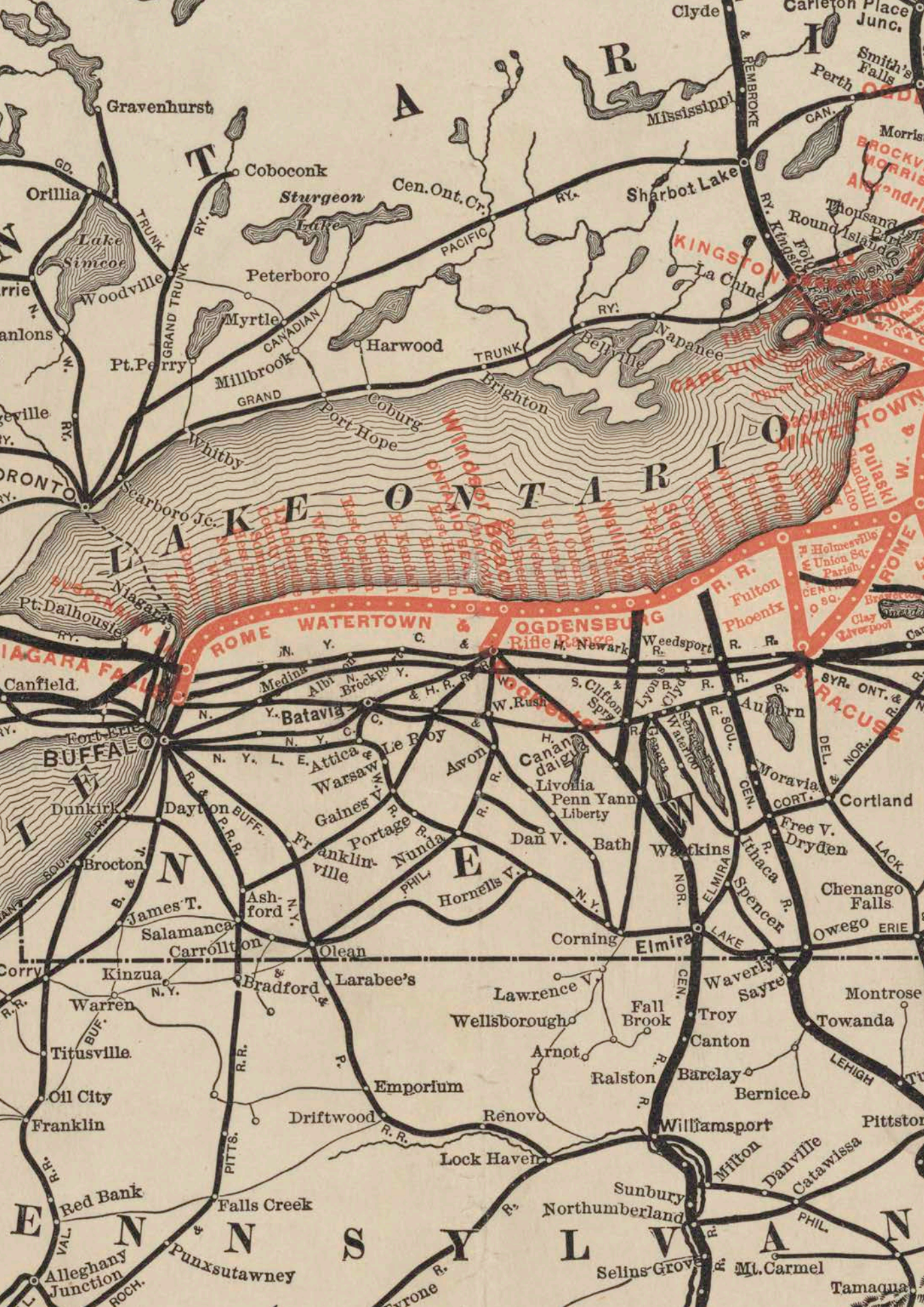
Gandy Dancer

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

Issue 10.1 | Fall 2021

gandy dancer /'ɡan dē ,dɑns ə/ *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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Dear Readers,

In the fall of 2019, the then-managing editors of *Gandy Dancer* welcomed their readers to issue 8.1 while rejoicing that the journal had turned a new leaf. The seasons were changing, the staff prepared to embark on a new academic year of fall and spring editions, and many fresh-faced readers couldn't wait to look over submissions.

There was no way to know it would be the last time, for three semesters, that the journal would be assembled in person. Since then, COVID has changed into a universally-known word; masks became more than an accessory and social distancing, ubiquitous. And yet, *Gandy Dancer* persevered. It weathered hardship and adapted. So, with enthusiasm, we are pleased to be back in person this semester. It's with this return to new normalcy that we are overjoyed to welcome you to *Gandy Dancer's* 18th edition.

None of us have remained the same people we were in fall 2019. To have done so would have been a disservice to ourselves and others. Perhaps, when you join us on this journey, through edition 10.1, you'll find yourself reflecting on such change more than ever. Many of the submissions *Gandy Dancer* was grateful to receive this semester explore that shift from who we were to who we've become.

Good writing is about change. Whether this comes in the form of a character arc, shifting goals, personal growth, language or ideas, change is imperative to not only our lives but good art. Connor Kieh's postscript, "Rookie," invites us to recall our childhood passions after a lifetime of hurt and hiding; Jennifer Mirarcki's poem "Deceivingly Beautiful Trails," calls for us to rediscover the truth behind new changes, while Lassiter Waith's fiction piece, "Salt-Raised Runt," demonstrates the devastation of changing for someone else. The push-and-pull of what once was, and what can never be again, is present all throughout this issue.

In "Tunnel Slides," a creative nonfiction piece by Jenna Barth, the narrator says, "Wait for me!" her older brother calls back. "No, catch up!" This back-and-forth sits right beneath the opening paragraph of Barth's essay, which takes a good hard look at the challenges of growing up, the undying wish for someone who knows what's going on to help you through—and what it feels like when that person isn't there. You must navigate the "tunnel slides" alone.

"Wait for me!" is a demand we have repeated to the world these last few semesters, but as ever, the world only demands that we catch up. In some small way, this edition of *Gandy Dancer* might be a step in the direction to catch-up. We hope 10.1 finds you where it's meant to; in the changing center

of your heart and the intellectual bit of your brain (and maybe your funny bone too, for good measure).

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for reading. May this edition of *Gandy Dancer* provide some guidance in our ever-shifting circumstances.

Your friends,

Amina Diakite and Maria Pawlak

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Cover image: Quit Clownin' by Anthony Mirarcki

Gandy Dancer

Blackberry Girls

The blackberry thickets
are swollen again.
Gather together
and gather our baskets.

We run towards the thickets.

The berries are small and wild.
We gather them, drop them into baskets.
Pop them into mouths.
We chatter about summer things
and laugh at the junebugs mounting
each other on the leaves.

Our little baskets are soon full.
We sit in the grass.
We are silent for a moment.

Then we slowly get up
and move towards the stone garden path.
There, we rub berries between our fingers.
On one of the stones, we each draw a line,
forming a blackberry star.

We gather around the stone.

At the five tips of the berry-stain star,
we set little offerings:

the head of a stray dandelion,
a slice of a halved crab apple,
the shred of a caterpillar-munched leaf,
a piece of shell from a fallen egg,
and the emerald wing of a dead junebug.

This is girlhood in summer.

We begin to braid blades
of grass together,
watching the star, waiting.
Braiding is never idle.
Old magic.

The little woven bundles
of grass are placed,
one by one, into the center of the star.

The offerings to summer
and girlhood swell
with a sweetening power.

Running through us:
Power magic blackberry hand holding twisting gathering.

Eat laughter, swallow its peals,
and smile it back up to
feed the afternoon like it's a baby bird.
Anoint brows with blackberry mess.
Tell stories, singing, dancing.

Blackberry girls are released
to the earth in a torrent
of solstice and thicket.
They remember the ash and dust.

They remember the summer.

Salt-Raised Runt

“Are you dating him?”

The lights in the bathroom were dimmer than they ought to be and May thought it made the smell worse. Beckett said it was because bright places were clean, like hospitals, and he would know because he was the oldest of five with a sixth on the way. May thought it was because there was less to really look at. Nothing to distract you from the smell.

“So, are you dating him?” Hailey asked again, pushing a finger against May’s chest. May turned her face away, looking at the stained-glass window, which cast a murky yellow-green tint over everything. One of the sinks was running. It’d been running for a week, and all the sophomore girls were taking bets on how long it would be until it got fixed.

Hailey’s blonde hair was frizzy and straw-dry, and her lips glimmered with moisture. She sneered and May sneered back. *Uppity*, she thought. *Dumbshit*.

“Who?” she asked.

“Beckett. What’re you, dumb?” Hailey asked loudly, turning slightly to smile at the girls surrounding her. They looked more like bored spectators than companions, leaning lazily against a stall’s pillar and popping gum between their teeth.

“No,” May said. “Why, you wanna fuck him?” One of the girls behind Hailey choked with laughter. Her friend frowned at her and Hailey ignored the commotion. Laughing at cuss words was childish.

“He’s different than the rest of these losers,” Hailey said, moving to sit on the edge of the sink next to May. “He’s always so serious about God or whatever, it’s cute. I wanna see if it’s all talk.”

In middle school, Hailey had started a rumor that Beckett was inbred. He’d had a crush on her even after that. May didn’t understand boys. Girls could do the most horrible things in the world to them and they’d think it

was cute. If someone ever started a rumor about her, she'd punch them in the nose.

"You know it's not. He was a choir boy until his voice broke," May pointed out, letting water from the broken faucet run through her fingers. It was cold, but she forced herself not to flinch.

"I should have known you weren't dating, sorry for going all headbitch on you," Hailey said, leaning into the word *bitch* and casting a glance at her friends, who remained silently unamused. Her voice rose an octave. "It's kinda weird that he's always hanging out with you, but I should've known it wasn't like that because he doesn't seem like the type to go for black girls."

May clenched her jaw. "You don't know shit," she said, scratching at a scab on her elbow. She didn't know why she couldn't punch Hailey in the nose. She never felt angry while it was happening; she just felt small and embarrassed and ugly in a way that humans could never be. The anger came after, when she thought about it in bed or walking home or in the bathtub, fighting to keep her eyes from watering. *You're not weak. If you cry, you're weak. They want you to cry, dumbshit.*

"Je-sus, no offense," Hailey said, pulling a tube of gloss from her pocket and applying it to her still-shining lips. "I just mean you can tell, you know? Black guys date a ton of white girls but white guys don't date black girls unless they're really into that kinda thing or it's like a fairy-tale love love situation."

She paused to look around the room. May's fingers had curled into a fist and she watched the water try to run through the tight circle. There was a loud pop of gum. One of the girls snickered, watching May.

Hailey scoffed. "I'm just *saying*, you don't have to get all mad—"

"Whatever," May said, pushing past the other girls and making her way out the door.

The evening sun fell heavily through the windows of Bell Hood High as May's shoes echoed on the well-waxed linoleum. She liked being in school after hours. It gave her a break from her cramped shotgun house and her family, all loaded into it like bullets. A run-in with Hailey was worth the space.

She walked outside to the gated playground that no one used for anything but lounging or idly pushing themselves on the swings, trying to look like they weren't having fun. Beckett was sitting on one, twirling himself in a lazy circle with his heels dug into the tar floor. He had a serious expression, as always, face turning red in the sun. May pointed it out when she reached him and he scowled.

"Why do we have to wait outside? It's cooler indoors," he complained, handing her a mini bag of pretzels he'd gotten from the lunch lady earlier. She always gave him extra snacks. May thought it was because he looked greyhoundthin and Beckett thought it was because his family was poor, which he resented.

"My father doesn't believe in handouts," he'd say, looking very noble as he said it.

"Cause they'd ask us what activity we were a part of and you can't lie for shit," May said, sitting on the swing next to him and lifting her legs up so she was balancing on the seat.

"I can, just not to grown-ups!" Beckett insisted, trying to kick her legs before realizing that she'd folded them up. She grinned at him and he flipped her the bird.

"Don't say grown-ups, it makes you sound like a baby," May said.

"Don't tell me what to say," Beckett said, voice softened by the heat. May was glad for the cloth of her dress; whenever she leaned too far to one side, the swing's chain touched bare skin and burned her.

"Hailey jumped me in the bathroom today," May said, tossing a pretzel at Beckett's head. It bounced off his nose and fell to the ground, where he crushed it under his heel. They both watched this process with idle interest.

"Hailey Whitfield? Why?"

"She wants to pop your cherry," May said, hoping the crassness of the statement might fluster him.

Beckett shook his head. "That's a girl thing," he asserted.

"What is?" May asked, screwing up her face. She was starting to sweat already and Beckett's thin black hair was sticking to his forehead.

"...Cherries," he said, chewing over the word. "They taught us in Sunday school. You can tell if a girl's done it because it's all red inside instead of pink or white."

He paused, eyes widening as he caught up to what May had told him. "Hailey wants to do it?" he asked, face becoming even redder. May shrugged.

Beckett frowned. "Well, did she say she wanted to or not?"

May shrugged again. "I'll tell you if you twist me up."

Beckett hesitated for a long moment before standing up and spinning May around by the chains of her swing until she couldn't do a full turn. Then he let go, jumping back as her limbs flew out and around and she screamed with the joy of it all.

"Now who's the baby?" he asked, going back to his swing and waiting for her to slow down. When she was still and relishing in her dizziness, he asked about Hailey and the bathroom again.

"She said you weren't like the other guys in our grade and she wanted to know if you were actually a virgin or not," May said, sliding off the swing and sitting on the ground instead. It was even hotter there, but she needed the world to stop spinning.

"What did you say?" Beckett asked nervously, tracing the cross hidden under his shirt like an auntie who'd just heard bad news.

"I said you were the biggest virgin in the world and that you've had a crush on her since she was born. I said you'd probably jerk it to a lock of her ratty-ass hair if she gave you one," May loudly proclaimed. Beckett kicked her side and she shrieked, rolling away.

"That's *not* funny, May," he hissed.

"*Whatever*, I was *joking!*" she shouted.

They glared at one another until a bird cried overhead. Then Beckett began to turn himself in circles again and May got back on her swing, using it to climb onto the swingset itself. Beckett watched her and then looked away.

"You shouldn't climb in a dress," he said.

"Why? It's only you here," she said, then kicked his chain. He didn't respond except to start slowly swaying back and forth as a companionable silence fell over them.

May thought about Beckett. They'd been friends since she could remember: the Jesus freak and the only Black kid that didn't huddle with her own kind. Why was he suddenly cute and not her? Her anger at Hailey welled up and she felt her eyes begin to sting, but she looked up at the sun until she imagined them all drying up.

Beckett had one Black half brother, Louis, who'd avoided her for months until one day she cornered him in his room and asked what his problem with her was.

"I don't want to be seen hanging out with you."

"Why?"

"Because you're Black."

"You're Black too!" she'd pointed out.

He'd scoffed. "Yeah, but I'm not Black-Black."

May thought about how she was Black-Black as she jumped off the swing set and rolled all the way to the fence that sectioned off the area from the rest of the playground. Beckett yelped and rushed to her, thinking she'd fallen, but when he reached her she popped up and stared at him with such intensity that it rendered him breathless for a moment.

"Do you wanna go out?" she asked in his silence. Beckett stared back at her. She was sweating and the scab on her elbow had started to bleed again because of the fall. He didn't seem to know what to say, so he focused on the spot of red slowly trailing down her arm.

"Sure," he said. Then, "Yes."

May nodded, standing as Beckett walked over to her swing and picked up the pretzels that she'd left on the ground, handing them to her again.

"Salt helps clot blood," he said, not knowing if it did. May took the bag, shoving pretzel after pretzel in her mouth until the entire bag was finished.

"If Hailey asks you to go somewhere with her, you're going to say no, right?" she asked, crumpling the bag and letting the jagged edges press into the skin of her palm.

Beckett sniffed, rolling his eyes. "Of course I'm going to say no."

"When you say no, tell her why, ok? Tell her I'm your girlfriend," May insisted. Her throat was dry, but she felt like she was buzzing, the heat suddenly energizing her. "Tell her *I'm* your girlfriend."

It was early afternoon, a time of peak activity at the Reid house. The television was on, though no one was really watching it, and May's little brother was running up and down the hall, screaming with joy as their dog nipped at his heels. May's mother's secondhand radio was playing a Little Richard song as her grandmother, used to the noise, napped in an old rocking chair.

"Mama, I'm going to be late!" May whined, trying to wriggle away from her mother and her hair straightener. Her mother pulled her back between her legs.

"It's your first date, you need to look good!" her mother scolded before grinning again. "Oh, your first date! My baby..." she cooed, kissing her cheek. May groaned theatrically. Her grandmother snored.

It wasn't *really* her and Beckett's first date. Their first date had been going to the candy store after school and their second had been going to a diner over the weekend where Beckett insisted on paying even though May knew he couldn't afford much. She'd had fries and he'd watched her eat. Both outings had been deathly silent except for the occasional bland compliment: *I like your dress. Is that a new shirt?* May was beginning to worry that Hailey had been right, that Beckett didn't go for Black girls and she was just forcing him. Whenever she tried to be sweet to him he got a pained look on his face and when he noticed her noticing he'd try to smile and it'd look weird on him.

May saw how other boys acted around their girlfriends: like animalfreaks, trying to impress them. They puffed up and strutted around like birds in mating season, but Beckett stood stiffly with his arms crossed or close to his sides, looking at anything that wasn't her.

They'd come across Hailey during one of their unofficial dates. They'd been sitting on the jungle gym watching pieces of crumpled paper and empty plastic bags blow across the blacktop when Hailey had climbed up the fence and began shouting.

"Wow, I can feel the romance in the air!" she'd jeered, her full face flushed pink.

"Shut it, Hailey!" May shouted back, standing on one of the yellow rungs. Beckett was turned away from both girls and May imagined this lent him a

degree of deniability. Like in gangster movies when everyone closed their eyes so they could claim they “didn’t see nothin’.”

“What? I didn’t even say anything, you’re such a hot head!” Hailey said, balancing on top of the fence. May had told herself that if Hailey set foot inside the playground, she’d maul her. She ran her finger along the Band-Aid on her elbow, forgetting there was no scab to pick at.

“Maybe if you acted a little more civilized, Beckett could stand to look at you. Hi, Beckett!” Hailey shouted, voice turning sweet at the end. Beckett’s spine straightened but he didn’t turn. May looked at his back and wished that he’d at least glance back towards her. *He just doesn’t wanna look at Hailey*, she told herself, leaping from the jungle gym and tearing towards the fence where Hailey was screaming and scrambling down. *It’s got nothing to do with me.*

“Who even uses the word *civilized* outside history class?” May had asked when she got back, grabbing the rungs and letting her body swing. She thought of herself hanging from a tree and Beckett below her, refusing to look up because she was wearing a dress. She snickered at the thought and opened her mouth to tell Beckett before closing it again and swallowing. The back of her throat felt dry, raw.

If she told Beckett, he might sputter and get angry, and then she’d laugh at him and they’d get into an argument that would last for half an hour, the topic changing from one minute to the next. They hadn’t done that since they’d started going out, and she missed it, but Hailey’s words haunted her, poking at something she already knew. She was lucky Beckett was even going out with her. Her with her dark skin and mean laugh and boyish tangled hair that only grew up and out instead of down toward her shoulders. Being with Beckett felt like a prize she was trying desperately not to bring attention to in case someone noticed and took it away.

So she’d just silently swung her body back and forth until Beckett suggested they go home to escape the heat.

Now they were making their first real appearance—not just holding hands at school or milling around town. They were going to a party that one of the lesser football players was having. Hailey had invited Beckett and Beckett had invited her.

May pressed her tongue against her sharpest tooth, feeling the pinprick of pain. The second she’d gotten home she’d asked her mom to do her hair for the party. She couldn’t wait to rub Hailey’s face in it.

“There,” her mother sighed happily, tucking May’s hair behind her ears. May looked at herself in the mirror. She looked weird. Older, maybe. She hadn’t known her hair was so long.

“Thanks, Mama,” she said, kissing her mother’s cheek and whining when she wrapped her in a bear hug, rocking back and forth.

"He's going to think you're the prettiest girl at that party," she hummed. May smiled into the mirror at the girl who looked like her. She seemed nervous. She didn't look pretty. She tried to imagine Beckett caring about her hair and couldn't.

By the time she reached the party her hair had gone frizzy in the heat. When she rang the doorbell, an older girl with thick glasses answered.

"Are y'here for Vinny?" she asked.

"Who's Vinny?" May asked. The girl rolled her eyes as if this were an inside joke between them before showing her to the living room and vanishing upstairs.

May looked around. Vinny's house was all wood paneling and mirrors, which made the place feel claustrophobic. There was a table full of snacks in the middle of the room, but no drinks, and somewhere a radio was playing a pop song she didn't know the words to. No one paid any attention to her entrance and she felt stupid for thinking they might. She spotted Beckett in the corner, thumbing the leaf of a potted plant. She walked over to him, instantly stiffening. He did as well, standing suddenly at attention.

"Hi."

"Hello."

"...Do you want—"

"You're—"

"Oh, sorry."

"No, I just—"

"Sorry."

"It's okay."

They both quieted, basking in their fantastic failure. After a second, May turned to look at him again, forcing a smile.

"You notice anything different about me?" she asked.

Beckett continued playing with the leaf, which he'd pulled from the plant. "...Your hair's weird."

"Weird how?" she asked, voice smaller than she wanted it to be. She coughed.

"I don't know. It looks like Hailey's," he pointed out. May stared at him but he wouldn't meet her eye. She dug her knuckles into her hip bone instead of his.

"I'm going to get some drinks," she said, walking towards the kitchen. She liked how mature the words sounded. Beckett didn't respond except for a hum which might have been the air conditioning.

May stood in the kitchen and tried to look like she wasn't about to cry. *Don't be a baby*, she thought, finding a half-full jug of punch and pouring two cups. There was a glass of milk in the fridge, chocolate syrup pooling at the bottom. Who drank milk? She was breathing weird. She looked weird. A few

girls glanced at her and moved away. She clenched her jaw. *You're not going to cry, they want you to cry. Don't cry—why do you even care? Idiot. Fucking moron.* Calling herself a fucking moron made her want to cry harder but it also felt good. Like pressing on a bruise. She wanted to call Beckett a fucking moron too, but she didn't want him to break up with her for being a bad girlfriend.

She was not going to cry. She was going to be a good girlfriend. The best one. A milk and sugar girl who only said sweet things, nothing sharp or lacking in her.

Putting a smile back on her face, she made her way back over to Beckett in the corner, freezing when she saw he was already talking to someone.

"You're really funny, you know that?" Hailey laughed.

Beckett stared at her without blinking. "I wasn't being funny."

"Yeah, I know. You're really smart, I was just joking!" Hailey laughed harder, pushing Beckett's arm. Beckett smiled slightly, the way he did when he didn't know what was going on but wanted to look like he did. Hailey's friends laughed—it was unclear at whom.

"Hey, Hailey, back off," May said, getting in her face. Hailey was wearing lipstick instead of lip gloss and May fought the urge to lick her own to make sure they weren't chapped and gross.

"Je-sus, chill out," Hailey said slowly, rolling her eyes and moving closer to Beckett so that their shoulders were touching. Beckett looked between the two and began to tap his fingers against the wall. "Beckett, are you seriously dating her? Like, for real?"

"Yes," Beckett said softly, drawing the word out as if he was unfamiliar with it.

"He said yeah, so beat it," May growled, then tried to calm herself. Hailey's eyes were wild with joy and May wondered if she was drunk.

"He's probably only going out with you because you forced him or something, right?" Hailey said, giggling. She was moving away from Beckett and towards May at a leisurely pace. May took a step back, telling herself she'd throw one of the cups of punch if Hailey tried anything.

"Just because you can only get a guy to go out with you at gunpoint doesn't mean everyone—" May started but Hailey cut her off, voice growing louder. People around them started to turn.

"You're such a bitch, May. You don't even like him. You're just afraid he'll leave your ass when he finds out other girls can do more than just play hide-and-seek or whatever it is you do all day!" Hailey said, so loud that the party went nearly silent, everyone eager to watch a fight.

May stood in front of Hailey and stared. She was drunk and red-faced, frizzy hair bumped up into a sloppy bouffant. Her lipstick was smeared against her teeth and as she spoke, spittle flew from her mouth onto May's cheek. May realized with a start that she would never be as pretty as her, that

Hailey would always win no matter what. Because Hailey had been raised being loved by the whole world, a thoroughbred who'd never seen her own blood, never watched it run and clot and scab. Hailey would always win because Hailey would never be Black.

Embarrassment quickly doused May's anger and she bit her lip, her chest beginning to heave. Hailey noticed it, grinning. The pink smeared along three of her top teeth, making her look carnivorous.

"Why don't you go back to hanging out in bathroom stalls? Maybe you'll find a guy there willing to—" But she didn't get to finish before Beckett's hand shot out and slapped her across the face.

The sharp sound of the impact made the following silence heavy. A few people shrieked and others sucked in breath through their teeth. No one had ever seen a boy hit a girl before.

Hailey's eyes widened and May felt hers open too as she looked down at her own hand, still holding a cup of punch, and wondered if she'd done it. She felt the sting in her own palm. Or was that the cold?

Hailey opened her mouth and closed it again. No one moved. After a second, Beckett startled and curled the offending hand back towards his chest, cradling it.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice shaking. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—I didn't—I'm—" And then he was gone, racing towards the door, and May threw their drinks in the air and followed him, a commotion kicking up behind her.

They ran through the hall to the foyer and out the door as a wail finally pierced the abandoned scene. They kept running. They ran down the sidewalk of the neighborhood neither of them lived in and the dirt road it gave way to, through the river that separated the rich side of town from the poor side, through the trees that they'd played in all through elementary school, and past the church where their families were praying, the ringing bells signalling the start of service. They ran into the wide expanse of fields and fields and fields where finally Beckett collapsed and May tripped over him, both of them gasping for air like they were drowning.

May stared at the sky. It was an endless expanse of solid blue. No clouds to shield them from the heavy-hot sun. The grass around them pricked her skin but her body felt too solid to move. Her eyelids sagged and closed as her breath began to steady.

"I can't believe you hit Hailey Whitfield," she murmured. Beckett was lying underneath her and their legs tangled together uncomfortably, but neither of them attempted to move. He didn't answer, starting to cry instead.

May felt a familiar anger well up inside her again. Beckett in tears suddenly felt like the most unfair, horrible thing she'd ever seen. Like when her dog had had babies and the runt puppy tried blindly to reach its mother's milk for days before dying. Because hadn't Beckett been a sweet-milk baby too? Why

was she the only one who had to be tough? Why was she the only one who had to swallow salt? Who had to find some way to live on it?

"Shut up," she said, feeling something splinter. She was being a bad girlfriend. Beckett was going to break up with her. She was going to lose. But the anger in her chest was like a balloon, pressing against her ribcage, squishing her organs. It needed release. She repeated it, sitting up. "Shut up."

"I hit her, I hit her..." Beckett gasped.

"Stop crying! Why're you crying?" she shouted, eyes wide.

Beckett ignored her. "My dad's going to be so angry—I've never done anything this bad! I'm going to Hell, I'm going to Hell, I'm going to Hell—" Beckett groaned miserably as May climbed on top of him so she could see his face. She raised her hand to slap him but slammed her fists into his chest instead, then his shoulders, then his hands as he raised them to push her, and then they were wrestling in the grass—both shouting and screaming at each other to stop, and then Beckett was straddling May and they both realized she was crying.

"Why can't I ever do it right?" she wailed, tears running hot down her cheeks and voice warbling as snot ran down her upper lip. As she spoke she tasted it on her tongue. "Why'd I have t'be born so ugly? Why'm I so mad all the time? I don't wanna be so mad, I wanna be funny and pretty and—and—but you—I don' even know why I asked you t'go out with me. 'M sorry, I don't think I like you the way Hailey does."

Beckett was silent as May cried. She felt the ugliest she'd ever been. Coughing and choking and weak. Her mouth was dry except for her natural salt. Her eyes hurt.

"Then why did you ask me?" Beckett's voice was soft.

"Because I wanted you to say yes," she admitted. "I don't know, I wanted to win."

Beckett was silent for a moment before getting off May and pulling her up so she was sitting. He hugged her against his chest and placed a hand on the back of her head. He didn't say a word, just held her to him until her body stopped shaking and she began to wipe her face with the skirt of her dress.

"I don't like you the way Hailey likes me either," Beckett said and May's heart sank even as her shoulders relaxed in relief.

"Then why'd you say yes?" she asked, voice fried from crying.

Beckett shrugged. "I didn't want you to be sad."

May punched him in the shoulder. "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."

"You're the dumbest thing I ever heard," Beckett said, pushing her back into the grass. May laid there, motionless. "...I think you're plenty prettier than Hailey," he said, frightened by her stillness.

"You're just saying that so I don't feel sad," May accused.

"You're already sad," he pointed out. "You look weird with your hair straight. You..." He took a breath, playing with a blade of grass. "I don't eat the pretzels the lunch lady gives me 'cause when I give them to you your eyes light up like it's the best thing you ever got and it feels...like I got something too?" He looked over at May, who was looking at him now, and felt himself blush. "I like you a whole lot, May, but I don't know. I don't know why, but I can't say it when we're dating or whatever. But if we're friends, I could tell you every day if you wanted. If it would make you happy, I mean."

Beckett grunted as May's leg flew up and connected weakly to his side before sliding down into his lap. He unbuckled her Mary Jane. Minutes passed quietly with only the soft sound of grass sliding against itself and the calling of far off birds to keep them from silence.

"May?" Beckett asked softly, having placed her shoe next to him. "Are we still friends?"

May snickered, sitting up in one wild motion, which startled Beckett into shooting his arm out defensively. "Of course we're still friends." Her skin looked like it gleamed with the sun. "You were all sappy just now...and you slapped Hailey for me!"

Beckett groaned at the reminder, covering his face. "I'm going to Hell," he repeated resolutely. May laughed in the sharp way she did and pulled his hands away from his face to grin at him.

"If you're going to Hell, I'll go with you," she said, holding out her pinkie.

Beckett looked at May and couldn't imagine losing her. Couldn't imagine running someplace without her on his heels, grabbing at his shirt and cackling. A thought passed unacknowledged through his mind: If May's not in Heaven, is it Heaven? He hooked his finger around hers.

The walk to Beckett's house was leisurely. May held her shoes loosely in one hand as Beckett walked beside her and sang, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the lord," having to stop for air after every other sentence. May closed her eyes, lazily harmonizing with his cries of glory, glory, hallelujah.

Beckett opened the front door and May led him upstairs to his room, stepping over discarded toys and book bags and pieces of paper that'd been abandoned in the halls and stairwell. His room was cramped. He shared it with his brothers; three singular iron-frame beds were arranged in an open square by the window and the space between all of them was littered with clothing, bent books, and candy wrappers.

May climbed onto Beckett's bed, the one right against the wide bay window, and lay down. Beckett nudged her so that she was half on the sill and she looked down at the dead grass that surrounded the house, trying to imagine waking up to it every day.

"I've never heard the house so quiet," Beckett said, kicking off his shoes and lying down beside her. They used to nap together often before Beckett's father caught them once. Beckett had stopped wanting to after that, but there was no one around now; his family stayed at church until sundown and they'd be up well before then.

"Everyone's going to hate you on Monday," May said, yawning.

"I don't care," Beckett said, voice already dropping off with sleep.

"You should. Hailey's going to get her goons to come after you," she teased, smiling at the ceiling. Beckett's head was on her shoulder and she could feel how smooth his hair was. She missed her old hair. She wondered if Hailey had cried like she had and her smile stretched into a grin.

"I don't care," Beckett repeated. The lazy argument continued, May dreaming up methods of torture that he might be put through and Beckett reaffirming his lack of concern. It was as familiar and warm as the sun. They were both lulled by it and by the time May asked why he didn't care they were both more than half asleep, the room coated in a spectacular yellow that made it seem unreal.

"I don't care who hates me as long as you don't," he said, more sound than words, as he fell asleep on May's shoulder.

Their bodies were safely tangled together, melting with the heat on top of unmade bed sheets, and May felt her chest swell with a joy she hadn't known before. As she lay in bed with Beckett, both of them bonetired and soaked in sunlight, she felt as if they had always been and would always be together. That they would never stop choosing each other.

A hot tear rolled down her cheek as she curled herself towards his sleeping body, her own shaking with silent laughter.

They can't take this away she thought, and then fell asleep, skin aglow with sunlight and soft. The kind of soft that came with care, with milk-laden love.

A Party

You're not a party guy. You never have been. It's probably because no one has ever invited you to one. You're probably alone too much. But here you are. You're starting college and trying to change that. You have a fresh start and no one knows how terrible you are yet. You can be whoever you want. You can adopt any facade you think people will like. You have a chance to make a connection with others. But you're scared you're going to fuck it up.

You're outside. The campus dorms and buildings light up the night. Some people you met at freshman orientation walk with you to a party they heard about. You walk with them to pretend you have friends for a second. You carry the beers you bought in an attempt to feel different from how you usually feel.

You arrive at the party house. The outside is completely dark and you question if it's the right house. You hesitantly walk up to the porch and peer along the edge of a closed curtain. You see multi-colored lights and a crowd of people, which confirm you're in the right place. But you're nervous. Part of you knows you shouldn't be there. Your parents definitely wouldn't want you to be there. But what do they know? They just raised you, fed you, and supported your decision to attend an expensive college for a degree you don't care about. Screw them. You walk into the house.

It's filled with seizure-inducing strobe lights and overbearing music. The people there are wearing flannels and crop tops. The air feels cramped. There's a living room and kitchen littered with red Solo cups. The new sights and sounds fill you with anxiety. All the surfaces inside the house are sticky with beer.

The people who you came with immediately scatter and leave you. You stroll around awkwardly trying to gain the courage to talk to someone. But

you can't. You sit on the couch and contemplate why you don't have the balls to talk to people.

You crack open the beers you brought. You drink them all as quickly as you can because you hate the taste of them. One beer, two, three, four; you drink them to distract yourself from how uncomfortable you feel. After a while, you feel a lot better. The lights and music no longer seem that bad, and there's a pleasant warmth in your body. The insecurities you were feeling shrink; you feel numb to what's happening around you.

You start to feel more confident in yourself. Taking your new liquid courage, you decide to wander around the party and see what others are doing. You walk up to a group of guys talking and laughing in a semicircle. One of the guys is talking in detail about a girl he slept with the weekend before. He talks about how he performed oral on her. You look at the guy and ask why he's not worried about catching STDs from that. In response, he says, "Well, you can't get an STD from oral unless they cum." You laugh because you think he's joking. He looks at you confused and you realize he's not joking.

You hear some commotion upstairs, and it makes you curious. After journeying up the steps, you see ten people standing in a white, glowing bathroom. Everyone looks excited as they stare at two guys with their heads down by the sink. You stroll closer and see a line of white powder in front of each faucet. You immediately realize that the powder is cocaine. You've only seen cocaine in movies. You saw people snort sugar or crushed up Smarties as a joke back in high school, but now you're seeing the real thing. You're immobilized by curiosity as you see each line of white powder vanish up a nasal cavity. The bathroom crowd cheers like they've just seen an Olympic record being made.

You descend back downstairs. The room seems to spin a bit and you feel more numb than you did before. You sit back down on the couch in an attempt to make the spinning stop. After a few minutes, a girl sits a couple feet away from you and looks at her phone. She's cute. You consider talking to her for a moment. You've never been good at talking to girls, but your artificial confidence is there egging you on. Like ripping off a Band-Aid, you turn to the girl and casually say, "Hi." She looks up from her phone and smiles. "Hi," she says.

You ask her how she is enjoying the party, and she tells you that she's a little bored. You exchange basic information with each other like hometowns and majors. You ask about the things she likes and it turns out she likes the same kind of music as you. She scoots closer to hear you better over the sounds of the party. You get a better look at the green hue of her eyes. She smells like lavender.

The two of you talk for a while, and you make her laugh a few times. You've never been an open person, but the alcohol frees up your tongue.

There's an awkward moment where the conversation dies, and you don't know what to say next. Her face gets a couple inches closer to you and then retreats. *Did she almost kiss you?*

You become nervous again and weigh your options. You don't want to seem like a creep, so you decide not to kiss her. The conversation starts to feel way more forced than it did before. You grasp at straws to regain her interest in you, but you have nothing. Some friends of hers come over and ask her if she's ready to leave with them. She tells you she has to go and waves goodbye. *Did she actually have to go or was she just trying to get away from you?* Either way, you don't blame her.

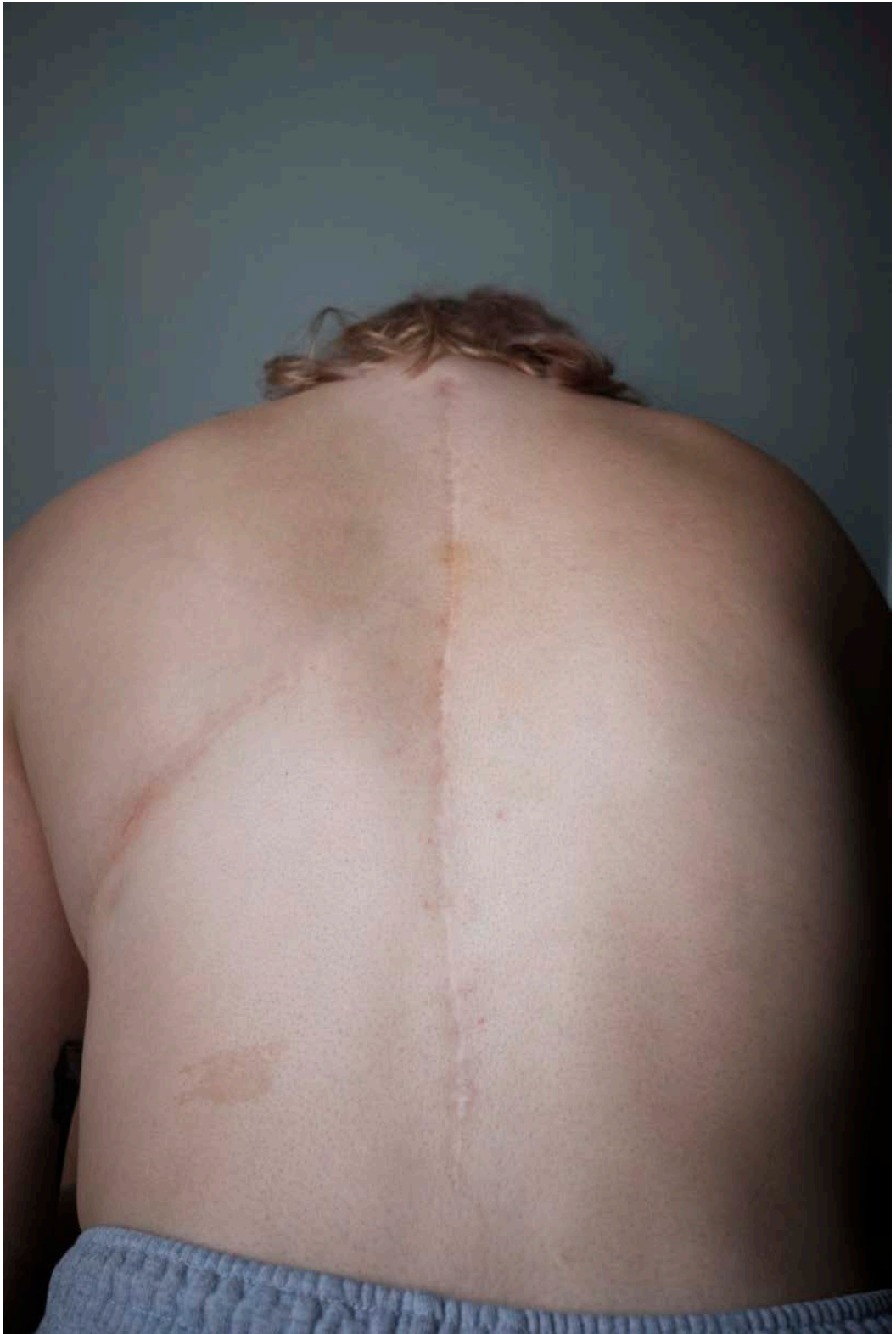
Now you're alone again. But you're used to that. Eventually, the party winds down and you leave. You had some fun, and it was definitely more exciting than sitting in your dorm room alone, so you go to a different party the next weekend. You repeat this cycle over and over again.

Later, you see the girl you talked to at that first party walking across campus. You're happy to see her so you wave and smile. She sees you but doesn't wave back. She looks down and keeps walking. *What did you do?*

You keep going to parties to feel something, but the excitement quickly leaves you. Months pass and you're sitting on a couch staring at all the other people at the party. You think, *No one cares if I'm here or not. Why do I bother?* Then you get up and leave. You stop showing up to parties altogether because you don't really see a point in them. Some people say life is a party. To you, it certainly feels like one sometimes. And sometimes, you wonder if you want to keep showing up to it.



Sun Bleached Vines (photography), Max D'Amico



Scoliosis (photography), Max D'Amico

MIA DONALDSON

Smoke Signal

Midnight: the constant
anniversary of your
nails in my
forehead, my knees
skinned in the
mosh pit by
the blade of
another body,
the hotel shower
is occupied and
the wet sheets
can't stand my
touch; I've been
thinking about sonic
confession, about the
halved moon coming
out lavender and
you somewhere in
Ohio, keying cars
and losing voices.
When I return
to campus, daisies
are growing from
your bong in
my window, a
sight I deemed
an omen when

you pulled the
King of Wands
and my hair,
and the greens
and browns burst
then bloom; bruise
became my first
name the moment
you spoke it.

MIA DONALDSON

the sacrificial lamb attempts assimilation

after Charles Bukowski

too soft
too smart
too much
to worship

in the shattered hands
for whom i repent
laughter, or fear.

(then)

strangers with broken
noses followed me
through your field;
i found virginity,
a gleaming tin can.

(now)

your footsteps bark behind mine:
cheap and wiry, sloppy and devious;

i've learned that loneliness is born
inside murderous guts and dead mothers.

i remain, afraid,
suspended,
molded.

(today)

men are not good to women.
men are not good to women.
men are not good to women.

DANIELLE HENRY

The Red Miata

For Spencer Reece

When I open the door he is standing on his desk chair.
He is only sixteen and on the verge of suicide.

His hands are eerily still.
They hold a coarse rope that is frayed at the ends.

His eyes are black holes,
the pupils, void of light.

When he finally acknowledges my arrival,
it's with disappointment.

He unties the rope and winds it in circles,
putting it away in his nightstand

as if it were never there.
The seconds pass: slowly, and slower still

Outside his window—
the red Miata,
its shiny exterior glinting in the sun, catches my eye.

Tunnel Slide

Deep breath. One foot in front of the other. I stepped into the McDonald's PlayPlace behind my older brother Devin. Before I knew it, he had already taken off his shoes and put them in the cubby. I desperately unvelcroed my light-up Disney Princess sneakers and threw them off, teetering after him. At eight years old, Devin's legs were way longer than mine, and he was a lot stronger and faster, too.

"Wait for me!" I cried, crawling into the play tunnel.

"No, catch up!" Devin's voice echoed back to me.

Smoke danced around my head in my friend's basement one weekend during my sophomore year in high school. She was already high and she passed me her wax pen after taking two hits. Pulling the smoke into my lungs once, twice, three times, I thought that nothing was working. Everyone else was high except me. After the seventh or eighth hit, my body went chillingly numb. The sounds of my friends' voices became distant and muffled. All I could hear was the beating of my heart getting louder and louder. I felt the blood drain all the color out of my face, leaving me like a white sheet of paper—a ghost. I couldn't feel my limbs and I couldn't move. I was panicking.

My tiny six-year-old hands reached before me, climbing up the yellow tunnel. My heart raced with anxiety. *What happens if Devin gets too far away and I get lost in here? What if I get stuck in here forever?* Suddenly, when I looked up ahead of me, all I saw was the tail end of Devin, his feet disappearing into another tunnel. I sped up, gripping each step up the yellow tunnel as tightly as I could to propel myself further, faster. I yelled for my brother but he was gone. I turned left, down the green tunnel, bumping my knees against

the bottom. Dead end. I turned around, going faster, tripping over my own hands and knees.

"Gotcha!" he yelled with a laugh, popping out behind a corner.

I screamed, fearing for my life. Tears ran down my cheeks.

"I wasn't gonna leave you. Don't be such a baby." Devin guided me further into the labyrinth of the McDonald's PlayPlace tunnels until we reached the top of the slide—the way to freedom. He picked me up and put me in front of him, hugging me from behind. We pushed off and down we went, out of the darkness and into the light waiting for us at the bottom.

Deep breath. One foot in front of the other. I try to get up out of my chair. I don't like this feeling. I was stuck in a thought loop, and I couldn't get out of it. *You're dying. You're having a heart attack. Do you feel how fast your heart is beating? It's going to explode inside your chest and there's nothing you can do about it. This is it; this is the end.* I couldn't tell what was racing faster—my heartbeat or my thoughts. *Deep breath. One foot in front of the other.* My panic gave me tunnel vision, darkness hugging my eyes. I took the stairs up one at a time, slowly, until I finally reached the top, leaving the basement. I needed to leave; I wanted to go home.

"I'm sorry my parents are making everyone leave so early. It's just because we have to wake up early. You sure you can find a ride, Jenna?"

"Yeah, don't worry." I forced the words out of my mouth, stumbling slowly, delayed. I walked out of my friend's house into the rain. I dug my phone out of my pocket and dialed Devin's number.

"Devin? It's me." I choked on emotion, trying to hold back my tears. "I need you to come pick me up."

There were voices in the background, telling me that he was definitely with his friends. "I don't know, Jenna, you can't just ask someone else?"

"Please, I'm bugging out. I need to get home."

"No," he said and hung up.

I sat on the curb just outside my friend's house, looking up towards the night sky, letting my face get wet with the mixture of rain and tears, waiting for Devin to pop out from behind a corner, waiting for him to remind me that he wasn't going to leave me—waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel slide that never came.

I Was Never Actually That Hungry

You enter my bedroom
to find that every surface
is covered

in bite marks, indents from where
my teeth had scraped away
at the impenetrable objects.

The mattress was half eaten,
metal springs and cotton
marshmallow fluff pouring out

like blood and guts on the floor. The desk
was all odd angles: only one
corner remained intact. Looking

around, you take notice of the
marks growing on the closet,
the chair, the curtains, the

pillows and throw blanket, the light
switches and door knobs, all showing
signs of my teeth's touch. The

pens were sucked dry of their
ink, you marveled at how the
shards of the broken mirror

sat on the floor, glittering blueberries
that escaped the carnage,
bitemark free. You

asked me why
I seemed so hungry, and I
could only shrug in reply,

mouth still chewing
yesterday's dinner, the wet
paper of my homework.

Dirty Umbrella in The Shade

Intervening on a
dry spring mood,
she was there.

—

Under sheets, under
pliable temperatures
She was there.

—

Heftier, the tangible
things became
when the ice in her
glasses kissed.

—

An embryonic tilt
to her shade, she
was often there, but never here.

—

When he left
she was gone
in the summer air, like
steam, like smoke.

—

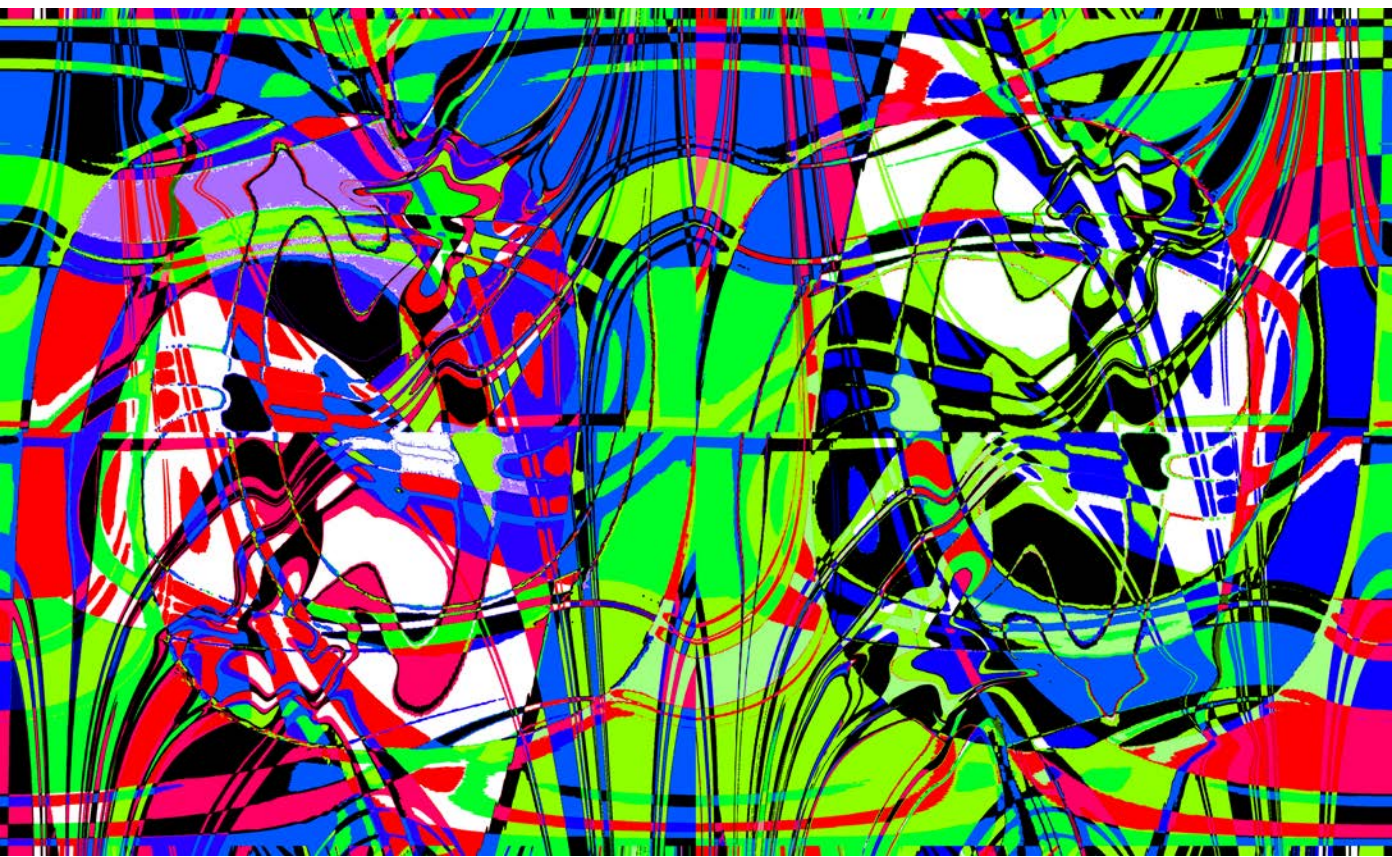
The art of taking,
the passion of what is
when she was never there.

Jones Beach 2021

At the boardwalk during the wrong
time of year, handling tea that
went long before you had parked
and watched the teenagers, in
their down-feather jackets, bounce
on the wood planks, walk backward
laugh. Maybe it scared you
to see them the same way
it did me, and when the
wind bit into your cheeks
slid between the gaps of your
fist and knuckles, turning some
flesh indigo, you'll
own the sand, own the
oil tankers and cargo ships
skirting off the horizon.



Quandary (digital art), Edward Supranowicz



Dissonance (digital art), Edward Supranowicz

When the Mailman Is Late

Cracks are really just spiders in disguise. They fool everyone except for me, because I see things for what they are. How raindrops are intruders and feelings are illusions, but people learn to love both because they think they have to. I'm not one of those people. Someone has to see the absolute truth in everything.

It's my gift, my curse, that aching itch in the back of my throat just past my ear that I can never scratch, just swallow again and again and again until it's smoothed over for the moment. My dad always tries to get me to take the drugs the doctor with the fuzzy hair gave me, but little orange bottles are tyranny and pills are just excuses, so we live in peace in a broken little home where the grass is too long and the old cassette tapes move themselves in the night.

I take breakfast at 5:00 a.m. Square bread with discarded crusts, toasted with no butter. If it's late then there's no telling what could happen. Maybe the decaying shingles will fall from the roof one by one, maybe they'll shatter the windows or hit a pipe, maybe the bathroom will flood or a bedroom, maybe no one will help us, maybe we just won't wake up one day. The coffee has to be black because what if the milk corrupts the proportions? What if I think I'm drinking caffeine, but really it's just mostly milk and I've been lying to myself? I would never lie to myself. It would be wrong and might cause my organs to fail or my father's. Or maybe the tree leaning towards the house might decide to fall. No, lying would offset the carefully constructed balance that keeps everything in its place. Lying would cause my whole life to crumble.

I wash the table five times before I eat there. I like the number five; it sounds good rolling off my tongue. It sounds right, like if the rag wipes over the wood five times then the neighbor's cat won't climb too high in the tree and worms won't wiggle their way into my bed. I used to like the sound of four and before that three. It was even one once, but five is better, five almost feels good, but maybe six might be the best.

The plate has to be twisted at a forty-five degree angle and the coffee cup at ninety degrees; as long as it's that way, there won't be an earthquake. My feet are firmly on the floor when I take my first bite, so that the car doesn't break down. I would eat with my father, but he always gets it wrong. Can't he feel when he's teetering over a line that can't be uncrossed? After all, failing is always purposeful because success always feels like luck. I don't like it when he tries to talk to me. Talking doesn't create change; it just makes you feel bad for not changing. He doesn't understand, but I wish he would, because how can you not break something when you don't understand it?

He takes breakfast in his room. I can't go near his room. Things are always moving: books on the desk end up on the floor, sheets are never straight, and the door always seems locked, but if you don't check it once, twice, six times, can you really be sure? He works from home on a little laptop, hunched over all day. I check on him seven times to make sure he's still there. If he runs, his mess, litter, and pollution will drag me with him, and our house will crumble. There will be nothing to come back to.

"Dad." I stand with my back to the wall outside his door looking directly at the opposite wall without blinking. The toe of my right foot is pointed east and my left foot is pointed north. The three second delay we agreed on ensues.

"Yes?" he replies, his voice annoyingly hoarse. He should clear his throat or else maybe the little particles will continue to grow until he can't breathe.

"Clear your throat," I tell him, though he should know what could happen.

He clears his throat.

"Again," I tell him.

He does it again. "What do you need?"

"The mailman is late," I say to the opposite wall.

"Maybe he got stuck in traffic."

My dad sounds exhausted. I know how he feels; surviving is exhausting, but that doesn't mean we should stop. "No. He's always here at 8 a.m." I talk to the wall again.

"Maybe he took a different route today. I'm sure he's still coming." The hoarseness is coming back.

"It's not supposed to be different. He's late. I think he's dead," I say fervently. There can be no accidents in life. Without the big picture, the little pictures wouldn't make sense.

"He's not dead." My dad sighs.

My dad with his nice enough ways, except for his inability to comprehend what is right in front of his face. "You don't know that," I reply. We are past the days when he can comfort me and tell me all the things he knows so that I don't have to worry about them. I now know the difference between what someone knows and what they think they know.

"You don't know that he's dead either," my dad says with a little more enthusiasm.

"But he's late," I explain again.

"Okay so he's late," my dad says. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"I want you to call the mail company and tell them that he's late." Sometimes speaking to my dad is like speaking to a child.

"Fine, how late is he?" My dad seems to be scratching his head.

I check my watch. "Exactly fifty-nine seconds," I say, slowly as the numbers keep rattling by.

"Oh, for the love of..." my dad begins.

"No!" I yelp. "You can't swear."

"I wasn't going to swear, I was just going to say..."

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!" I seal my hands around my ears. Sometimes the oceans in my mind get loud, tossing worries like waves that wash away all the things I need to make sense.

"Okay, I won't say anything," my dad says.

"You can't swear or else I'll have to put salt over all the window panes and then that would mess with the ergonomics of the wood." I'm starting to ramble a little, but how could he not understand how important this is? I've only told him two hundred and forty-one times.

"Okay, okay, you win." My dad groans. "I have work to do now, so run along."

"But the mailman's late," I tell the opposite wall. "I think he's dead. Probably popped his tire then got bitten by a snake when he went to fix it."

"I'll call the company, if he doesn't show up, okay?" My dad seems as though he's trying to soothe me. "It's not likely that he got bitten by a snake so you can find something else to worry about."

"It's more likely than a plane crash. I worry about things that are worth worrying about, like missing mailmen." I pause. "Because he's late."

"Why don't you go check if he's here now?" My dad's fingers begin clicking away again.

"But then I'll have gone up and down the stairs eight times before 9:42 a.m." I almost stomp my feet, but then they would be out of place.

"I don't know what to tell you. Sometimes you have to go up and down the stairs more than eight times before 9:42 a.m." He doesn't sound like he's listening anymore.

"No, that's not right, you have to call the mail company and tell them the mailman died. He's two minutes late, he's not coming." Hyperventilating is just drowning without the water, but he doesn't seem to know that.

"Alright, I'll call, but you have to go downstairs, because I have work to do." Dad doesn't sound like he's going to call, but deals are deals. Breaking them is like lying, and lying would cause the house to collapse on itself one brick at a time. Being brave when I'm scared is lying too, but people seem to think that's okay. My dad wants me gone because he thinks I'm crazy, but I'm not crazy, I'm just careful. For all he knows, I could be saving his life every moment I spend mine seeing things he can't.

The stairs look warped when I look at them from the top. I cleaned them twice yesterday. I'll clean them again today, but it isn't time yet. I should have been reading the newspaper when it arrived two minutes ago like I do every morning except for Sundays when I read the first forty-three pages of the dictionary instead. Every step seems like a warning flag, because after all what are possibilities if not ways things can go wrong. I take the stairs fast to get it over with.

If I believed in curses, I would believe that I cursed myself. Everything was safe and right the way it was. Change can only mean that new factors will throw off the old ones and I can be left to figure everything out all over again.

As I suspected, the mailman isn't there when I go downstairs. I don't know what to do with myself. What is the point of a plan if no one else cares how important it is? After reading the newspaper, I usually clean the kitchen, but I can't clean the kitchen until the newspaper arrives, but that won't happen until the mailman comes, but he won't come until Dad calls the company, but Dad won't call until he wants to, and there's no telling when that will be. I hope it will be soon, but what is hope really if not confirmation that there is no proof of anything?

I have no choice but to venture onto the front step to get the newspaper as quickly as I can. I feel something like remorse for the events of the morning, but that doesn't make sense because remorse isn't sad enough to be depression, and it isn't guilty enough to be regret, so there doesn't seem to be a purpose for it inside me. If I step on the crease between the tiles on the step, surely the mirror in the closet of the guest bedroom will shatter and little pieces will lodge themselves into the carpet, and when I go to clean it I'll cut my hands and knees. If the sun hits the top of my head before 12:17 p.m. then the chimney will clog and suffocate us in our sleep.

"Hello." A voice catches me by surprise. There is a small child standing in the neighbor's yard. I dislike small children; because they always have juice

stuck to their chins and rude questions spewing from their mouths. I don't reply. I don't speak to anyone other than my dad before I've read my newspaper, otherwise the ink from the newspaper will leach into my skin while I'm reading it and cause irreversible damage to my nervous system.

"You're supposed to say hello back," the boy whines.

I have to respond otherwise he'll come over to me and that would be far worse. "I don't speak to anyone before I've read my newspaper." I pause. "It's bad luck."

"You're waiting for it now?" The boy is still coming closer.

"Yes, the mailman is three minutes late," I reply.

"Okay," the boy says, and walks towards me. "I'll wait with you." He sits down on my front lawn in the grass that's too long.

I glare at his impertinence. This is ridiculous. All the muscles in my body are rigid. What's the point of having property lines if no one respects them? What's the point of having children if they don't listen to you? Why would anyone be outside before 12:17 p.m.?

But the kid doesn't say anything, he just sits there watching the road like I am. I don't like it. Waiting is just disappointment before you realize it's there, and quiet is really just a blanket that covers the real problem. And yet, nothing bad is happening. So, I sit on the porch until the mailman pulls up with my newspaper exactly seven minutes and twenty-eight seconds late, and I can run back into my house where it's safe and comfortable and everything makes sense. But I don't make it inside before the boy calls after me.

"See you tomorrow, then," and at first I hate him for saying it, because friendship is just sacrifice and suggestions are really demands, yet as I begin to remove the dishes from the cupboard, I think just maybe I will wait for the mailman on the porch tomorrow, because what are obnoxious, annoying children if not expressions of growth and what am I if not someone who sees things for what they are?

Apocalypse Song

I remember the day the world ended
I woke up in a lake of my own creation
the birds outside were squawking their
travel itineraries over their shoulders
as they swept off toward Eden or the Arctic Circle

we put on our sparkliest prom dresses
swarmed out onto the already scorched grass
marveled at how quickly summer had jumped on us in the
middle of winter and turned our cheeks pink like raspberries
we kissed and spun each other around in tight dizzy circles like figure skaters

we sped through traffic lights stuck on green in a
hot wired pickup truck and let our taffeta skirts
pillow out behind us like parachutes
we ransacked all the gas stations in town for beer and popsicles
before they had the chance to melt
didn't bother looking for supplies because the grown-ups had
taken it all and left us for garden fertilizer

when the truck ran out of gas we smacked at the corroding asphalt with
bare feet until we were sticky and black up to our ankles
we rode past the Mona Lisa on skateboards with
cans of neon yellow spray paint and graphed the
trajectories of our short lives in hearts and
stars on every brick wall we found still standing

and at the end of the day, we dragged ourselves to the beach and
watched a radioactive orange sun plop itself
down on the ocean like an egg yolk
and when it disappeared under that thick green line we realized
that the sun was too heavy to bring itself back up
so we dove down deep into the water with it

our lungs and bellies filled with steam and pure hydrogen
and we dove to the place where the green water turns into
green forests turn into a starless black sky
we came to rest like pine needles on the soft floor
and exploded into supernovas so that the new people
would have some light to find their way
out, back to the stinging surface

maybe centuries from now they will emerge from that coral underworld
and their seaweed hair will dry and crack in the electric air
they will find crunched cans and the remains of tiny bonfires lit from popsicle sticks
scattered on the sand like the clothes left on the floors of our bedrooms
and maybe they will wonder about the childish tantrums of their ancestors
the ones they found calcified into statues on a sandbar not even a hundred feet off the coast

Dragonchaser

Mesmerized
irises. Foil-thin lips

suck
sludge into lungs.

Sex,
inutile. A woman

seduced
by residue.

Nothing
sacred escapes

a black trail
down.

Meal scraps,
sweat-

stains & hopeless
air

hug the furniture.
I

watch her azure,
witness

a woman
need

some other love.
Powerless,

I call 911 &
breathe

for us both.

New World

to exorcise
the white-hot
of “mercy” pleas caught in my throat

to cure the illness of you
in my stomach
behind my eyes

to bask
in warm patterns of sun
on new baby skin, soft, safe and neglected

to be baptized clean
by forgetting the serration
of you,

you, you,

 you, (always, only you)...

while the past nineteen years surrender
down my legs with sage scented soap

my dad is dead now

and everything is the same

(but simpler.)

Hands

when i see yours,
i see flat callouses
across golden midwest
plains of palms.
i see you scratch
with your fountain pen
black ink between clammy
crevasses of your fingerprints.
i see bitten nails
painful, short
for climbing, and how
you neglected to touch
(or be touched, by me)
those hands were made
cold for a reason

are they warmer now?
i imagine, sadistically, that
they could be, that
my departure could complete you
in the same loving way it
halved me

do you know my
hands? did you learn me
like i learned you?
my hands were

weaker than yours,
do you only
remember your own?
you could have beat me senseless.
do you see the pencil
between fingers, long
spindly scratching at
your window. do they reach
for you, do you drink
from them. do you
see mine, me
i have to know
or can you only see them
around your neck?



Icarus and Apollo (digital painting), B. Currier

Seven Steps to Surviving in the Wilderness by Billy Burkins

Step 1: Find Water

When you're stranded in the woods, the very first thing you have to do is S.T.O.P. Stop, Think, Observe, and Plan, preferably in that order. You don't technically learn this until you get promoted to the rank of Tenderfoot in Boy Scouts, which I'm still pretty far from reaching, but I read ahead in the manual in my free time, so I know a lot. I honestly think it should be one of the first things they teach you when you join in first grade, along with all of the brotherhood and God stuff, but when you're small like that Boy Scouts is more of an activity your parents force you to do to get you out of the house. All Troop Leader David has said so far about survival is that if you get separated from the group while out on an adventure, which is the technical term for our outings, you need to stay put. That's stopping. Think about where you came from, how you got there, and where you went wrong (if you did. You probably did). Next, observe your surroundings and calculate if you're in any immediate danger. If you're not, you plan. Plan how to get your troop leader to notice you and what to do if you don't recognize anything nearby and all

that. That's what you do if you're a baby and don't actually know what to do to survive. That's what to do if you're lost.

But I'm not lost.

So, when you're not lost in the woods, and when Charlie T. from Mrs. Barranick's fifth grade class made it a point to share with everyone how far ahead the rest of the Boy Scouts are compared to you now that promotions are based on merit rather than age, you set out into the woods behind the playground to prove that just because you're not getting badges as fast as them, it doesn't mean you're not a true boy scout. You CAN survive in the wild despite missing troop meetings a lot. But if you get far enough away so that you don't remember which way you came from, you find water. Water is pretty easy to find in the woods, especially if you get lucky and it rained a couple hours ago and your mom sleeps a lot during the day, so she won't be looking for you for a while. After walking for about an hour—or maybe a lot longer—in the woods and scoffing at every trail you come across, you hear water up ahead.

Now, just because you hear water, it doesn't mean it's going to be drinkable. Usually, it won't be. And, I know this because Tessa M. dared me to drink from a pothole puddle once, and I got sick for like a week. That's why I bring a water purifier with me whenever I leave the house. It's inconvenient most days, and takes up a lot of room in my backpack, but when you're a survivalist like me, it's second nature, and it can save your life. If you don't have a water purifier, running water is still helpful. Animals usually stay close to a stream, which is what you figure out it is when you get closer and narrowly avoid tripping over a branch or something, and animals equal food. I don't really like hurting animals if I don't have to, so, best case scenario, I'll just follow them around and see what they eat. They know edible plants probably more than I do, and I know a lot. Mom says I have a great memory, the best one there is maybe, which is why I was my elementary school's spelling bee champion in third grade (Charlie beat me in fourth grade, but that doesn't matter. Someone called him an overachiever once; I don't remember who.) Anyway, the stream is small and peters out quickly down a cliff some yards away, so you don't bother investigating because it's probably a little steep, but water is better than nothing. If you're smart like me, you should have had some juice before you left the house, so you're not super thirsty, but you still should sludge through the mud to the stream and set your adventuring backpack down on a rock to get started. The metal clasps on your backpack are always a little hard to open because it's cheap and you've had the same one since second grade, and you probably struggle with them for a second but it's okay because no one's looking, before it springs open and you dig your hands into the camouflage pouch. Without even peeking you pull out exactly what you needed—your life straw. It was like a bajillion dollars, which Mom

probably couldn't afford, but luckily Dad, who lives in a different state now, sent it in the mail as a late birthday present. You clasp the bag up and get as close to the water as you can without getting your clothes or shoes wet. I read the instructions on the straw a bunch before, but I never actually used it. You should get it right, though. And when you go to open it, and maybe tug on it a little too hard, you hear a popping sound and the cap rockets off, making a clacking sound as it smacks against a tree and disappears in the grass past the water somewhere. Then the straw cracks. They're not supposed to crack, you don't think. They never broke in the videos, so you're going to be mad for a moment because you've been really excited to use it, but hey, stuff happens. You can't just rely on your tools, no matter how expensive they are—you have to rely on yourself. A true Boy Scout is always prepared, and preparation means knowledge. Since it rained, you can collect droplets from leaves using a baggie you saved from lunch.

Step 2: Build a Shelter

Troop Leader David said that shelter can be made out of nearly anything as long as you insulate it. Caves aren't a good idea because they're naturally cold and often home to big creatures. Plus, the draft is super bad if you don't cover up the hole. That's why a lot of people look towards sticks and mud when they know what they're doing (but most people don't). One of the major reasons why people die in the woods is because they don't correctly protect themselves from the environment, especially when it's colder out. It's the middle of March now and it still snows sometimes. I brought my big coat with me, so I'm fine. Plus, I was always the best one at building shelters in the Cub Scouts before we moved up to Boy Scouts and things got way more complicated than they needed to be and Mom got sicker. I had to take a lot of days off to help her get around the house. Mom said I shouldn't worry, though, because I could survive off anything if I'm determined enough because I'm really strong. Strongest guy she knows, actually, which is impressive because she knows a lot of people. People come by the house a lot to drop off food when she doesn't have the energy to cook or to donate some clothes here and there. That's where I get a lot of my stuff from, so I can go to school and the boys won't look at me weird because we don't have a lot. Charlie still looks at me weird, but he's weird, so it doesn't count.

For a shelter, all you need to find are some trees about six feet apart. Lodge a log between them that's like three feet off the ground, get some big sticks and moss, and go from there. If there isn't any moss—and there isn't, which is weird—dirt is fine. Mud from the stream—probably about sixty yards away from where you're going to build your shelter—will keep the sticks together. I wouldn't recommend building super close to a stream because the dirt there isn't super stable, and you need stable ground to build a shelter or else things

may start slipping and sliding and you'll get crushed. Danny with brown hair, who is a year ahead of me in the scouts and has a phone that's really cool, told me that he saw someone get crushed by a rotting tree after they built their shelter near it and a strong wind came. You wouldn't want to be just another guy getting whacked by a tree because you're waiting on a card from your dad that has some money in it for new Boy Scout stuff, so you should push on the trees nearby to make sure they're stable.

You spend like a whole hour finding suitable sticks for your A-Frame, which is when you lodge that log between trees and then rest sticks against it on either side. I built one before with my troop, even though I mostly helped with the finishing touches since Mom was feeling bad that night and I wanted to make sure she was okay before heading out. Now, you have to break some branches off trees to get sticks long enough and sturdy enough. Make sure to take a lot of breaks while working to prevent your asthma from flaring up and sing a song in your head to entertain yourself. Your hands are only a little sore, and it's only a little dark and cold outside now, so you work only a little faster, gathering up mud and grass to plaster against the sticks with the oven mitts you threw in your bag. While gathering mud, your foot might slip into the stream, and your shoe and sock might get wet, but you can't worry about that right now. You have to build your shelter before it gets dark, and you have so much more to do if you're going to prove Charlie wrong. The look on his face when you tell him you went camping all by yourself is going to be well worth your minor slip-ups. Maybe you'll even get promoted if you tell Troop Leader David. It's getting cold quickly though, so maybe you'll only stay out in the woods for one night instead of two. Your hands will feel a bit raw after scooping mud, but at least your shelter is complete. That's more than good enough.

Step 3: Collect Food

You're going to be hungry by now, and you haven't actually had to collect food by yourself before because you're eleven and that would be ridiculous. I would usually prioritize building a fire, but it rained earlier in the day, so most of the fire wood is damp and unusable, and you wouldn't have brought a match or a lighter because that's cheating (also I don't know where Mom keeps them), so, food. You're going to want to walk back to the stream and consider going past it, and begin to step on a rock to head over and see if you can find any edible berries or fungi on the other side since you haven't had any luck so far, but you don't want to chance getting any more wet, so you don't. And then you step forward and cross anyway. A real Boy Scout wouldn't get scared of some water. No, he'd persevere, and besides, Charlie would totally tell Emma L. from Mr. Otis' class that you're a pussy if he were here. Anyone would be embarrassed by that since Emma is the prettiest girl in the fifth grade, which I'd swear my life on. Charlie and I both have a crush on

her, which is why I think he's mean to me sometimes even though he already has a better chance with her than me because he's in school more and farther ahead in Boy Scouts. He doesn't take days off to spend time with his mom. I doubt he even knows what cancer is. That's why people like us are going to have to work hard in the wilderness, so we can show them how good we are. That's why you go deep in the woods, but not too far from where you left your adventuring backpack: so you can show them that you can survive despite not having the merits or the recognition or the support. Despite being the slacker, you're really good at surviving.

If you find rotten logs, you're in luck. When you look up survival stuff at the library in your spare time like I do, you're going to learn that bugs like hiding where things are rotten, close to the surface, and dark. Most bugs can be eaten raw as long as they don't have a hard shell, you think—those guys tend to carry parasites that need to be cooked out. As mentioned earlier, firewood isn't in great supply right now, so beetles and grasshoppers are out of the question. On the brighter side, the more wet the ground is, the more bugs you can find. If you're like me, you've only eaten a couple of bugs before, and mostly on dares during recess when the teacher wasn't looking. The last time your dad called, you told him how many times you've eaten bugs because you thought it was funny. He doesn't call much anymore, but that's probably just because he doesn't like eating bugs. Not that you do, but you're a survivor. You'll do what you must.

The first log you come across is going to be prime bug real estate, so you have to dive right in. It's late. Underneath, you find mostly ants, and they scatter pretty quickly, but you're determined. You have to break the log open to find the fun stuff—termites. You kick the log open with your sneakers, so you can keep your hands in your pockets for as long as possible, and you see there are plenty of termites to go around. You scoop them quickly into the second baggie you brought, and move onto the next. You're quick. It's colder. It's almost completely dark now, and that's why you don't notice how close you've gotten to the cliff.

Earlier it was just another landmark, something you barely registered. You were too caught up in the stream.

You've never been the best at keeping your balance.

You fall.

Step 4: Stay Warm

It's late when I wake up. The house smells of hot cocoa and iodine, and Dad is mumbling something to himself in the other room. The floorboards of the apartment creak as he paces back and forth, and it sounds like he's outside my door. He has always been really restless. That's a trait I got from him, he said, so he suggested I join Cub Scouts. Get my energy out. Do something useful.

I wonder why he's anxious so late in the night. He should be asleep. It's Monday, so he has work in the morning. Mom has an appointment with a new doctor in the afternoon, and they're going to make her lungs better. He shouldn't worry. I'll go back to school when she's better. We're going to be fine.

I hear the knob slowly twist and warmth creeps in past the opening door and slips under my blanket. The fireplace is roaring outside. I close my eyes. I don't like seeing him while he's anxious. Slipped feet shuffle slowly towards my bed, then past, and the window that I left open clasps firmly shut. It's hot.

The floor doesn't creak when he stops by my bed. His clothes whisper faintly together as he sits on the ground.

He's quiet for so long I begin to think he's fallen asleep.

"I'm leaving, bud."

You're supposed to be asleep. Don't answer, even though you don't understand.

"I'm not strong, Billy." Silence. "You need to be strong for her. You need to help her survive."

He gets up, the floor creaks, the door closes.

I'm not strong. When I finally get the courage to go after him, he's gone. Mom's asleep on the couch.

Step 5: If Injured, Conduct First Aid

It's late when you wake up. You're cold. All you can register is the biting of the air on your cheeks and the faint smell of iron. You can't think of anything. You're tired.

Then comes the pain.

When you were five, you fell off your bike and broke your arm. You cried for hours because it hurt so much, even though it was closer to a sprain than anything. This is worse.

Your head, my head, is on fire. It feels like fire ants are crawling in your nose and over your eyes and ears. The hot on the back of your head might be blood, must be, because the ground is supposed to be cold. I go to reach to pull my jacket tighter, but my arms don't move. I try my legs. They don't move either. Nothing moves.

Don't panic.

If you panic, you're dead.

I saw that in a video once.

Think.

First thing you have to do is try everything. Despite the burning of your head and the blurring of your vision you manage to look around. Sort of.

My head doesn't move with my eyes, but it's okay, all you need to do is see. It doesn't look like the fall was that far—I can hear the water draining

into a small pool a couple yards away—but it was enough. You don't know how long you've been unconscious, but your mouth is dry and you can smell blood. Blood is common in your house. You know how to deal with blood there. You clean it up. But you can't move. Your arms and legs and stomach and chest are nothing. Something must be bleeding, though, and you have to patch it up.

Your backpack is a million miles away back at the shelter. You should've brought it with you when you went searching for food. Why didn't I bring it with me? Rule number one is to be prepared.

Even if I had my backpack, it wouldn't matter, though. I can't move.

You think about what would happen to your mom if you couldn't move. You panic.

Step 6: S.T.O.P.

I stop panicking.

I think about Charlie taunting me during lunch a couple days ago. I think about how we were friends, once, when we first joined up and I was a good scout and had time to study our mottos. We studied the concept of brotherhood a lot. Supporting your fellow man, trusting in each other like you'd trust in a parent or God. Keeping up hope. We were friends. I don't know when that changed. I miss sleeping over at his house and practicing knots together.

I observe my surroundings. I landed on some dirt, and the forest floor around me is covered in leaves and foliage that I barely recognize. There are a bunch of plants that have medicinal properties, but in the dark I can't tell the difference between poison and immunity boosters. The trees down here are tall. The sky is dark; I can barely see it through the trees. No signs of any animals or people nearby. I observe myself. I try to. I'm scared. I'll be fine.

I plan how to get out.

It begins to snow.

I can't tell if I feel it on my skin.

Step 7:

Your lips are chapped and you don't know how long you've been stranded in the woods. You don't feel so good. You should have brought a flare. Or a flashlight. Maybe the Band-Aids Mom keeps in the bottom of the medicine cabinet. Band-Aids would stop the bleeding that you're sure is coming from your head now.

You're slipping in and out of consciousness and your body is hot, one of the first signs of severe hypothermia.

Kids lost in the woods don't survive hypothermia.

Maybe you're not as strong as you thought.

You can't be.

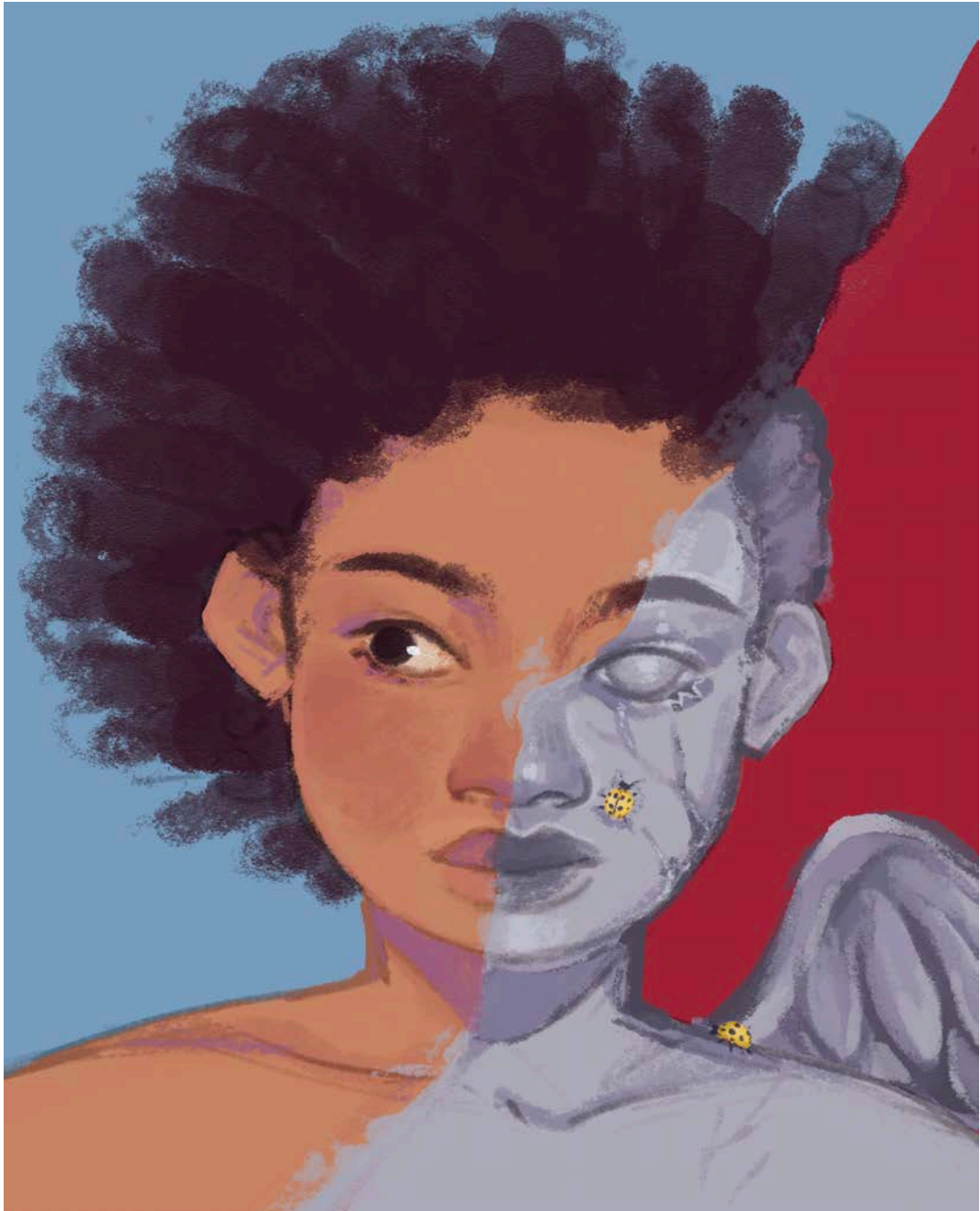
You'd make it home if you were.

Your mom is going to wake up around seven. She's an early riser because she sleeps the rest of the day. She's going to call to wake you up, and of course you're not going to answer. She'll shrug it off and force herself to the kitchen to make breakfast. It will take her a while, trudging in her orthopedic slippers and clinging to the walls. She's weaker by the day, but she'll get it done because you have to eat. She'll notice that you're low on groceries and mentally note that she'll have to order some more. She'll make you an omelet because it's your favorite and she can tell you've been having a rough time at school. She'll pour herself a steaming cup of coffee, breathe it in, and cough it out. She'll say, "Baby, it's time to get up."

It'll mostly be a whisper, but she'll say it with a smile. She's strong. You should be there to hear it.

She's not going to worry too much that you don't get out of bed. She knows you stay up late reading a lot of the time. She'll let you sleep in. You need your rest. She won't notice you're missing until lunchtime.

But, for now, she'll sit on the couch and watch the sunrise through the windows.



Petrified (Procreate on iPad Pro), Al Tejera

Deceivingly Beautiful Trails

the winding wind twirls through my hair
can my speed eliminate the hate?
or erase the truth?
dissipating through the soil
the genocide turmoil.
kill the savage
feed its baby to the wolves
eat its empty soul,
howl at the new land
scorch its traditions
skin it alive
rape the pride
heed the screams
kill them all.

dig up their bones
hang them on a wall
call it mythical
Red
White
and
Fuck you too.

CASSANDRA MANZOLILLO

Thigh High Lace Love

I only like men in high heels and corsets.
Who act like a pageant mother to me
& flaunt across underground railroads & drift through
boisterous city streets. They bite down
on my inner ear lobe,
tsk tsk tsking to me
as I capitulate to the concrete
my knee caps cave south
my nose in between their pointed, triangular toes
& my tongue, up their hairy hamstrings,
till it curves into the roof of their sticky, lipsticked mouth; oh
stop it.
Look around.
All of the masculine marked boxes are covered with sheets of cracked glass,
don't show me my past:
daddy issues this, mommy issues that;
I deserve love, please come back.

would you stay, & hold my hand & could you do that thing, where you
make slow circles inside my palm, till I drift off falling slowly sideways, my
head rests below your neck. Stroke my hair as the mellow tv night light
glows & you sit next to me,
wishing that I was the daughter you never had; when I drift in and out of a
realm where you are my mommy, my girlfriend, my boyfriend, my daddy,
just all of the goodnight forehead kisses I can get.

The Truth of Lemon Dish Soap

Here,
In this kitchen,
Which revolves around only you and me,
The world is composed of simple truths.

It is late.
We are tired.
You sit in your body and
I sit in mine.
We talk—
The worries of daytime
Smoothed by the tides of great conversation,
And the truth of understanding
Is exchanged across the table
With less effort than it takes
To pass the salt.
When you wash the dishes,
I stand next to you to dry them,
Watching your hands scrub in circles;
The truth of lemon dish soap and nightly ritual is rinsed down the sink.

Here,
In this kitchen,
The night moves slow, like Sunday mass.

It's as if the tightly stretched timeline of our lives
Has gone slack,
Just for a moment.
The truth
Of easy silence
Hangs between breath and word,
Is caught in the brushing of knees and shoulders.
It almost feels like saying too much
But I say it anyway because
How can I not?
And for some reason, you let me.

It takes no convincing.
It demands no proof.
How lovely this is,
Our tightrope slow dance,
Our midnight waltz from opposite sides of the kitchen table.
To think
That someone else has been so human all this time—
Is something I had known
But did not believe,
And which is truer to me now
Than the scent of lemon dish soap.

Sureline

*Believe me: this piece is paced by the waves
that were crashing upon me while I wrote this.*

Lying on death's bed I
imagine myself wondering why I
couldn't have just been more

sociable or lovable or I don't
know you choose the word More
soft and sweet and carved out of you Since fall

ing in love I haven't
had much to write Since falling in love my
poems have lost their an

archy smoothed out neatly formulaic
careful organized Since
falling in love I have learned to deny

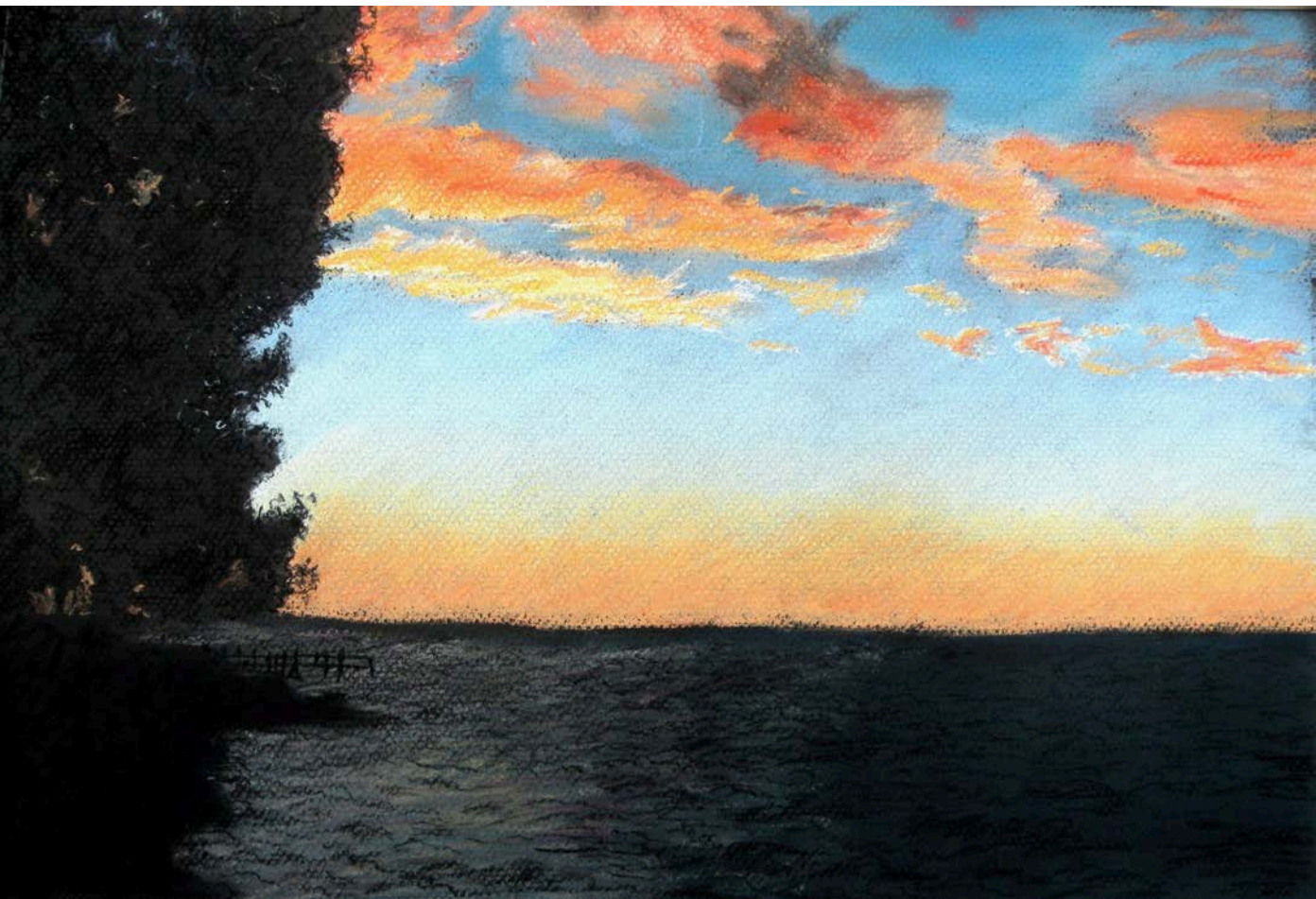
my masochism Since
falling in love I've become a maso
chist. I am not well Since

falling in love I have watched the ocean
sunrise off the coast of
Maine the sea is so forgiving it for

gives even me forgives
my mother for making me and you for
keeping Forgives you when

you have left forgives you when I cannot
Since falling in love I
believe anything again The ocean

is not my poem and
I am not the ocean's anything



Chaumont Bay (chalk pastel), Anthony Mirarcki



Jesse (colored pencil on blue paper), Anthony Mirarcki

Rookie

I've always loved animals: the scaly slither-ers, the bumpy-backed ribbit-ers, the hippity-hoppin-escapees that my older sister intentionally set free; the stick imitators, the slow-moving-quick-biting snappers, the sun-bellied swimmers. When I was four, my mother bought me my first bug catching kit. I spent hours stalking and pouncing around our yard. My first "pet" was a wooly bear named Bob. He was a fuzzy black and brown noodle in my palm. I'd wake up each morning and rush to his little wire cage to see the new munch marks he'd made in the leaves I poked through the wooden slot.

I grew up imitating Steve Irwin and Jeff Corwin. As I'd walk around the yard, I'd talk over my shoulder to an invisible camera crew, breaking down and dramatizing each catch. By the time I turned eight, I was more interested in reptiles and amphibians than bugs. I had no fear of snake bites. I was more seduced than Eve.

They were quicker and more dangerous than bugs. They would coil up and put on their mean mug when my hands entered their personal bubble. They would taste the air, my lingering particles. They would flatten or puff up their speckled bodies, like they were trying to impress the prettiest girl in their grade. They would open their mouths and reveal the pale pink danger of their fangs.

And I would think, *the game is on*.

They would strike at my left hand and miss. My right hand either pinned down the back of their head, or if I was feeling particularly cocky, I'd just go straight for the tail and lift them up in front of my face before dropping them into a five-gallon bucket. I'd give them grass to hide under or sometimes even try to feed them a frog. I was fascinated by their unfused jaws and winding, malleable bodies.

When I wasn't holding a butterfly net or plunging my hands into muddy pond scum after frog legs or a meandering water snake, I was casting out my worm and bobber. Some of my earliest memories are of fishing. I can remember receiving the "As seen on TV" Rocket Rod for one of my birthdays and being thoroughly disappointed, as I spent most of the day trying to untangle the bird's nest of fishing line blocking the barrel of the rocket.

When I was about nine years old, my mom's side of the family all decided to rent a cottage on Conesus Lake for a week in the summer. It was only about fifteen minutes away from our actual house, but we spent the nights there anyway. I spent the whole week fishing off the dock. I must've gone through five dozen worms, and I'm sure their black bile guts were stuck under my nubby fingernails the entire week. My cousin Mitchell, who was about twelve at the time, and I hauled up sunfish after sunfish. I think we kept count, something like fifty rings a bell (though I'm sure we padded our numbers a smidge).

But a boy can only be satisfied with sunfish until he wants something with a little more oomph to swallow up the nightcrawler dangling off his hook. About halfway through the week, my mom's best friend Tim came to stay at the cottage, too. They had been friends since college when they both attended Mansfield. Tim came from a long line of Marines—Pennsylvanian thoroughbreds. To me, he's always looked more like a woodsman than a military man.

He was a mound. He stood at about five foot seven, but the width of his shoulders must have verged on three feet. His shoulders seemed to constantly be encroaching upon his neck. His beard was white, which matched the traces of hair that grew on his mostly bald head. His face was round and bore a vague resemblance to Santa Claus. His cheeks were plump with pronounced ridges of smile lines leading up to his straight and full nose. His eyes were downturned and humbly brown. You'd be hard pressed to find him in an outfit that didn't feature some camo garment.

When he arrived at the cottage, he found me fishing off the dock. He grew up flipping Smallmouth out of the Susquehanna, or fly fishing for trout in mountain fed streams. He asked me what I'd been catching.

"Mostly sunnies," I told him in a high-pitched voice I can no longer recall. "They keep taking my worm, though." He knelt on the dock and stuck his index finger into the white Styrofoam cup of worms. He dug out one of the translucent brown strings and kept it pinched between his thumb and index finger. He put out his other hand, beckoning for my pole. He grabbed the line and then the hook.

"Look here. You take one end of the worm and insert the hook into it, then you run the hook straight through its body, up its guts." He shoved the hook into the crown of the worm's head, or tail; I didn't know. Then, he

dragged the hook through half the length of the worm, so that the worm rode all the way up to where the hook was tied to the fishing line.

"Then you put the hook through the worm three or four more times and keep wrapping it around the hook. This way, the sunfish can only pick at it, but they won't be able to take the whole thing. Here, give that a try." I watched as the inky guts coated his fingernails too.

It worked like a charm, but I still couldn't hook into anything bigger than a sunfish or a bluegill. I came close to catching a catfish, who sat lazily at the bottom of the water column brushing his belly against the sand, but he wouldn't bite. By Sunday, I'd had a great week at the cottage, but I couldn't help but feel disappointed that I didn't catch a single bass. As my family spent the morning cleaning and packing up, I ran out to the dock to try one more time.

After a few more small bites, Tim ventured out to meet me on the dock. "Any bites, Connor?" I told him just a few, as I gawked longingly into waters that have always felt ethereal, mysterious, and dangerous to me. It was then that I felt a tug on my line. My body felt an excited jolt for a moment, but when I saw the sunfish dangling from my hook, my shoulders slumped. I was so disappointed that I didn't even finish reeling the little sucker in.

I let him tug my line one way, and then another, as he desperately tried to shake me off. He tired himself out after a while though, and he eventually just hung suspended in the water column, slightly sideways, perhaps with a cramp.

It was then that a dark green, football shaped shadow lurched out from the protection of the dock's underbelly. It seemed to scream towards my tuckered-out sunfish, opening his mouth into a massive O. The football inhaled the sunfish in one lunge. My body froze, but Tim was right there yelling, "Set the hook!"

I jerked the rod up towards the sky suddenly, feeling a new weight taking out my line. I didn't really know how I was supposed to "set the hook," but I suppose I had seen people do this on TV before. I also didn't really understand how I was supposed to hook the bass if my hook was already in the lips of a sunfish. But, I felt his weight on the line and I knew: *the game was on.*

He bucked like a bull. He drove his head downwards, shaking it side to side. He jumped like a dolphin into the humid air, then splashed back into his dominion. I reeled him in, all the way to the dock's edge, before the line went slack and he spit out my sunny. My shoulders too went slack as the tension of the moment evaporated amidst the July heat.

"Awh! You had 'em!" Tim yelled, as he clapped me on the shoulder and laughed with his belly. "He must've been close to a five-pounder!" The game was over. I had lost my big bass, as he once again turned to a dark shadow and

disappeared into the green shade of seaweed. I reeled in the sunfish, popped the hook from his puckered cheek, and tossed him back.

I stared at the ever-shifting, shimmering water, possessed by the secrets of a submersed world.

As I entered my teenage years, I was less preoccupied with bugs, reptiles, and fish. I spent most of my leisurely time on video games. None of my best friends were into fishing, so I lost touch with it as I got older. I no longer possessed my prepubescent energy and wading through skunky pond water just to catch a snake became rather unappealing to me as my body inched through my chrysalis years.

Of course, I loved video games, but they were ultimately used for escapism. I sunk hundreds of hours into the yearly installments of *Call of Duty*. I donned the cowl in the *Batman: Arkham* series. I leaped from crashing trains, planes, and sinking ships in the *Uncharted* series. I protected a little girl named Ellie from fungus-faced clickers in *The Last of Us*. I was evading myself in these digital worlds, even if I was having fun all the while.

As a late bloomer, my body remained skinny and muscle-less throughout high school. My body was nothing like Batman's. I began to lose interest in sports because my body refused to grow. I gave up on having a first kiss, or a first girlfriend, because I thought I was too skinny to be attractive to any girl, even as girls in my grade asked me to the prom. In the mirror, I saw Connor the way nobody else did. My self-hatred trumped my desperation for romantic or sexual relationships.

When I graduated from high school, I hoped college would solve my problems. I hoped that my roommates would like video games too, or maybe they'd listen to Eminem or Kendrick Lamar, or maybe they'd love baseball, or maybe they'd teach me how to be loved.

But I hid me. I never tried to talk about video games, or hip-hop music, or sports with my roommates or classmates. The social exposure of college pushed me further inward. It became new fuel for the recluse. After one year of roommates at a little community college, I decided to transfer to SUNY Geneseo and move back in with my family.

But there were times when I would try to make a break from myself. Most of these early attempts included excessive consumption of alcohol for a one-hundred and forty-pound nineteen-year-old.

I didn't have my first kiss until I was nineteen. She was a friend of a friend, who I met at a college party. Someone had told her that I hadn't had my first kiss yet. This intrigued her. She was so curious as to why I hadn't kissed anyone. She treated me like an alien, like she was going to be the first human girl to kiss this new exotic species. Of course, her inquiries only made my

heart race faster and, in turn, exacerbated my thirst for gin. But still, I was too nervous to kiss her. With the music blasting, she'd talk so close to my lips that I could smell her perfume, her hair, and it all made me want to drink myself to sleep.

She wore tight jeans. She had bold blue eyes and dirty blonde hair. Her name was Sam. I wanted to kiss her, but it was impossible. There was no part of me that could risk the acceptance of pleasure. Eventually, when we were both drunk enough, she just pushed me against the wall, pressed her lips to mine. "You did good!" she told me.

When she ghosted me the next week, I decided to take up drinking alone in my bedroom late at night, once I was certain my family had all gone to bed. As my relationship with alcohol became more intimate, my relationship with myself became more violent.

I had long ignored my despondency until it slashed me across the forearm. Then, I began hunting a new game: pain.

It was an idea long before it was blood on bathroom tiles; I had listened to Eminem talk about it on "Stan," with furious intrigue: "Sometimes I even cut myself to see how much it bleeds. It's like adrenaline, the pain is such a sudden rush for me." When I first heard this song at eight years old, I wondered how pain could be a rush. I didn't understand this idea right away. It happened gradually. As my teenage years slowly passed and my body seemed to experience puberty latency, I began weaving my cocoon not out of silk, but thorns. I kept shrouding myself in memories that hurt keenly: my grandpa's dilapidated rib cage being hugged too tightly by his skin; my older sister being tossed into a stack of firewood by my father when she was twelve; my cousin speaking at his own mother's funeral when he was just twenty-four; my baseball coach belittling me on the field: "You're ninety pounds soaking wet!"

I saw no reason to take it easy on myself.

When I couldn't love myself, I hurt myself. I would dig out the bottle of gin or vodka I kept stuffed in a backpack under my bed. I took shots from the bottle until I felt my head get a little too heavy for my neck. Then, I'd stuff my pocket knife into my hoodie and wobble to the bathroom with my headphones in. I sat on the toilet with my knife in my right hand and my phone in my left. I'd drafted a playlist for those moments. I wanted immersion.

It was a rush. I hated how alive it made me feel. Every cut felt like waking up from hibernation. I could see my life outside myself. I could touch the lukewarm slickness that kept my life living. I wanted my outsides to match my insides. I wanted to be scarred and I wanted people to think of me as scarred. I was gnawing at my chrysalis, cutting my gums on the barbed fibers holding me in place.

When I was a boy, if I wanted to catch a snake, I dove headfirst after its fleeing tail. As I entered adolescence, I forgot how to take that dive. I'd unlearned how it felt to pursue even the most fleeting glint of happiness. Once I realized that I wasn't living for myself, but rather for those who might mourn my death, I knew I either had to figure out how to want more of life or put an end to my own.

I asked for therapy and received it, though my parents had little to say to me about my cutting. For months, I'd drafted suicide letters in my head, but I was too chicken shit to leave any kind of paper trail before I was truly ready for the deed itself.

Instead, I chose therapy and a serotonin reuptake inhibitor.

Within a year, I had stopped cutting and started loving again. Some days, I could hardly go an hour without thinking about suicide. I approached the end of my undergrad degree at Geneseo wanting to enjoy my final semester. I found someone who helped in that regard. She was in my graduating class and wrote short stories. We talked about my cutting and her eating disorder. She told me she'd just left a shitty relationship, and I told her that I was still a virgin. She didn't treat me like an alien. Instead, she asked me if I wanted a teacher.

So, we raced against the countdown of our final spring semester at Geneseo and tried to give as much of ourselves to the other while we still could. She ran her fingertips over my scars in her twin bed and kindly asked me not to cut myself again. She said it quietly, like I might be offended by her love. I told her I'd try.

When we graduated, she went home to her small town outside of New York City. I stayed in Geneseo. We talked a lot at first. Then less. Then we didn't. We were together briefly, but fully. Ironically, she taught me much more than I imagine she intended. I learned that I wanted more of life: more hugs in snowfall, more words to taste, more cities to see, more rivers to wade, more awkward goodbyes. More. I was thankful for my scars, but I wanted to keep my promise. I wanted to treat myself with the same kindness she had shown to me.

I hadn't seen Tim in nearly a decade, but it was during that summer after I graduated that Tim invited my family to stay with him in Pennsylvania for a weekend. I was a little anxious to meet him again. I wondered what he would think of the me I grew up to be. I feared that the Marine would think me weak if he noticed the scars on my arm.

We packed into my dad's truck on a Friday morning. It was early August, and I was just about to start my graduate degree. I'd bought a fishing pole earlier in the summer and was struggling to recapture the feeling it gave me

as a little boy. To be frank, I realized that I sucked at fishing. Tim assured me there'd be plenty of fish to catch at his place, though.

He was retired and lived alone up on a mountain in the Nippenose Valley. After a three-hour drive, we pulled into his gravel driveway. His house was more of an estate than a house. It was long, almost like a warehouse. It was his, but it was also his brothers' hunting vacation home, too. There were about eight different bedrooms upstairs, and in total, I'm sure the place could sleep thirty people. But it was just us and Tim for the weekend. Well, and his chocolate lab, Bo.

We had a campfire on Friday night, went to bed early, and rose early the next morning too. We drank coffee next to his twenty-foot antique shuffleboard table, underneath the mounted heads of trophy bucks. Tim had an entire trophy room, which featured everything from pheasant, to entire taxidermy bears, to rattlesnake skins—all killed on his property.

"So you ready to fish?" Tim asked me suddenly.

"Yeah, in the stream?" I asked back.

"Sure," he told me.

"My mom and I walked it this morning, and we didn't see any fish in there," I mentioned.

"Oh, they're in there," he said, as he beckoned me to follow him into the garage. He handed me a fly rod. I'd never used one before. He grabbed a white container of worms after he put on his vest. Attached to the vest were nail clippers and fishing forceps; clippers he used for cutting the fishing line and the forceps for removing the hooks from the trout's mouth.

He walked me to the stream's edge. It was only about sixty-five degrees under the canopies of eastern hemlocks. The stream vibrated louder as we approached its edge. The stream is natural, but Tim designed holes every twenty feet or so, which act as perfect homes for brook trout. Before the trip to Tim's house, I'd never even heard of a brook trout.

"Some are natives," he began as he slid the hook through the worm's guts just as he'd once shown me. "They'll be most of the smaller ones. They're usually darker too. Their colors are slightly different. The big ones are stocked. They should be hungry today, though. I haven't fed them in three or four days."

He demonstrated the awkward dance of fishing with the fly rod in the stream: with your left hand, you control the line. With your right, you control the rod. However, the rod was about seven and a half feet long. I was constantly snagging my rod tip on branches just out of view above my head. It felt like learning how to use a prosthetic limb.

When I finally made a decent enough cast into a hole, right where the stream dove over a horizontal log and formed a mini-waterfall, I felt my rod tip dip downwards. Tim looked over my shoulder: "Set the hook!" He called

from behind me. I yanked my right hand up with a jolt and sent my hook and mutilated worm into a branch. I was a little overexcited.

Tim just chuckled behind me, “What a rookie!” and then he gave me the heartiest of pats on the shoulder, nearly knocking me down the sloped bank of the stream and into the water. I laughed along because I was alive to see myself fail at least one more time. I laughed because I was learning, and failing, and growing to be more alive and more in love with this stream, these trout, myself.

And for a moment, I wished I had fallen into the stream; to be fully submerged in the frigid water, fully submersed in its translucent plasma. My chrysalis would soften, and I would let the trout nibble at the shedding skin peeling off my kneecaps and pinky toes. I would look up at Tim through the ripples, and watch him toss pellets to his pets, and I would be new.

Gail Hosking's *Retrieval*: A Review

Less than a year ago, the United States ended its longest-ever conflict. The country left Afghanistan without grace, hiding highly-publicized videos of departure behind policy and promises. For many, it was an all too familiar scene. Forty-six years earlier, the United States ended its then-longest war in much the same way: carelessly and without poise. Even now, the U.S. government clings to technicalities in order to avoid officially calling what transpired in Vietnam a “war” at all. But its legacy endures. In her book, *Retrieval*, poet Gail Hosking demands that readers wrestle with the discomfort of a war many would rather forget: one that took her father from her. Through her skillful writing, deft descriptions, and immense vulnerability, Hosking takes the reader on a tour of her memory—a tour that’s fundamental to understanding the enduring history the Vietnam War era leaves behind on a human level.

While the book is split into three sections, Hosking makes the conscious choice to shy away from distinctly ordered memory. The poems do not follow the chronological order of the speaker’s life. Rather, they feel spontaneous and disjointed, attacking and retreating like soldiers without commands. The opening poem, “Chance and Hope,” sets the stage for the ensuing exploration into memory with the observations of a child. Hosking writes, “[m]y father put together survival kits...concentrating like a character / with his script of danger, his story of men.” By comparing the narrator’s father to a character with a script from the onset of the collection, Hosking explores the falsehood of eager duty that much of the country was lulled into during the war.

She repeats this assertion in the second section of the book in the poem “Notes From the Underground,” writing that the soldiers “knew the war was run by politicians / but went anyway because that’s what soldiers do.” The speaker carries more cynicism here, well aware of the politicized nature of the war, but that doesn’t change the fact that soldiers do what they’re told. In the very next line, she imagines that the soldiers are the “ones who help paint a picture—a case of hand grenades / under my dad’s cot...” Once again, these soldiers are not mere men; they are painters setting a scene like the character with a “script of danger” that Hosking imagines the speaker’s father to be in the opening poem. It’s with this expert reimagining and returning that Hosking lets the speaker explore the same experiences and memories more than once, each with new heartbreaking observations and declarations.

Hosking’s poem, “Personal Effects,” is emblematic of the expert skill present throughout *Retrieval*. Bare-bones and practical, “Personal Effects” is a list that goes through each of her soldier father’s belongings. Alliteration threads the seemingly simple poem from start to end, opening with the line “six short-sleeve shirts / four wash-and-wear trousers.” While the opening is innocuous enough—who among us hasn’t packed T-shirts and simple shorts in our travel bags?—each consecutive line ups the ante. The final several lines pack a punch:

six month’s gratuity pay

one signed statement

I fully recognize the hazards involved

one black body bag.

Phrases like “signed statement” and “black body bag” invite the reader to enjoy delicate, alliterative language even as the implication of these words leaves a hole in one’s heart. As one reads, the practicality gives way to tragic truth in the form of a life signed away. Hosking knows to leave her readers gasping; she doesn’t have to spell out what that black body bag means for the speaker’s loved one. It’s clear enough after a simple four-word line. The restraint of this poem paired with the more exploratory nature of “Hope and Chance” and “Notes from the Underground” demonstrate the dichotomy between the truth of the fact at hand—that men are packing up their bags and going to war—and how it feels to witness this as a daughter of one of those men.

Throughout *Retrieval*, Hosking’s voice never falters. While “Personal Effects” might end with a plain yet foreboding “black body bag,” it’s “A Life” that says plainly, “[t]he week he is killed she cooks / black-eyed peas and ham hocks,” as if the death of one’s father is no bigger an event than a rainstorm or

grocery trip. By choosing to go small when exploring huge wells of emotion, in this case grief, Hosking hooks the reader with an understated, restrained tone.

Visiting her memories through *Retrieval* is a journey the reader is lucky to go on; an experience that leaves one changed. Through each poem, Hosking picks apart a sliver of history on two levels, one personal and one wrestling with the legacy the Vietnam war era has left behind. From “think[ing] about what your father / goes through over there / in the jungle...” to newer memories that invite “a calm settling inside me, my heart / opening from rusted chambers,” the clarity and contemplation of *Retrieval* leaves one mournful yet serene and, surprisingly, full of hope.

An Interview With Gail Hosking

Gail Hosking was born on an army base and continued her childhood as a military brat, living in southern Germany for a good part. She attended Alfred University, holds an MFA from Bennington College, and taught at Rochester Institute of Technology for fifteen years. Her books include the memoir *Snake's Daughter: The Roads in and out of War* (U of Iowa Press), *The Tug*, (poetry chapbook from Finishing Line Press) and a new book of poems *Retrieval* (Main Street Rag Press). Her essays and poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Post Road*, *River Teeth*, *Solstice*, *Reed Magazine*, *Upstreet*, *Lilith Magazine*, *Cream City Review*, *Passages North*, *Consequence Magazine*, and *The Threepenny Review*.

GD: Retrieval does a fantastic job at expressing the unwanted inheritance of the Vietnam War. It illustrates the effects of war on family structures and society and provides emotional links and connections. In the collection, there are multiple mentions of two different parallel worlds lived simultaneously. Can you elaborate on these two worlds?

GH: One world, of course, is the actual war—what you read, what your father tells you, what people say. Letters arrived from a place you've never seen or heard of before. The other world is the one of high school and friends. Football games. Your Latin grades. America moves from day to day without any thought of war. No one talks about the war, so you divide your life into two parts in order to survive. You want more than anything to be a “normal” student. The poem “Split Frame” is an illustration of this. Two different

worlds exist at the same time, and one must carry those two worlds around in heart and mind.

The author Viet Thanh Nguyen says that the war is lived twice--once in the actual war and the other in memory. "Nothing ever dies," he says about war. This, I have witnessed, is the life of a soldier who has seen war.

Can you talk more about the collection's title? What are you hoping to retrieve with these poems? What does remembering allow us to do?

Retrieval refers to retrieving bodies after the battle is over. In literal terms, helicopters fly in and bodies are picked up, put into black bags and brought back to base. Retrieval also refers to our memory, which is returned after we want to forget. In essence, it's about going back to get what was lost, what must be brought back into full view, what's been hidden in a nation's psyche. Remembering lets us connect the past with the present. Hopefully, remembering helps us understand the present better.

Your position as an "army brat" is interesting and notably different from how many other children may remember their childhood. Would you say that as a child you were more aware of the realities of the world, and as a result, you "enjoyed the world of a child" less? In your poem "I've Got to Say," the speaker mentions their college students "in classes someone else pays for, grown children" playing at war. Can you elaborate?

Indeed, life of an army brat—at least in the 50s and 60s—was far different than the life of a civilian child. We lived separate from the civilian world on bases surrounded by barbed wire. I lived in Germany then and witnessed bombed out buildings left over from WWII. I heard stories, saw men without legs, and watched my father clean his weapons on the dining room table in preparation for the next war. I watched men drinking beer go over battles well into the night. I stood in front of the buildings at Dachau and saw the horrendous photographs of Jewish prisoners. When I returned to the United States and lived with my grandmother (going to a civilian school), I was surprised how little everyone knew about the Cold War. How much of their lives wrapped around school dances and family vacations. We had come from different worlds. I wanted more than anything to be a part of their world with swimming pool parties, etc. but I had already seen too much. I often felt lonely because of that.

I did not see that kind of understanding in the 18-year-olds I taught at RIT. The only people who came close to that kind of wisdom were the children of immigrants.

When crafting these poems, was there an instinct to have all the poems be in first-person point of view? How does the point of view aid in what you want your readers to take away from this collection?

The instinct for the “I” was there from the start. It demanded my possession of these stories, admitting to the emotions. In that way they read like a memoir, which also demands the “I.” I didn’t think of this as I was writing the poems, but I see now it was my way of forcing my generation to see what was going on as they tried to ignore the war. It was my way of being heard and seen after so many years of silence.

During the development of this book, what was the writing process like? Did you write with the intention of curating a collection, or did you realize they belonged together after the fact?

I did not for one second think of a collection as I was writing these poems. In fact, I rarely took my poems seriously because my first loyalty was to essays and memoir. Even though many were published, I never thought of putting them together in one book. But as time went on, it became obvious to me that I rarely let go of the theme of war. Eventually I gave the collection to a friend/poet/editor who chose the strongest poems, put them in order, and gave me permission to send the manuscript out. I think had I been thinking all along about curating a collection, I might have been too self-conscious, which is not good for the writing process.

There is much pain, anger, and sadness within these poems. Poems like “For Richard Nixon on the 40th Anniversary of My Father’s KIA,” “White House,” or Ode to Captain Iacabelli: Company Commander” are hyper-specific and seem to contemplate blame and the consequences of choices. The value of blaming extends an opportunity for accountability. Who do you think is to blame?

Blame was indeed not my intent, but of course, it’s there. The president, the nation, all of us. Our country makes choices. If you look at our history, you can see that we are a nation of war. Accountability sometimes comes with time, as it has about Vietnam on a national level. People admit how wrong it was to blame the soldiers themselves. “The higher ups”—what my father called those in charge—are finally admitting, too, how wrong the war was. Vietnamese are writing their side of the story. The bigger picture keeps arriving, and now it’s far easier to see all those details our nation kept hidden for so long. Blame is a big word, and it does not cancel out what’s happened, nor is it a word to linger over. Blame gets us nowhere. Only the truth will help us.

In poems like “Lawdy Lawdy, Miss Clawdy” and “What’s going on?” you incorporate lyrics from songs that have had an enormous impact on American society. How did these songs and artists influence your writing? What is the significance behind borrowing these lyrics?

The music of those years was essential to my upbringing. We had no TV in Germany then and only one American radio station called “The Stars and Stripes.” That station played the top one hundred songs from America, had shows like “Gunsmoke” and “Dragnet,” and gave us the news of the world beyond our base. My mother was young and loved to dance and listen to American songs. She went to the Elvis movies on base. She collected records and played them constantly. When I came home from school, she would be dancing with her friends. So the music is embedded in my body. I cannot see images from that time without a background song list. Though not my intent at first, I see how the songs included in the poems are a way of witnessing those two worlds at the same time: the world of the Cold War and the Vietnam War at the same time as life for a child continues. These worlds live side by side. That’s one of the main points of my writing. There are families that are affected as political decisions are being made in the distance.

In your poem, “Sometimes,” I enjoy how you express the “both/and” aspect of love. You say, “sometimes love divides.” Do you still feel that “love” is the dividing factor of our country versus pride?

I’m not sure if love is a dividing factor in our country. Pride, of course, is there. But love is actually the link that keeps us together. In spite of awful things happening, when it comes down to it, love most often takes over. I knew my father loved me, for instance, even as he left me. My father’s love for the military/this country did indeed divide us at times. There was no other way around it. “We are military, Honey,” my mother used to say, which was meant to explain why we lived as we did.

What was the intention behind the form of the book? Why three distinct sections?

The section idea was my editor/poet/friend’s idea. I gave her a pile of poems and she was the one who helped me order the pile, get rid of the poems that didn’t work, and encouraged me to send it out. Now that I think about it, I see that memory itself is divided, comes to us in sections. Time is divided. You have the childhood part, the essence of the war part, and then the post part. More or less.

In your author’s note, you say, “writing is a good way to spend a life.” What brought you to writing as an outlet?

As a child I used to write letters to pen pals. I was a reader. But writing essays and memoir and poems came to me late in life. I started writing about my father (only for my sons) when I came close to the age he was at his death (42) and then I was encouraged to write a book using the photographs he left behind. It became *Snake’s Daughter: The Roads in and out of War* and was published by the University of Iowa Press. I went back to school to learn to

write better. I got an MFA from Bennington and then could not stop writing. Along the way I have had many essays and poems published. Now it's just a way of life. A way to make sense of the world. A way to connect with all that I witnessed growing up.

About the Authors

JENNA BARTH is a junior psychology major at SUNY Geneseo from Long Island, New York. She is currently a teaching assistant for ENGL 201: Foundations of Creative Writing and has found that one of her true passions is creative nonfiction.

ANDREW BUYEA is a creative writing major at SUNY Oswego. He can often be found drowning in all the responsibilities he foolishly decided to take on.

B. CURRIER is a senior biology major at SUNY Geneseo. They're fond of anatomical and botanical sciences, art, and stealing bones from unsuspecting individuals. They have a passion for the natural world and can usually be found nestled asleep in some moss.

MAX D'AMICO is a lens-based artist currently residing in New York City. He often uses photographs to communicate philosophical ideas and explorations of life. His process combines intuition and gathering information, allowing him the freedom to explore things he doesn't yet understand as well as to create work for a specific purpose. The topics he focuses on are interactions between humans and technology, relationships between humanity and nature, and physical manifestations of time.

MICHAEL DENICOLA attends Stony Brook University. He studies creative writing and enjoys writing poetry and fiction.

MIA DONALDSON is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo majoring in English and political science. She enjoys cities, gory literature about horrific women, chai, and making everything into a poem.

KIEL M. GREGORY works with youth in the Southern Tier of New York where he is an MA candidate at Binghamton University. His prose and verse appear in *Lips*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Furrow*, and *aaduna*, among others. Visit kielmgregory.com for more.

ASHLEY HALM is a junior at SUNY Fredonia double majoring in theatre arts and English with a minor in creative writing. Originally from Corning, New York, Ashley's writing interests include poetry, flash fiction, and playwriting. In her sparse spare time, she enjoys cooking, making art, and reading.

DANIELLE HENRY is a freshman at Stony Brook University. When she's not cheering on the New York Rangers, reading, or spending time with family, she is writing.

MIRA JAEGER is a freshman at Fashion Institute of Technology majoring in illustration. They enjoy literature, poetry, and screenwriting. Their poetry and visual art has been featured in *Gandy Dancer* and in Geneseo's *MiNT Magazine*.

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ANNA KUBIAK is currently a student at Genesee Community College with plans to transfer to the University at Buffalo where she will pursue a degree in legal studies with certificates in journalism and creative writing. While attending GCC, she writes for *The New Courier* newspaper and is the President of the Creative Writing Club. She plans to pursue a career that allows her to connect people through writing.

CASSANDRA MANZOLILLO is a writer, filmmaker, and dancer based in Long Island, New York. Cassandra is a full time student at Stony Brook University and is set to graduate with a BFA in creative writing and literature.

ANTHONY MIRARCKI lives in Syracuse, New York, with his wife. He currently works as a carpenter and is a full-time student at SUNY Oswego, working towards his BA in English and creative writing. Anthony's work has appeared in *LIT Magazine*, *Great Lake Review*, and several print anthologies, as well as won first place in the 2020 Poetic Bond Poets' Choice Award.

JENNIFER—OR JEN—MIRARCKI was born with no plan at the very end of some long September day. Taught in the streets north of Syracuse, she now resides somewhere without real rules or barriers and attends SUNY Oswego.

NOAH RIGBY is a senior creative writing major at SUNY Purchase with minors in psychology, theatre performance, and playwriting. When he's not writing he's either walking through nature, lounging about, or using the term "vib-ing" in semi-professional emails. His poetry has been published in *Gutter Mag* and *Chaotic Merge*, his fiction in *Italics Mine*, and he has won multiple awards for his playwriting.

SUSAN ROMANCE is a junior at SUNY Geneseo who is studying English and film studies. At home in Cheektowaga, New York, Susan enjoys spending time with her family and eating homemade meals. When she's not staying up unreasonably late, you can find her writing poems or playing on her Nintendo Switch.

SARAH SHARPLES is an English major and women and gender studies minor at SUNY Geneseo. As well as a writer, they are the editor-in-chief of queer literary magazine *Iris Magazine*, the managing editor of *The Lamron*, a highly-protective plant parent, an overly-ambitious crocheter of mediocre clothing, and an obnoxiously-enthusiastic maker of Spotify playlists.

EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently appeared or will

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AL TEJERA is a senior geology major at SUNY Geneseo. He can be found in the woods collecting rocks or drafting a new piece of art. He has a fondness of the dark, the weird, and biblical aesthetics.

RACHEL VALENTE, originally from Buffalo, is a junior at SUNY Oswego studying English and creative writing. She has two cats named Agatha and Poe (after the writers of course), and is a proud bookseller at the River's End Bookstore.

LASSITER WAITH is a senior at SUNY Purchase and a fiction editor at *Chaotic Merge Magazine*. He was a fiction finalist in 2020's Best of the Net competition and enjoys queer stories about strange people.

TESS WORTASZEK is a senior at SUNY Geneseo in the process of earning her BA in English. She is also a part of the creative writing program with a focus on poetry.