Gandy Dancer

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

Issue 11.1 | Fall 2022

gandy dancer /ˈɡan dē ˌdansər/ noun
**gandy dancer** /ˈɡan dē ˌdans ər/ noun 1. a laborer in a railroad section gang that lays and maintains track. Origin: early 20th century: of unknown origin.

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

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

Our Postscript section features work by SUNY alumni. We welcome nominations from faculty and students as well as direct submissions from alumni themselves. Faculty can email Rachel Hall, faculty advisor, at hall@geneseo.edu with the name and email address for the alum they wish to nominate, and alums can submit through our website. Both nominations and direct submissions should indicate which SUNY the writer attended, provide a graduation date, and the name and email of a faculty member we can contact for confirmation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Please visit us at www.gandydancer.org, or scan the QR code below.

Questions or comments? Send us an email at gandydancer@geneseo.edu
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Special thanks to the Parry family, Stephen J. West, and Angela Briggs
Dear Readers,

Not long before writing this introduction, the town of Geneseo was buffeted by both its first snowfall and many subsequent rainstorms, as if to say, “Wait a minute, winter isn’t here yet!” Through this confusing weather, the staff of *Gandy Dancer* trudged their way regardless of rain, snow, or shine, to work on our lovely magazine. We, your managing editors, both commend the determination of our staff and the courage of all writers and artists who submitted—there were many passionate discussions about what to publish this year!

Though COVID-19 appears to be slowly but surely releasing its hold on the local community, that hasn’t stopped the latest national and global news from troubling the minds of SUNY students. In this era of information technology, we encourage all to remain informed, but to also remember to breathe, reflect, and think about your own health and wellbeing. You may find that the works in this issue ask you to consider that perhaps the most meaningful change begins with the self.

In the prose we have collected, you will note a highlighted importance of personal growth fueled by human interaction. Aimee Maduro’s creative non-fiction piece “Drive” shows you how to find beauty in the world and solace in the people close to you, as she writes, “it was hard to know which direction was easier to look in; the heavy crescent and knowing winks in the sky, or the gentle hands beside me gripping the steering wheel.” Alternatively, Martin Dolan’s fiction story “Donato’s,” utilizes the rhythm of breathing, “One, two. One, two,” to center the story on the idea of prioritizing the self. Whichever you prefer, the potential for healing is multitudinous, and you will find many examples in this issue.

We encourage you to find solace in the people and writing that care for you, and to not forget that “people can be resting places / Soft places to land, / to hang up your hat / And be washed of the day’s dust,” as Ashley Halm writes in her poem “Ode to a Cowboy.” We encourage you to let the poetry of *Gandy Dancer* remind you that you are allowed to begin the process of healing yourself, in spite of what is occurring all around us. We also hope that the work collected here reminds you that you are allowed to be angry about what is happening, just as Mollie McMullan’s poem “Lockdown Lockdown Lockdown” bleeds rage with the lines: “They think of mothers as expendable, / a mere body, / a husk bisected by birth, / a skin that can be shed.”

Themes of healing wrap around the prose, poetry, and art of this edition. The writers and artists featured recognize that this process is not easy. It does not happen all at once. Art, however, can be a start. And as we fall into the
impenetrable cold of winter in New York, we hope that *Gandy Dancer* can act as a crackling fireplace, or at the very least a warm coat. May your reading bring you the feeling of being recognized that we felt while reading and allow for a healing process that continues into the new year.

Warmly,

Elizabeth Roos and Julia Grunes
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after the apocalypse

lavender breezes
cotton spurs
daisies grow through concrete.

i'll cut up blacktop and
cut it for dinner
still smoldering. i'll
hold your hand and

dirt will cake our fingertips.
i'll make you a cherry pie
while you bury
the dead. all
in a day's time.

find me a four leaf
clover and
make a sacred
wish. blood on the altar.

we'll wash it away
with salt water and
lay ourselves to peace. all
in due time. let's not
rush ourselves. let the world

breathe
again.
After a summer of orange cones and helicoptered backroads, he could finally claim the highways as his own, wanting to tame the open road with an accomplice. On a sluggish Tuesday, the two of us bunched into his old navy sedan, our drive molded through moody teen anthems blaring from the speakers; our off-key harmonies threatened to drown out each guitar solo. Despite not visiting the elementary school since our finger-painting days, we deemed its parking lot an ideal location to watch the vibrant palette of light descend beyond the trees.

Parked beside faded sidewalk chalk, he joked about the cheesy coming-of-age movies, the climax where teenage heroes defeat their greatest threat by staring at the sky from station wagon hoods. Pulling each other from the front seat and atop the car’s roof, our shoes bumped together in playful battle. The sky was a cliché blend of rainbows and cotton candy and all the majestic things poets can’t translate into language.

Later, we couldn’t recall who leaned in and initiated the kiss first, only a slow and clumsy moment of fumbling lips and hands caressing faces. The moment was quick to dissolve into humor and playground romps, tension fading with the daylight.

Moody music still echoed beside our laughter, the return home seemingly no different than the departure. But it was hard to know which direction was easier to look in: the heavy crescent and knowing winks in the sky, or the gentle hands beside me gripping the steering wheel.
Our House

I put tulips under all the pillows, and then set fire to the house. As the flames thrash around, crawling their way through each room, I sit on the front lawn, watching my perfect little house morph into ash. Before it’s forever ruined, I try to imagine each room, to preserve it in some way. I start with the bedroom. It was of moderate size, containing few items besides my queen-size bed, an old wooden dresser that my parents had passed on to me, and a closet that contained whatever clothes I couldn’t fit in the dresser. The bedsheets used to be pure white, but once she moved in they became red, against my better wishes. Its floor was carpeted, much like the living room downstairs, providing a comfortable enough space to lay down if I was feeling particularly tired. I’d do that pretty often, especially when she wasn’t home. Gazing up at the ceiling, pure white like the sheets that used to cover the bed. The white always brought me a certain calm, affording me an escape from the harsh red, finally allowing me the mental space to think. I wanted to experience that same therapeutic feeling one last time, but at that point I’d already poured the gasoline onto the carpet, causing it to swell and darken.

The bed was my main focus though, ensuring every inch of it was soaked so those horrid red sheets could never be resurrected. The only other addition I made to the now tainted bed were two pink tulips that stuck out from underneath the pillows. I knew she hated them. She made sure that whenever I got them for her, she’d put me down in the same dirt from which they came, but I didn’t care. It was a small act of defiance that really didn’t matter compared to the theater production I was now orchestrating. Each flame was now following the carefully constructed choreography that I had set within each room. So far the performance was more than I could’ve ever hoped for, each flame improvising and adapting to the scene around them. Despite the more than satisfying show, I felt a drop run down my illuminated face.
The living room is next. It was directly to the right when you walked in the door, with the same carpet as the bedroom upstairs, but it never felt quite as well suited for the therapeutic floor sessions that I’d have in the bedroom. The living room provided its own special comforts, however. A decently sized TV was mounted on the wall, allowing me to watch whatever show or movie I was in the mood for. I’d often rewatch the same stuff, though. It brought me a certain relief despite the obvious, predictable nature. The only thing to disturb this repetitious comfort was her condescending gaze telling me how pathetic and worthless I was. I’d experience both the repetitious viewings and judgmental gazes from the leather couch that I’d found at a yard sale. It wasn’t anything special, but it had that homey brown leather look you think of when you first think of a basic leather couch. When I first brought it into the house, I thought about how perfectly it was placed in the middle of the room, how it was always meant to be there. It had traveled unknown miles and lived in an undetermined number of homes in order to finally arrive here, in my perfect little house, in my perfect little living room. To her though, it was an eyesore. “Why do we even keep that ugly ass thing?” she’d say, with that same, unforgiving gaze that would deplete my confidence.

“Because I like it?”

“Heh.” She’d brush the comment off her shoulder, trying to sound like she’s joking, hiding the true resentment she’s feeling. “And you think that’s a good enough reason?”

I had stared at the couch for a while. It gazed back at me, questioning the reason for my sudden, malicious decision to destroy it and the home which it had inhabited for years now. I didn’t give it an answer. I simply poured the gasoline, allowing it to seep into the couch like loose change. I had wanted to drag it outside, at least give myself a better viewing experience for what was about to happen, but also to salvage at least one thing of mine that had inhabited the house that wasn’t my own body. For this to mean anything, though, it had to burn with the rest of the house. At least it’s fair that way. Everything that was hers is mine and everything that was mine is hers. Now, we are both left with nothing.

I did have something, though. Not the couch; I could never say that was really mine considering how often she plopped herself on it, taking up most of the space, and leaving me barely enough space to sit. No, it was my mug. It was a large, white mug with a slight chip on its rim from when I dropped it in the sink while doing dishes. I remember being terrified that I’d broken it completely, that I couldn’t utilize the last thing I truly owned within that house ever again. But it had endured my error in physical coordination, and I continued to use it every morning and every night. Every time I held it in my hand, I could feel myself loosening up. The calming weight of it in my hand let me know that I still had one thing left for my own. But then one
morning, this morning, I went downstairs to claim it again, as I had done every morning before. She was standing there with it in her hands, sipping her morning coffee from it while watching the television in the other room. Her red lipstick stained the white ceramic. It might as well be shattered into a million pieces.

“What?” She asked, finally noticing my gaze.

“Nothing, just thinking about what I want for breakfast.” I hid my contempt. I hid my rage; it’s the only thing I can claim as my own anymore.

Stop. Stop thinking about what you’ve lost. It’s been lost for years now. The second she entered your life and the house in which that life was cultivated, it was no longer yours. You built it from scratch. You chopped the wood. You built it using the materials mother nature provided. You wanted something to call your own. To truly claim it as your own. The couch, the bed, the dresser, hell, even the carpet. All of them made an image. My image. My home. But with her there, how could it be mine anymore? It became ours. It’s hard to even say that it was ours since she came to reject everything that was mine, and I rejected everything that was hers. That places the house itself and everything within it in a constant state of possessive limbo, with no one able to claim anything as his or her own since the other will end up rejecting it regardless. And since one person rejects it, that means we both reject it, since it’s supposed to be our house. At the end of the day, it ends up belonging to no one.

So burning down this house, a house that was once so beautiful and holistic in its vision, was a mercy. It was sick, infected by a vision that was not my own. I let her in. I shared myself with her. Shared my home. She didn’t want any part of it. She just wanted the ideal. The perfect husband who’d conform to her decorative wills. I wanted my house back.

I hear tires squeak to a halt behind me. I shouldn’t have stayed. I should’ve left as soon as I knew the house was going to thoroughly burn, but I needed to be here to see the look on her face. I turn around to see her stepping out of her car. It’s dark out, so it’s hard to make out her face in the blinding headlights. My mind begins to run through all of the different possibilities: Shock, hatred, anger, devastation. I don’t want to face any of them but I know I have to. When the headlights shut off, everything goes dark for a moment until I finally see her face. She’s looking directly at me, her figure outlined by the flame in front of us. It’s that same look of resigned disappointment she always had whenever I walked through the door. We hold our gaze for a while. There’s nothing left to say. Nothing to do to fix what we’ve done to each other. Eventually, she walks over to me, sits on the grass, and watches the show I’ve orchestrated for us. “What happened?” There’s no inquiry in her voice, only blunt force.
“I burned the house down.” I know that’s not what she meant, but it’s the only answer I care to give at the moment.

“You know that’s not what I meant.” She’s utilizing that same, blunt tone to deliver her response.

“You know what happened, so can we please stop treating each other like children?”

Her face remains still. Not twitching or reacting to what I’ve said in any way. It’s as blank as the ceiling, only instead of bringing me comfort, it brings me the same dread as those red sheets. She seems to be focusing on something in particular. Her eyes seem transfixed on a certain point in the house. She’s unnaturally calm as if she’s finally seeing what we were, what we are. On her face, I project a future. One in which we don’t fight over what we own. One in which we don’t try to control each other.

We’ll have kids—three of them. Two boys and a girl. I try to think of what we’ll name them, probably something common like Claire or Benjamin. Maybe we’d even name one of them after our grandparents or something like that. But their names aren’t really what I’m trying to focus on at the moment. I’m just focusing on the idea of them, of our family. When the sun is covered in dark, looming clouds, we’ll all gather on that homey brown couch to watch a movie together. A new one this time, since everyone’s craving something a little exciting and different. And when the sun returns, shining through onto the grass below our feet, we’ll go into the backyard to play catch or some variation of tag. Hell, maybe we’ll even have a dog to play with, just to add an extra layer to our perfect family. Then after an exhausting day of caring for our kids, our house, we’ll take the kids to their bedrooms, put them to bed. One of us will read them a story, while the other watches in pure adoration. It’s a nice idea, having a family. Most importantly though, it would be our family.

But it was never going to happen. We’re not those parents, those people. We never had the capability for such mutual love and possession. All we had were our own selfish desires. We were only just now accepting that about each other. And all it took was for me to burn the house down.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make you happy,” she says, eyes glistening.

It’s the first time in a while she’s been sincere with me, providing a small reminder of why I fell for her in the first place. “Yeah, me too,” I say.
Cadillac Vines (digital photography), Kiel M. Gregory
Crime Scene

Hugging the rusty, 
white bathtub, 
yellowed-toenail clippings. 
In the kitchen sink, 
dishes reeking of 
sweat and seafood.

A mug, cold coffee, 
left for dead. 
A rancid, sour stench. 
Lotion—white in 
color, no fragrance, 
not 
particularly 
sticky or thick 
in texture— smeared all 
over 
every door knob 
in the house. In the
closet, several	pairs of muddy
sneakers with their soles
ripped off.

Completely coating
the office desk,

what must have been a
dozen cans of
neon orange paint.
Hanging over
the window sill,
Shea Newman—

her stomach sliced
cleanly open, and

if you looked closely,
you’d have seen her
soul ripped out also.
The soup is served late, already cool, as if the kitchen staff and waitress have come together, conspired somehow to send you a message. You eat it anyway. You’re stoned and dehydrated—even room temperature minestrone tastes great. Something between your ears and brain is throbbing. Across the room at the hostess stand, you can see a woman gesturing, not-so-subtly, at your table. You take another spoonful of soup, swallow it, force a big smile for anyone watching.

On either side of you, Emily and Jordan are still fighting.

“I never told you I was going with you guys to Jake’s,” says Emily, “not for sure, anyways.” Her words aren’t slurred, but her voice is shrill, which might just be worse. People from the tables around you are looking over now, frowning.

“What do you mean?” says Jordan, exhausted and angry. “What were you planning on doing between now and going out, then?” He takes a swig of his beer—an Italian import whose taste he doesn’t bother to enjoy—and washes it down with a handful of unbuttered bread.

They’ve been fighting for hours now. Emily showed up at your apartment this morning already pissed off, half-explaining her text exchanges with Jordan in between sips of mimosa that she mixed herself. When Jordan got to your place an hour later, the two of them hardly said a word to each other, just glared, until a few drinks each had loosened them up. That had been at the first bar. At 10:30, maybe? It’s nearly six now. They’re still going at it.

Emily pouts and crosses her arms. She’s wearing a green crop top with the bottom half of her boobs hanging out. Her shirt had been full-sized once, an Irish flag printed across its front, until Emily took a pair of kitchen scissors to the lower third of it. More recently, at the last bar you stopped at, she’d
spilled half a White Claw down her front, giving what was left of the shirt its current dark, damp color.

At least the pair of shamrock-shaped sunglasses had gotten lost during the Uber ride to dinner.

Jordan, to his credit, is considerably more put together. He’s already, at only twenty-three, showing the prowess of a functional alcoholic twice his age. You’ve never liked Jordan—you’ve sat through enough of Emily’s 3:00 a.m. sobs to fall for his fake-charming bullshit—but you /find yourself taking his side in this /fight, even if it’s only because his voice is less irritating. Emily is a pushover with the men she dates, and when these boyfriends are inevitably cruel to her, she takes it out on her own friends (usually you). There have been many before Jordan, and you’re sure there will be more after: a constant stream of assholes and burnouts about whom she refuses to take your advice.

Today alone you can point to several times—getting ready in your apartment, talking to friends from school you bumped into downtown—when Emily told anyone nearby that she would, in fact, be at Jake’s in between dinner and going out. You don’t bring this up, though—you don’t want to stir the pot. Not that either of them would listen to you, anyway.

Emily only ever manages to muster the courage to stand up for herself after enough drinks that the coming argument would anything but articulate. And Jordan, without fail, always takes the bait. In that way, at least, they’re perfect for each other.

If you were a /fly on the wall, you might even /find this argument interesting: so mindless that it’s funny. As you are, though, seated in the center of a sleepy dining room of seventy-somethings, you’re freaking out. You hate drinking—the way it makes your friends insufferable and the men they date somehow worse—but you’re starting to wish you only took one weed gummy instead of two before the bar crawl.

“Don’t give me that shit!” Jordan says, too loud. His voice is big and male. It carries across the room, bounces off the walls and into the ears of everyone in the restaurant. The people who have just been seated look concerned, instinct telling them to worry about the women sitting with the belligerent man. The ones who have been seated for a while, who have already heard Emily’s side of the argument, just shake their heads. Another woman calls a waitress over, holds her hand in front of her lips and whispers something.

You feel like you should do something, give the room a little wave that says, “Don’t worry, this happens all the time.”

And that’s when you realize you can’t, that you haven’t been moving, that you can’t move at all. You’ve been frozen in your chair for who-knows-how-long. Emily and Jordan are still bickering back and forth, repeating the same arguments louder and louder, and more heads are turning, looking at them, looking at you. Your chest is tightening, squeezing around your lungs. Your
breath is heavy. Air flows in and, slowly, flows back out. Your skin is crawling, inside and out, but you can’t worry about that now. Ignore the eyes, ignore the sounds, just focus on your breathing. One breath. One, two. Then another. One, two.

You raise one hand up to the table, grab your spoon. Its texture—cold and metal—grounds you for a second, so you focus on that instead of Emily and Jordan, tune out their words. You take another spoonful of soup, then butter some bread; do it like it’s totally natural, like there’s nothing else you should be doing. Anything mindless, anything to occupy your hands while you focus on your breathing. One, two. One, two. One, two. Focus on the sound of your lungs, your heart, not on them.

You know you should be angry or, at the very least, embarrassed—you’ve gotten far more worked up over less in the past—but you can’t muster the emotion. You’re too high. The wandering eyes of the strangers around you, confused and upset, are physically weighing you down. Your shoulders and neck are crawling, heavy yet tender. You try to slink backwards into your chair, try to disappear. Breathe in, breathe out, eyes straight ahead, focused on nothing. Your vision blurs, pleasantly.

“Is everything okay?”

One of the waitresses is leaning over your table. You’re about to speak up, say that no, actually, you’re not, but she’s not talking to you. Her arms are crossed, eyebrows lowered. She’s angry. She’s looking right at Jordan, reading the largeness of his physical presence as a threat.

“We’re fine!” says Emily, and she tries to flash a smile. She’s had about four too many drinks for that; she just looks crazy. Emily’s answer doesn’t satisfy the waitress, but she does stand down a little, thinking at the very least her interference has calmed the argument. Emily shoots Jordan a nasty look, which he returns.

“You know what we could use?” says Jordan, in the particularly pompous voice he saves for waitstaff while he’s drinking, “some more bread.” He shoves the empty basket of bread across the little table, towards the waitress. It slides halfway across the table then stops, tips over. Jordan locks eyes with the waitress. You watch her, gears turning in her head, calculating where this conversation is about to go, deciding this asshole isn’t worth her time.

“Fine,” she says, “but keep it down.” She takes the basket and turns back to the kitchen.

The rest of the restaurant is quiet. No one is watching your table anymore, you can see that much, but the deliberate way they stare at their menus and cellphones is almost worse. You know what they’re thinking. You’re thinking it, too. One, two. One, two. One, two.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” you say, suddenly, and before Emily or Jordan have the chance to respond you’re already standing, walking away. You
keep your eyes straight, bob between the few tables still in your way, avoid
the waitresses whose conversation stops when they see you. You move slowly,
with what you hope passes for nonchalance, but then someone behind you
laughs and you’re speeding up. Tucked away to the side of the bar is a dark,
unmarked door. You go to it, open it up and step inside in one fluid motion,
realize only after the door closes behind you that you’re looking at a urinal,
that this is the men’s room.

One, two. One, two. One, two.
The door doesn’t lock, either, which normally wouldn’t be a problem ex-
cept for that what you really need right now is to be alone, away from Emily
and Jordan and the waitresses and everyone else in the restaurant, their argu-
ments and their judgmental eyes. There’s a chipped sink and a dirty mirror.
Then, in a tightly packed row, a toilet and two urinals. No stalls separate
them. The room is long and narrow, hooking back behind the bar, so small
you can touch both walls at once. You hear footsteps on the other side of the
door, voices, and your stomach drops.

Your jeans around your ankles, one-ply toilet paper between your ass and
the porcelain, right arm outstretched to keep the door closed, you try, and
fail, to pee. The bathroom smells like cat litter and cleaning supplies—you
can see both in the far corner—and an uncomfortable warmth is steaming up
from the toilet bowl. You close your eyes, try to stop pressuring yourself, let
your body do its thing. Focus on your breathing, that much you can handle,
but that only makes it worse. One, two. One, two. Except the twos
are irregular, offbeat and heavy. Sweat is pooling on the bottoms of your legs.

A minute passes, maybe more. Nothing has happened and, realizing noth-
ing is going to, you get up from the toilet, pull up your pants and buckle
your belt. You wash your hands twice, jutting your butt out to keep the door
closed. You make the mistake of checking your reflection in the mirror. Your
mascara is running, for what has to have been hours, and in all the commo-
tion of dinner, no one bothered to point out the red sauce dotting both of
your cheeks. You splash sink water on your face and it helps; despite how you
look, you feel almost normal. You can’t stay in the bathroom forever, but for
this moment it’s a sanctuary.

Your high is manageable, if not pleasant, but instead of relief you feel,
for the first time all day, anger. Anger at Jordan, sure—for his arrogance,
the condescending way he talks to Emily and to you—but really, it’s Emily
you’re mad at, not him. You’d warned her about Jordan, about all the boys
like him, advice she has refused to take seriously except in hindsight. She’d
dragged you out to bar crawl even though she knew you wouldn’t have fun,
dragged you to this damn restaurant, too. Dragged you into the insanity of
their argument—at once about nothing at all and about everything—carried
out among strangers, made you an unwilling actor in this public performance of their dysfunction.

And you know tonight, tomorrow, whenever all this blows over, she won’t thank you for your help. Won’t apologize to you, either. She’ll whine a little over FaceTime about how needy Jordan is, then send over photos from a weekend trip with his parents, asking if you think they’re cute. As if if you weren’t right there on the front lines with her, caught in their crossfire.

You open the bathroom door to the sound of glass breaking. From where you’re standing you can’t see into the dining room, but you can see the waitstaff’s faces. The younger girls lean over the bar with mouths open. The older waitress, the one who confronted Jordan earlier, just shakes her head, goes back to cleaning.

Your feet are moving, sliding between tables that aren’t bothering to hide their stares anymore. In the center of the dining room, the chair you’d been sitting in is flipped over, legs jutting diagonally into the air. Jordan is leaning back, arms outstretched. His one hand had knocked over the chair, the other wrapped around what used to be a bottle of Peroni. There are shards of glass on the floor.

Across the table, Emily is hissing. “Are you serious, Jordan. Are you f-cking serious?”

Jordan’s smirk is cruel. “I forgot my wallet. What am I supposed to do?”

“You didn’t forget shit! You’ve been buying drinks all day.”

“Maybe,” he says, with slurred satisfaction. “Or maybe I’m just sick of paying for all your shit. Maybe I’m sick of your constant attitude.”

“Fuck you!” She throws a combination of cloth napkin and spat-out food towards Jordan’s face. It falls short, hits the table, and he laughs. The room is silent but also buzzing. You stay where you are, at the edge of the dining room. You can’t look away.

Emily doesn’t seem to know what she’s saying anymore. Her words slow, sound weaker by the syllable, and even at a distance, you can see the day—all the alcohol, all the arguing—catch up to her at once. She starts to talk, fumbles her words, ends up with something between a burp and a hiccup. It’s a few seconds before Emily tries to speak again, except this time, her voice is different. Unguarded, vulnerable.

“You’re a real asshole sometimes, Jordan,” Emily says, and then she’s crying. Big, juicy, drunk tears, loud and snotty, darkened with glittery makeup, right in the middle of everyone.

Jordan doesn’t say anything, just stands up from his chair. He doesn’t go to Emily, try to comfort her or apologize. Instead, he fumbles in his pockets, pulls out his wallet, throws a credit card on the table as if that’s enough. He turns his back on Emily, looks for the door and then starts towards it. His shoulder hits yours as he passes—not aggressive, he’s stumbling drunk. He
doesn’t bother to close the door behind him when he steps outside. A cool
draft blows in from outside. The only sounds left come from Emily, mum-
bling something unintelligible between snotty tears.

Emily looks up and sees you, really sees you, for the first time all day.

“He’s…he’s…” she tries to say, but can’t finish her sentence, slips back into
tears, sloppy and loud, and you know that whatever is still working in her
booze-filled brain is expecting you to come to her, hug her, tell her everything
is going to be okay. How pathetic she looks. You’re one of the crowd, now;
separated and silent, staring at her spectacle with judgmental eyes. You know
that Emily believes this is your job: damage control, showing up to clean up
her messes, wiping her the tears away. It’s been you in the past, and it will
probably be you in the future, too. But not today. Not today.

You take one step back, then another, then another. You imagine that
you’re melting into the crowd, away from the commotion, letting the distance
between you and Emily grow and grow and grow until you’re out the door.
The dark March night is cold on your skin. Across the street, you can see
Jordan shivering against a road sign, scrolling through his phone, probably
looking for a ride home. He looks up and catches you staring but you don’t
turn your eyes away, not this time. The two of you stand like that for a min-
ute, eyes locked, not saying a word. Then, in silent understanding, you turn
away from each other, head in opposite directions down the street.

With the two of them behind you, you can finally breathe. The air outside
is fresh, clean, and when you exhale it comes to life before your very eyes—
condenses into a silver fog and then, slowly, disappears into the nighttime air,
fades to black. You focus on these breaths; appreciate, for once, their beauty,
their music.

One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two.
*The Line Between* (gouache on paper), Erik Carrigan
Dear Graham,

It’s been twenty years but you were always him. I can see the face of your son. I have shown you change. I don’t know the faces of my sons. If we lived as brothers, we could grow together.

Losing you was painful. Now that drugs, now that homeless, I wonder why, brother? Where were you when I needed you most?
Possible Instagram Followers

I ask myself to sigh as I remark / on your classic acrylic / Renaissance portrait / posts / with your fifteen thousand friends / or ghosts / cruising through Hawaii / Argentina / Laos / every horizon / every jungle / White girls are taught to find power / scribbled on the ticket home / I’ve never seen you faint / or beg / or even think for too long / Silence passes between us as old and gargantuan / as the Alps / No one can find meaning in my yearnings when they’re joyful / Is this why / I hate you? / Is this how / you did it? / Washed out Polaroids / party hats / in the trash / in the morning / Learn to leave the past alone / like the rest / of us / Please squeeze the napkin in your hands during family dinners / or excuse yourself to the bathroom / where you become a phantom / in the mirror / Please sing badly / or let your skirt fly up in public / or be cruel to me / just once / so I can mean it / Is it because you don’t like me / or like me / in an unspecial way / In the way I like your photos? / Blistered thumbs / Pink Emoji / Red Emoji / Smile With / The Eyes Emoji / Is it happiness? / In the why / rather than how? / Is it cisness / paleness / prettiness / the silken ivory / dress / that drapes / over you / Little house beside / the prairies / Little home inside / your heart / Boyfriended / Bewitched / Tongue / twisted / Is it because people / are dying / Cities are burning / Because I was late / for the bus? / I know / I’m not mentally ill enough / for my friends / not wounded enough / for my art / Not interesting enough
/ to make it past / my skin / chipped nails / and pile of laundry / But this is not about me / This is about you / And how I can’t stand you / and crave you / and think about you all night long / Curse you / to live a life / like the rest of us / Please / Drop your phone / in the ocean / Lose / your house / in a flood / Find another planet / Make it a better place.
I apply to work at the Catholic school of my abuser
so I can take care of little boys like him, make sure they’re destroyed
through secular means
instead.

When my step father found out about my relationship,
he asked what kind of drugs we took together
I said,
“I don’t do drugs, I wasn’t raised Catholic.”

It’s true, I didn’t smoke until that boy had looked inside me
And I needed something to flush him and all that god worship out
to think of all the places I put my lips; on joints, plastic straws
and my very own curses.

To think of all what he wanted from me; what could he have possibly
wanted from God?

Jesus was a man once too, well, as much of a man as I am. Skin picked
elbows and pillow-soft cheeks. Tempted and tarnished.
When I didn’t get baptized, I started to float. Every chance I get salvation, I end by drowning. Is that the point?

I might believe in Jesus if he had a shitty ex boyfriend. If he was alive, I bet he would get cancelled on Twitter. It would be for the better. We need less Ex-Catholics and the colonizers we share in our Jesus-colored complexion. I might believe in God if Saints were still criminals.

Even then, I’d still sell out to debauchery. Boys like me better when there’s something new they can put into me. I did praise before I did prayer, and I’d do it all over again.

I apply to work at the Catholic school of my abuser, so I can become the world he rejected. I want to be in a church like a block party and surround myself with people who will never find me.

I don’t believe in any man.

I might believe in Jesus.

If only because I understand what it means to be worshipped when all you want is to be trusted.
Nasty Bird

A rain-streaked window was Helen’s only entertainment as of late. She stared out of it when the cheap thrills of midday television started to slow the turning of her cogs just a little too much. You really can only watch so many fluorescent flashing episodes of *Wheel of Fortune* before starting to feel your brain leak out of your ears.

Helen despised that feeling. So, she took care of herself—she tried to walk everyday, continued to tend her garden even though she disliked it, and forced herself to engage in boring elderly activities such as online chess and puzzles. She did these things not because she had any real zest for life, but because she never wanted to become one of those old women who slowly melted into their couches day by day until they inevitably slopped onto the floor lifeless as soup. At the end of a long day of fighting the battle of time, Helen allowed herself the simple pleasure of staring out the window.

Some people say they find joy in their old age, but she knows they’re full of shit. There’s nothing good about getting old. Except maybe grandchildren.

“It’s important they know their grandma,” her daughter Grace had said the first time she dropped the kids off on her front porch, hovering awkwardly. “Regardless of where we stand.”

Her grandkids—Jamie and Fiona—came over on the weekends, the best days of her life now. They marveled at her garden, even though it was not much to look at. They made messes in places that hadn’t been touched in years. She loved it most when they stood at her elbow as she made simple meals, chattering and licking their lips.

The two came over routinely once or twice a month for a weekend at a time. Her daughter never called to let her know, but it didn’t really matter. She was always home. It was during one of those special weekends when the bird’s existence was made apparent to her.
"Look! Grandma!"

They were in Helen’s expansive backyard. She took care of this land without any help; the grass was a sharp healthy green, tickling her ankles as it was starting to get a little long. The newly planted hydrangeas in her garden were coming in nicely despite the pesky weeds. She didn’t believe in pesticides, at least not when it came to the delicate flowers. The chemicals were so aggressive. The smell of hyacinth carried through the three acres of yard all the way back to the trees that separated her property from wild forest. She was hunched over her garden wondering why she even bothered anymore, while Jamie waited impatiently for birds under the birdfeeder. Fiona, on the other hand, was lying in the grass with a book.

Helen didn’t turn around. She was engrossed in weeds. “What is it?”

“The birds! They’re so cool!” Jamie was excited. He was the younger grandchild, a quick little thing full of light. His exuberant nature never failed to charm—as well as annoy, in some cases—those around him.

“Oh yeah?” she tugged at a rather aggressive root. “What do they look like?”

“Reeeeeed Robin,” he squealed. “Yum!”

She could hear him and his sister cracking up, and then a second later, he gasped.

Helen whipped her head around faster than she should have at her age. Luckily, her grandson was fine, but the birds in question were being pecked at by a large blue jay. The robins, which Helen noticed were actually cardinals, scattered away quickly. Jamie sulked.

Helen hobbled over. “Shoo!” she waved the blue jay off. It only sprung away from her touch, narrowly avoiding the swat. She came closer, and then it made its escape.

“Nasty bird!” Fiona said.

Helen halted. The world around her dulled. Nasty Bird. She took an unsteady step back, her body fuzzy at the edges.

His scurvy war pals used to call him many things—Dirty Bird, Old Eagle Eye, Crazy Bastard—but Nasty Bird was the most common. He wore that nickname like a badge of honor. His friends would laugh and jostle him in the way young men hardened by war do.

When the people who called him that were still around, she was young and beautiful, and he was striking. He had the kind of boyish charm that made other women fidgety around him, and Helen suspected that he liked the way she never succumbed to his power. She knew she was lucky to have married a man who admired her ability to stand on her own two feet. However, a war fought on foreign soil can have casualties at home.
Wives of soldiers often know suffering more intimately than people give them credit for. All you have to do is look into the eyes of a woman who has loved a man a world away, and you know what she carries. Helen knew people tended to feel grateful for men like her husband; men like him took on all the most intense rage and pain of the world for themselves. But where does all that rage and pain go? What happens when the angry man you love is not a world away, but sitting at the kitchen table?

They fought frequently after he came back. Her husband had left a light-hearted, progressive man who appreciated her for who she was; he came back another creature entirely.

“You don’t know what it’s like out there!” he yelled.

She pinned him with her eyes. “You’re absolutely right. I don’t, but I know what it’s like here at home, and I worry—”

“I don’t need a silly housewife worrying after me. I survived a war, a battlefield—”

“You,” she stepped closer to him, “do not get to speak to me that way!”

“What is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

A spark, like a crack of lightning against her face.

At least now she finally had his attention. He scrambled, clearly upset, and fawned after her in the aftermath.

“I’m so sorry Helen.” He pressed a cool washcloth to her face.

“I don’t know what got into me.”

“It was a mistake.”

“It will never happen again.”

“I promise.”

Helen cared for her husband, but even when she was young, she was not naive. She knew how war had killed her friends’ husbands’ souls, and she knew at that moment that it wouldn’t be the last time.

“Grandma, are you okay?”

She blinked her eyes, clearing it all away. They had come back inside a few hours ago, lured by the promise of cold lemonade. As reality swam back into view, she noticed the blue jay from before was back at the feeder. The annoying little thing hopped around contentedly for a while then fell still. It gazed toward her reflection in the window, unmoving. Like it was challenging her. She turned away from the window, smiling at Fiona.

“I’m okay, baby,” she said.

“Okay.” Fiona smiled back. The girl was absolutely lovely; blonde and freckled like her mother. She had a quiet, observant disposition that her brother lacked. It made Helen worry.
“Why don’t we get dinner started? That way we have time for dessert before it gets too late.”

The children cheered in unison, and Helen felt her insides brighten.

After Helen prepared a dinner of her famous Kraft mac and cheese—and more importantly to her grandkids, homemade chocolate chip cookies—everyone settled into the comfort of night. The children were sated by food and the soft drone of the boxy TV in Helen’s bedroom. She was almost asleep herself when she got a call. She got so few; she hovered for a moment in contemplation before answering.

“Hello,” she said tentatively. Best not to wake the kids.

Grace’s voice surprised her: “I assume they’re asleep?”

“They’re asleep,” Helen said.

Grace sighed and something about hearing her voice over the telephone made Helen imagine her as an old woman—her headstrong, corporate lawyer daughter as a graying, wrinkly lady with nothing to look forward to except her own grandkids. It made her sick.

“I’ll be there first thing tomorrow morning,” Grace said. “You know I hate leaving them overnight, but work’s a disaster and I can’t leave in good faith. Does nine o’clock sound okay?”

“They can stay as long as you want,” Helen said. After a moment she added, “and you should get some rest.” She tried to sound authoritative, but it came out weak.

Grace didn’t seem fazed. “I’m glad I could finally start leaving them with you,” she said. What Helen knew lingered beneath those words: I’m glad he’s gone. It hovered in her mind.

“I love having them here.”

This transparency surprised her, but maybe this night was one for honesty. Maybe with the shield of a cool blue evening they could make things better.

“Okay, I’ll be there in the morning.” Grace hung up.

Or maybe not. She could feel her daughter closing herself off before she even heard Grace’s words, and it stung. She laid in the bed for one more quiet moment staring at the chain that hung from her ceiling fan. It swung, and it swung, and it swung. She knew that in her kitchen the curtains swung too—the wind would make it so with its hollow moan. Helen imagined that blue jay might even sleep on a swinging branch. She felt nauseous, seasick from the sway of it all. She wondered if the swinging would ever stop.

The next morning, the very same bird woke her up with the sound of his screeching. In her post-dream state, it sounded like a blaring alarm. She
sprung from her spot on the loveseat only to find no emergency. The house was not burning to the ground, and there was no burglar; only a devious blue jay who seemed to cackle at her fear. Still, she needed to check on the kids. In her sudden and panicked awareness, the desire to see them was overwhelming.

She made her way to the bedroom. Although she had spent some time watching a movie with the kids there last night, it had recently become more of a spare room since she could no longer sleep on her back. Jamie slept deeply on the bed right where she left him, his mouth open and drool pooling on the pillow. Fiona was curled on the air mattress with her eyes open. She sat up quickly.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

Helen smoothed her graying hair and let loose a breath. She must look haggard. She despised her body for its inferior mechanisms. At least, she pondered, she’d gotten up at all. She’d trade fitful sleep for the ability to be alert any day.

“Everything is fine, Grandma was just startled.”

“What scared you? Was it a nightmare?”

Her granddaughter’s eyes were wide and light, and though Helen searched for them, she could not see any shadows creeping in. It relaxed her to notice the lack of curve in her granddaughter’s back, the lightness of her shoulders. She was pure, clear joy.

“No, no sweetie. It was that bird again,” she said. “The one that bullied the cardinals away.”

“Oh,” Fiona said, standing up. “Can I help you make breakfast?”

Helen smiled. “Of course.”

They walked to the kitchen together, past the window and the lumpy loveseat where Helen slept. She maneuvered carefully over the tiles.

“Your mother called,” she said, pulling out a pan from a low cupboard, “She said she would be here to pick you kiddos up by 9:00 this morning, but...”

The clock read 10:42 a.m.

Helen squeezed Fiona’s shoulder. “I think work is holding her up.”

“It’s okay.” Without a word, Fiona started grabbing milk, eggs, and measuring cups. “I figured that’s what happened.”

They worked in silence as the morning light softened the hard edges of Helen’s home. Maybe she felt her edges soften a little too.

Of course there were good times, enough of them that Helen would often block out the horrors of her past in favor of focusing on the moments of tenderness. Sometimes, when she leaned uncomfortably into her chair-bed at
the end of the day, she'd grasp for these good memories pitifully—if only to find some tiny relief.

The day she returned to most frequently was an early date with her husband. He was all bright smiles and gentlemanly gestures in those days—he held the door for her and pulled out her chair. He took her for a nice dinner, and, like any young kids looking for trouble back then, they went dancing afterwards. His hands were gentle. This was before he was a military man, when he was less fit and more fun. When he laughed easily. When she fell in love with him.

By the end of that night they were sweaty and breathless. A slow song drifted between the crowd, which thinned out as single ladies and solo gents left to get drink refills or make a hasty retreat together. The two of them stayed, and while they danced Helen thought about love.

There were also those nights she spent sitting by his bedside towards the end. Those nights were an altogether different kind of good memory; a less wholesome kind. She remembered them well because she finally had the power. He was the one groveling at her feet for the first time. He was the one asking for forgiveness. She had never been religious but in those months—ones in which she had to feed him, and wash him, and help him stand up—she started to see how some of that Jesus-talk her mother used to spout was sort of true: maybe there was something to be said for loving your enemy. Maybe there was something to be said for turning the other cheek.

Still, she wasn’t a saint. She didn’t forgive him, and she’d never know if that was the right choice or not. An animal might be rotten if it bit the hand that fed it, and her husband was by all accounts a rotten animal; a nasty bird. But he was also human—and that was the reminder that always twisted the knife when she thought about how she denied him his peace in the end.

Helen flipped a pancake, admiring the smooth cooked side. Fiona filled cups with orange juice.

“Go wake up your brother,” she said.

Ever her mother’s daughter, the little girl didn’t object. Soon they were all sitting at the table munching happily; the juice was tangy, the pancakes were warm. Helen glanced out the window from time to time, checking on the bird feeder. The pest hadn’t come back yet, but Helen was strangely paranoid he would. She was already planning ways to be rid of him.

A ring at the doorbell interrupted their peaceful eating.

The children sprang up from their seats. Fiona opened the door without looking through the peephole. They knew it was their mother because nobody else ever came here.

“Mom!” Jamie jumped and hugged her.
“Hey you,” Grace said.

Fiona greeted her mother with a calmer embrace. Grace kissed the top of the child’s head, and they grinned at each other. It struck Helen then that her daughter was a really great mother; that she had something inside her that Helen never did and never would. She wondered where she got that from.

“Go grab your stuff.” The kids scurried off at their mother’s gentle command.

Grace took a few steps into the house but didn’t sit down. “Mom.”

Helen didn’t respond, and the tension was like a third person in the room. She only shook her head. The short conversation last night hadn’t done anything; they would always be like this. Desperate to do anything other than sit like a decrepit old lady at her dining room table, she got up and started piling dishes in the sink.

Fiona and Jamie tumbled back out into the room with their overnight backpacks. They gave their grandmother quick hugs and said goodbye.

As soon as they shut the door behind them, the silence echoed. Helen felt it settle back into all the places that collected dust when the kids weren’t around. There was nothing worse than the dawning hush of a dead house. She felt enormously tired, but she started washing the dishes anyway.

The next day, she decided to get rid of that bird once and for all. It was tormenting her, and it had scared her grandson. It had to go. She had read in a Better Homes and Gardens magazine that blue jays dislike the sound of windchimes, and that they don’t care for safflower seeds; these would be her weapons.

She took a quick ride to the hardware store to gather her arsenal. As usual, the teenager who worked the register took forever, and Helen did little to hide her impatience. As soon as she got home, she devised a plan. She would fill the top of her birdfeeder with all the safflower seeds it could hold and see if that deterred the beast. Though she detested the annoying clanging of chimes, she would put them up if the bird insisted on being a nuisance even after her change in seed. If it persisted after that…

She’d load the twelve-gauge collecting dust in the shed and shoot the damn thing.

Okay, maybe she wouldn’t do that. She wasn’t a very good shot, and she’d never actually had to use a shotgun. She tended to avoid the shed when she could. So many of his things were left there.

Shoving away the thoughts of shooting and killing, Helen gathered her materials and marched to the backyard. She stuck her nose up into the air in defiance and poured the safflower seed into the feeder with a heavy hand. She
then stood for a moment, hands on her hips, and looked around to see if any blue jays dared to face her.

They didn’t. Or at least not yet. She suspected that stupid bird would be back soon, but she hoped a taste of that seed would send him away. In the meantime, Helen walked back through her garden and into the lonely house. There was nothing to do now but wait.

It had been three weeks of hoping the blue jay would leave, but the bird just kept coming back.

In the mornings when she usually spent reading or sitting on the back porch, he was there. During the midday when she would throw together a cup of tea and sandwich at her kitchen table, he was there—the bird feeder so glaringly visible from every angle. When she took naps she was snapped awake by his call; when she tried to focus on anything else, her attention was pulled back to him.

Helen supposed it could be karma from a past life; it could certainly be premature karma from this life, as she had done enough harm to warrant such a haunting. It was possible all of that bad juju she had succeeded in tallying up in her current body had filled up in her next life and boiled back over into the now, like a pot she left too long on the stove.

It was just as possible that the Better Homes article she read was straight bullshit.

It was morning. Helen was sitting on her back porch with a coffee and a crossword puzzle, trying not to sulk. The world was dreadful and quiet. She pretended to be engrossed in the puzzle for nobody except her and the wind, when in reality she found herself counting down the days until she’d likely be seeing Jamie and Fiona again. She wasn’t fooling herself, and she doubted she could fool nature.

As she sat and sipped and sank deeper into the hazy yellow day, nature made itself known to her the way it had been for several weeks now: with the screech and chirps of cardinals being harassed by the blue jay.

She glanced up to take in the scene. Once again, two little cardinals innocently picked and prodded at the seed only to be interrupted by the torment of the blue jay. Her eyesight hadn’t gone yet, as she could see from her porch the way the black markings on the bird’s head streaked into a menacing hardened brow. His beak was curved just slightly in a grin as he ripped at the cardinals’ feathers—a grin that only seemed to intensify as they let out their pierced cries for mercy.

That was enough. She curled the puzzle book in her hands, turning it into a viscous club. She pulled herself up from her wicker chair with a sudden ferocity and rushed down the porch steps towards the bird feeder.
The cardinals took flight in fear, but the blue jay held his ground. She saw red as she lunged toward him, harder and meaner than she ever would have if the kids were here. He flittered for a moment but annoyingly circled back to the feeder and let out a loud caw.

She swung.

She swung harder.

On her third attempt to nail the bird, she actually made contact. She whacked it pretty good, and the creature squawked in pain before making its hasty retreat. She then lowered herself to the ground, desperately trying to catch her breath in the wake of her attack. Once her breathing started to even out she noticed there was something tingly about her hands, possibly from clenching them harder than she ever had before. There was also a biting feeling in her lower stomach that threatened tears. She couldn’t place it.

After that, the bird never returned. Helen could sense the fear she was so used to carrying around slowly easing. Before, her life and past had swirled around her head daily; thoughts baiting thoughts, like vultures circling a bloody carcass. Now, she simply went about her life. Everyday it became a little easier.

Today was her anniversary. She had tried desperately to erase this day’s importance in her memory through sheer force of will, but no amount of newfound serenity would ever allow her to forget. She knew she would have to get out of this house and away from the ghosts that loomed around every corner. She would run all of her errands today. Even if she couldn’t really forget today’s significance, the least she could do for herself was pretend.

When she got back to the house, Grace’s car was parked in the driveway. She stared at it for one minute—nearly two—before getting out of the driver’s side of her own car. Was this it? Had she actually lost her mind?

No, but maybe something bad had happened to her grandkids. Why else would the daughter who hated her be here today of all days? The thought had her rushing to the front door, her grocery laden hands shaky.

Inside Fiona and Jamie colored on her dining room table, perfectly content. She sagged with relief as their heads snapped up and they ran to her screaming, “Happy birthday Grandma!”

She hugged the children tightly. Probably too tightly, as her grandson squirmed and slipped away after only a moment. She let go and did a double take when she saw Grace there, actually sitting on the couch.

“I let it slip that it was your birthday,” Grace said. She turned her attention back to the “The kids wouldn’t stop begging me to let them come by.”

Helen was at a loss for words for a moment. Her birthday wasn’t for another two months, and her daughter was nothing if not attentive when it came to important dates. Was this some cruel prank?
She didn’t want to upset the kids or worse—have to deal with the disappointment of losing their presence after being promised it, so she went along. After they ate cake and ice cream, and Fiona and Jamie sang the loveliest Happy Birthday tune Helen had ever heard, their mother corralled them into her car. As Helen sipped a coffee, preparing for the quiet of a childless house, Grace stepped back in.

Grace spoke first. “I slipped a $50 in the card Jamie made for you,” she started, sounding almost professional. “Although as you saw it might be a little sticky from the glitter glue, I told him not to use that crap—”

“It’s not my birthday,” Helen cut her off. Grace looked bewildered. “What do you mean?”

“My birthday is in September.” Helen took a deep breath. “Today is the day your father and I got married.”

“Oh. Oh my god…”

Grace scrolled through her phone; a calendar app, Helen supposed, and raked her hand through her hair in disbelief. Time seemed frozen as Helen gazed at her lap, and Grace stared at her feet. A table, an ocean, a world between them.

After a moment, Grace collected herself. “Why did you let him stay, Mom?” The words seemed blurted, but Helen noticed how she refused to back down. “You were the strongest person in the world to me, but you let him—” She stopped abruptly. Helen imagined there were some things even her strength couldn’t allow her to say.

“He hurt us,” Helen said, letting the truth spill into the air between them. Helen couldn’t look at her daughter. She didn’t want to have to face the shadows there, the curve of her back, or the heaviness that rested on her shoulders. Heaviness put there by her own mother. What had she done?

“I’m sorry.” Helen said it without thinking. She knew from personal experience how little ‘I’m sorry’s’ meant.

When she finally looked at her daughter, she noticed how strongly she stood. Immovable.

“I don’t forgive you,” Grace sniffed, hastily wiping a runaway tear. “But I do love you.”

Once again, Helen recognized that biting sensation she had felt after she attacked the blue jay. She could place it now—it was the feeling you have after you’ve hurt somebody. The feeling you have after you’ve hurt yourself. She started to cry, and after years of silence it felt cathartic.

“I don’t forgive me either,” Helen said. She desperately wanted to embrace her daughter, but couldn’t. Instead she wiped her own eyes, took a shuddering breath, and pushed all the broken pieces back into place. “I love you too,” she whispered. She watched her daughter walk out her door.
She sat back down on her couch. Her coffee became cold as she stared out the window, searching for anything but mostly looking for the blue jay. She stayed there until morning light and thought about how gentleness is akin to roughness; how we are born not with wings, but with hands—and that maybe those hands are meant to both hurt and heal the very same.
Mindfull (watercolor), Sophia Turturro
Penoptics (watercolor), Sophia Turturro
Open Up Your Skull

The young girl—she was light and breakable, like an insect. Body an artist’s mold. He had to dig a hole fit for a chest. So he could squash the bug. A trail littered with blood and leaves. Her screams make the dog bark.

Her hands torn from birch bark. He continues his work by faint light—heaving, grunting, slurring. It leaves him tired and spent. He created a mold of her perfect skull in his mind. It was firm. A ripened squash. He would keep her in his chest, close to his heart. A hidden chest, buried under sheets of white bark. But her face had become a misshapen squash. Her skin purple and light, bread covered in mold. Under the birch trees, her throat full of leaves.

It pains him that this is how he leaves her. He thinks about her deflated chest, her lungs of black mold. When he comes to visit her the dog will bark. He studies her face, light extinguished. Stomach gutted like a squash.
She will forgive him. For his thoughts—he had to squash
Down fall his tears. Down fall the leaves.
Her bones are light.
He digs his hands into her chest,
his skin like bark.
He will never be able to mold
her thoughts. The lichen on the trees is mold.
By bystander birch trees, a rotting squash
slept there. Under white bark,
and lifeless leaves.
A buried chest.
And then it began to become light
again.
I have become the pet of my night class, 
sharing my favorite part of a dead aunt’s name claimed mine—
clad in a corduroy jumper, fluttering hands 
struggle through the make friendly part of beginnings.
All older than me, the others coo in the 
hard plastic seats making room for the tiny girl with too big 
dimples…I am now Lynnhoneyhowareyou.

They take me with them on their 15-minute breaks 
to the Nabisco and Coke-sponsored vending machines in the building next door. Do you drive yet Lynnhoney? Get rides 
from my momma on her way home to the city. How do you get there when she doesn’t come? They hover, make 
me nervous like all the parents in the world suddenly turned their overpowering rays of worry on me. Start sweating now.

Spend the night at my partner’s place sometimes. The Jew? 
You mean the man who walks three blocks to carry my leather-bound bag 
and my hand when I’m afraid to go there? Alone? I thought Jews are more conservative about…that? You mean the lovely boy who 
brushes my hair and thinks my voice is more important 
then Plato and Shakespeare. I didn’t think that was serious? Just as serious 
as the shea butter in his shower and my dent in his mattress.

Lynnhoney it’s just a little different, that’s all. Look at the girl 
glancing off the windowpane. Look at the milky coffee skin. Smooth the edges and 
kinky curls. Run my fingers against the smooth dark hair on my
tummy. See a mixed girl with a group of blond ghosts. I am different. You are more beautiful than different, Lynnhoney don’t worry, you are special. The boys nod along to this apparent truth. The girls twist my curls and caress my bright round cheeks.

I am more beautiful than different.

What happens when I am no longer beautiful, but just different?
A Thruway Ramble

I wonder if I could build a house
out of the things on the side of a thruway.
The rocks by an aunt’s house,
shards of broken glass, spare tires, metal
from street signs, wildflowers, or those
from someone’s roadside garden,
panel tile of a sidewalk, a stuffed animal,
the wind stolen from a child’s grasp,
plastic grocery bags with red smiley faces
saying thank you, thank you, thank you,
bottle caps beside mismatched bottles,
an empty, grease-stained McDonald’s fry cup,
dog toenail clippings, PVC pipes from a
water park sold to a regular homeowner,
cigarette butts, shed snakeskin, a still
and disemboweled fawn, and every
other footprint we forget we leave behind.
F**k War! (oil on canvas), Harry Wyatt
Ode to a Cowboy

You insist you'd rather be a ghost
Wandering untethered from one place to the next
And I think maybe I used to believe that too.

But I also think that people can be resting places
Soft spots to land, to hang up your hat
And be washed of the day’s dust.

A soft spot can be hard to show
Because that’s where the arrows find you
And leave you with scars that sparkle like spurs.

In the five o clock shadows and seven o clock sunsets
We lend the pieces of ourselves we can afford to lose
Until we are tangled together like so many old reins.

I think if there is a god
He makes cowboys two of a kind
And scatters them over the desert in the hot sand.

The chances of finding each other
Before the animals do are slim
But maybe this is the oasis.
Lately, the word ascension has been surfacing more and more, along with ascend, its root. The term originates from the Latin ad, meaning “to,” and scandere, meaning “climb.” The word and its different forms of speech have been adopted widely as western terms to describe the climbing of many things—ladders, stairs, social strata, thrones, morality, afterlives, celestial position, and countless other inclines. Inclines that lie ahead in space and time. To move toward higher elevations is to ascend to them. The experience of ascension is appealing, magnetic. Some are drawn toward it, upward to it, as an optimistic conclusion to whatever low living came before.

There is a specific type of almond called the bitter almond. Unlike their milder, tastier supermarket relatives, the bitter almond is unsavory to humans, the result of an aversion developed over the many thousands of years humans evolved in the region now called Iran. The bitter almond is still abundant in this region, but foragers beware. What’s bitter about this almond is a toxin capable of natural molecular decomposition once it is ingested and digested by humans. Its sugar and hydrogen molecules break down, leaving a different compound behind, called cyanide. Cyanide first makes the body feel hot and sleepy before it makes the body dead. The naturally occurring, bitter-tasting compound found in bitter almonds is called amygdalin, from the Greek word, amygdale, which translates to almond. In summary: early Mesopotamians gathered and ate deadly almonds, deadly enough that they began to taste nasty, until a scientist in 1830 finally decided to name its toxin after the
I am suddenly a child again, of an age somewhere between four and nine, young enough to be frightened by nightmares but old enough to remember. My mother calls me the man of the house, which feels forced because at such a young age I cannot grasp manhood. Anxious, I ask her what she means, and she clarifies; it is only for a few days and my father is going to return home before I know it. I believe her. I trust her. No reason not to because she doesn’t lie. I don’t have a sibling yet and my mother doesn’t work, only my father does. He travels for business; not weekly, but often. So, she pays me more attention than is enough and brings me to all of the places she believes are important. To school. The drug store. Neighbors’ houses to socialize. The library. The summer carnivals. She tucks me in each night and like the exemplary mother that she is she wishes me to have sweet dreams. However, while I’m the man of the house, my dreams are often not sweet. They can be bitter, foul, and emotional, those terrific nightmares that invade and overtake. I lay in bed, sweaty and worried, hot from all my blankets, unable to sleep until sleep’s descent turns involuntary.

The full definition of ascend cannot be construed without also considering its antonym, descend. This is because descend carries an equivalent yet opposite complexity, descending the physical—ladders, stairs, planes, hot air balloons—and descending the conceptual—ranks, ethics, emotional states, afterlives. To move toward lower elevations is to descend to them. Much like ascend, one can descend to or from, the direction dependent upon the contextual demands. Descending to someone is different than descending from someone; the former by choice as one might bequeath something, the latter by unavoidable inheritance. By surname. By parental edict. By blood. A descendant. Oddly—no—dreadfully, one can also descend upon, implying that harm is to be done.

Amygdalin can be found in the seeds and pits of other fruits. Apricots. Peaches. Plums. Apples. Cherries. Fortunately for fans of these fruits, the pits are too big and typically tossed aside, or they are small enough to be passed if accidentally swallowed down. To repeat the warning is prudent; grinding or chewing these kernels, seeds, or pits too much will cause fatigue and occasionally death. Both mild and severe cases requiring medical intervention have been reported. Eating the sweet flesh of the fruit will have the opposite effect,
though. Rarely are these cases reported upstream. Peaches and apples, favored especially when hand-picked, can make for especially lively afternoons.

In the nightmare it is dark and I’m lying in my bed staring at the invisibly black ceiling, my bedroom door always open a crack. Light creeps in. Again, I’m only this many years old, so my senses invent fear and demand the security of light, even if artificial. That is when I hear glass break. The glass breaks at the same volume every time, from the same direction. It is only twelve steps from here to there, through the doorway to the end of the hallway. I’m lying in bed counting the steps, another three to the top of the stairs that descend to the front door. A short staircase in what my mother calls a raised ranch. The glass. It might be a water glass, except that I hear the twisting metal handle and peeling weatherstrip sounds of our heavy metal front door beginning to wax open. My mother is asleep almost directly underneath me, below in the basement bedroom, alone. We’re both alone. We’re both heavy sleepers, but I’m wide awake, the covers now tossed aside while I sweat my silhouette into the sheets. My feet barely touch the floor, so I barely make a sound. Someone else, whose feet can touch, do touch, touching and dirtying the foyer landing, some hulking shadow is there. In the house. I decide.

Ascendent is naturally confused with ascendant. An ascendant ascendent is a rising parent, or, more generally, an upward-moving position of power or control. An ascendent ascendant, oddly, dreadfully, perhaps nightmarishly, can mean the same exact thing. One retains its Latin etyma while the other adopts a French variation. They are both a noun and an adjective. Both. So, too, are descendent and descendant. Kindred and symmetrical is each interchangeable pair. Coincidentally concurrent and perhaps altogether ascendant.

This information about the brain, is another adjacent scientific fact related to bitter almonds that kill and to peaches that enliven afternoons. In vivo, at the center of the brain tissue, confined deep beneath the cerebrum, south of the thalamus but north of the cerebellum, nestled alongside its alma mater the hippocampus, is the almond-shaped mass which neuroscience calls the amygdala. One of its primary functions is to control emotional response as it relates to survival. Anxiety. Fear. Flight. Aggression.

In the darkness of the hallway, I am peering around the corner into my father’s normally empty office, opposite the staircase. The man is dressed in
black, very tall and slouching over, almost headless from this anterior angle, all heavy in the shoulders and hands. Gloved hands, leather hands. In his right hand is a crowbar. Sometimes, this is when I wake up, anxious. Other times, the office is empty as usual, and when I peer to the right, toward the staircase, at what is practically eye level for someone ascending the first stair, I see the black leather gloves, reaching in through the broken glass, unable to reach far enough inside to turn the knob. Then the glass breaks again, and again, angry at me, and I’m seeing the huge shoulders, entering and closing the door behind him. In his right hand is the crowbar. Sometimes, this is when I wake up, afraid. Other times, the office is empty as usual, and looking right I see the door that is already open. Too late to witness the breaking and entering, I begin to rise slowly from crouching, seeing glass broken, angry already, and I’m looking down to see the man there below. He is broad, heavy in the shoulders, and hunching over, ducking down into the basement from the lower flight of stairs, to descend upon the basement bedroom, and I don’t wake up. I don’t wake up at the sight of his crowbar. I don’t peel away in fear. Instead, I see myself leaping over the banister, wrapping my arms around his huge neck. I make myself heavy, heavier than his shoulders. A brave stunt meant only for dreams, never nightmares. He is shouting, angry and leathery, which is all I truly want. A shout to send a warning call downstairs to my mother—to be the man of the house. In the end, the nightmare mandates that his right hand drops the crowbar, and that there be a moment of terror in the time it takes the crowbar to hit the concrete basement floor as his leather hand reaches for my face. I’m never sure if I make a difference. The crowbar sound always wakes me up.
*How Do You Feel?* (oil on canvas), Alyssa Cusimano
Transplant

There once were three orphaned organs that needed new homes

Two monkeys sit side by side, restrained
Good, he thinks
They will be of use

Heart, Kidney, and the Lungs
Kidney and the Lungs are placed in SCS for two days
Heart only has four hours, maybe six depending on good behavior

Monkey 1 is aggravated
Monkey 2 is frightened
Both just as easily succumb to the anesthesia

Heart is then given a new home in Victor
Heart loves Victor, and Victor loves Heart

Tubes connect Monkey 2 to Monkey 1
Nourishing Monkey 1’s body and so

Kidney and the Lungs reach day two
Kidney’s new home is Frank, the Lungs get Elizabeth
A scalpel separates the skin, arteries, nerves, and bone
That connect the monkey’s heads to their bodies
Monkey 2 dies in order to satiate Monkey 1’s brain

Victor’s heart now beats steady as a rock
Frank doesn’t have to worry where his waste goes
Elizabeth can breathe easier than ever

Monkey 1’s head is placed upon Monkey 2’s body
They wait for Monkey 1 to regain consciousness
When he awakes he is aggravated just as he was before
Monkey 1 cannot move Monkey 2’s body
Monkey 1 is put down
It was the ethical thing to do

What perfect pairs they make.
FRANCES SHARPLES

blue variety

you are body of three men a night
of finite anticipation
you are body of two women before me
you explain medically
you are body of knowing my mother’s name
and the parts of me that have not been fed
you are perfect in timing
of coursing and courting and arching and breath
of secretion down my throat
of smoking before we meet
of polite asking of relapse
of namelessness
of telling me the blues
and browns of my hanging closet which is not as big as yours
which does not smell like stale cigarette smoke
and i ask you to sleep over
as though i know your last name
and you call me to ask about the story of mine
and the art prints you collected today

i am body thoroughly practiced in loving in distance
i am body thoroughly practiced in empty calling and the hardness
of wait and lack of weight
i am wanting in every word you say
i am wanting in your touch of whatever variety
i am body getting in the car that might be yours
i am cutting my hair
in the morning in crunched sandy light
in light you forget

i am body shedding on the tile
i am body offering you toothpaste
and the light offers you blue
and brown
and you dye every inch of your image
i am teaching you word games
and you are teaching me patience
and you are body matching your palm to my face and
they are a perfect fit
your fingers in my mouth
and i tell you you can make me say anything
and you don’t
and really you are not much bigger than me but you hold my
body exclusively in the crook of your neck and i taste sweat trace a chest tattoo and you leave in the morning and i go back to bed breathe into my hands one on my belly, one on my chest i am body childish you are body of six days my elder i am body of rebuttal and i have never written fourteen pages of poetry about you you are body of reason and recycled paper rhythm you are body of mesh and reformation i am body in the crook of your neck
There is nothing pretty left
to write because the photographs
we developed in Vermont
have not changed. The flowers
we kept on the windowsill
are mauve and jam
and amethyst. The dinner
we left out overnight
has flies. Your naked body
sinks into the couch
beside me. My hair clogs the drain.

A camera that lets me stay here forever: In the mattress on the floor.

In the brash
blankets and lacerations.
In the ash-filled canoe. In the pond
behind our house, where
we strip fast and clean. We
wade and remember when
we fucked in the river behind
your childhood home
post-foreclosure. We listen
and you know the sounds and smells—
toad spring chorus, eastern newt, loon,
garter snake. I lift to the sound
of your voice and it is murky,
deep and warm. I float into reeds.
Wind whistling through, sharpness, spring chorus,
southern bog lemmings. My breath
popped and leaking. Your feet damp
on the shore. Dragonfly. Deer tick.
Peregrine falcon, you find
the camera. Focused and kind.
My lungs filling. My sound
drowning. Your skinny fingers
push down. The only shot that came out blurred.
I Know I’m Going to Die

I grew up in hospital beds, dragging an IV pole behind me like a wooden pull toy. Nurses piled ice on me like blocks. A TV in a cubby, like the empty one in my third grade classroom, played my favorite movie over and over again so that the last words I heard after closing my eyes were the lyrics to *Part of Your World*.

I didn’t know I was about to die. My mother either didn’t remember or didn’t want to take pictures, preferring her last photos to be of a seemingly healthy child and not one whose body was already pale enough for a too-small coffin.

Doctors formed a ring round my rose-stained sheets, and stuck me with needles hooked to bags full of red paint to replace what I spilled. I knew that I was about to die.

I knew my first book wasn’t a real one. Real books were thick with hard covers, not a few folded pieces of construction paper containing barely a paragraph:

One day I was bLeeding enternaly, that Mean’s im Bleeding inside My BoDy So I went to the Hosiptal and at the Hosiptal I HaD the niseist nurses in the worldD My nurse’s name’s are Kelly Koral Becky and BarB I likeD all of My nurse’s and I likeD the play room to Becase I got to Do Lot’s of craft’s I also got to panit and I Dowt relly Get to Do that a Lot and I went to the
I-C-u and there I HaD the Most Butefull room ever and when I HaD to go Home I CrieD for 3 an a Hafe ouwers Stra So if you ever go to the HosaPital remBr its alot of fun oh I DiDint mechin you get free fooD.
I knew I wouldn’t live long enough to publish a real one.

Death, like growing up, was an interesting hypothetical to my friends. They agreed that I would be the first to die. It was the most logical conclusion to come to; I was the one who had to stop playing to take daily medications. They hadn’t been alive long enough to notice people were aging, that each birthday candle actually counted down instead of up. I wondered how many birthdays I had left.

When I was nine and in another hospital bed, I grew sick of the paper-thin blanket and of hiding my IV under it to sleep and of nurses waking me to take my vitals and of the IV lines tangling when I dragged the pole from my bed to the bathroom and of water getting stuck under the tape holding it in my vein when I washed my hands. I expected to grow sicker, never taller. I knew that I would die.

When I was ten I read about Alexei Romanov and how he had hemophilia. Hemophilia was a large medical word like splenomegaly. If he got so much as a paper cut, he could bleed out. I went to recess wearing a spleen guard, knowing that if I got hit by a stray ball then my spleen could rupture and I would bleed in. He died when he was thirteen. I wondered if I would live that long.

I wasn’t allowed to go to gym class with my friends. In high school, in the room meant for in-school suspension, I wrote essays on sports instead of playing them. People talk about how teenagers feel immortal and untouchable, but I always knew my life was ephemeral and not eternal.

When I was seventeen, I went to the hospital after vomiting and then collapsing in a pool of my own blood. I have outlived Alexei Romanov. I won’t live much longer.
As the anesthesia takes effect, the voices around me grow distant and unsteady. The only solid sound I can find is my own voice. I sing a lullaby, wanting it to be the last thing I hear. Is this what it feels like to die?

I have several works in progress, one of which I structured so that it would only work as a trilogy. I wish I hadn’t done that. Even the most prolific authors can only put out around one novel a year. Can I publish a real one? Will I have enough time?

When I was nineteen, I was admitted to the hospital. Then I was discharged. Then I became sick again and was readmitted. Then I was discharged. Then I was readmitted. I know that there will come a time when I’m never discharged.
Stretched Thin (steel and wood), Zach Buzzell
Man in a Box (cement, steel, wood), Zach Buzzell
Aphrodite’s Audience

Her plates look like minimalist paintings,
and I am left wondering
what kind of hunger is acceptable

She was born of Aphrodite’s shell but denounces her origins
Little bird,
if you are not beautiful
what does that make me?

At dinner, I think of stitched lips and pennied collarbones
I eat silence for dessert
and soak in the darkness of my dining room

My body is immortalized in my memories of her emaciation
She cries into her yogurt while I butter toast
The disgusting part of me

is envious
Lockdown Lockdown

They speak of the lives of children as if they’re guaranteed

I think of babies born with crosshair birthmarks,
cherubs suckling at the mouth of a gun (formula is so hard to find these days)
being alive is enough of a fight

I speak of kevlar textbooks,
parents who learned to scrub blood from school uniforms,
thoughts and prayers

They think of mothers as expendable,
a mere body,
a husk bisected by birth,
a skin that can be shed

(I think of the morticians, the profit)
The Smoker (linocut print on paper), Harry Wyatt
Tia Was Taken by
One of Trujillo’s Men

si Jefe.
I will swallow my words
and choke on ones like
libertad.

si Jefe.
I will leave behind my children
to satisfy your need
for my knees
to be grounded
en sal.

si Jefe.
I will let you use my blood as wine,
the fear in my eyes as pornography,
and my weak limbs as branches to
amarrar.

si Jefe.
Me dejaré perder
en campos de caña
para que mi república
no tenga que hacerlo.
When I Asked My Best Friend How to Say “Wrist” in Spanish

I know it’s muñeca.
that it’s the same word for doll,
porcelain or plastic.
but when I open my mouth
pieces of a broken face fall out;
clinking-crashing noises
hitting unsteady ground.

so I cave in
to the mercy
of my friend who says
the word my mind couldn’t
find a place for anymore:
a discontinued figurine long forgotten.

I wonder
if memory would do the same
to words like

*amor*
*canción*
*estrellas*
*huesos.*

If I lose these
I will be at a loss
for breath. My lungs
will collapse
like flamenco figures made of clay,
turned over to flames after being
shattered or neglected.
Cold. It’s cold here. Winter isn’t over yet. It clings to this place like a blanket, our tired bodies bowing under the weight of its lead-white folds. The walls of our cells are giants. Hyperboreans with rheumy eyes. The cold seeps, heavy and sluggish out from them like tears. There is a new inmate in the cell next to mine. As I lay in the dark I hear him weeping. I want to tell him that everyone cries here, even the walls. But instead I just lay here nursing my aching fingers, dreaming of spring.
“Question two: are you feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?”

For the last six months, I’ve taken these questionnaires enough times that you’d think I’d be able to plan my answers out ahead of time. Yet sitting here, I take all sorts of mental notes, hunched over, while my sour hot coffee breath ricochets off from my mask and into my nose, thinking: Have I been feeling down? Depressed or hopeless?

“Nearly every day,” I answer.

“So, what are you studying? You said you’re in college, right?” She asks me later after the questionnaire. This, like the questionnaires, I’ve considered routine during these appointments. I’ve lied to other doctors, even my primary one. It’s easier to tell people I’m still going to become an English teacher; there’s less judgment that way. Somehow, pursuing a career in education seems more respectable. But this doctor sees me. I notice her hand, the way it maternally comforts my thigh, and when she speaks to me, she doesn’t sound clinical. This time, I convince myself it will be different.

“I’m an English major with a minor in creative writing,” I say.

She stares into my eyes blankly as if she were in a daze. She doesn’t say anything at first, and it feels like we’ve sat there for hours trying to paint portraits of each other, trying to hone in on specific details like exactly how many eyelashes we have or how many obvious pores on our skin. Crap, I’ve made a mistake. I avert my gaze, breaking our eye contact. She waits to speak until I look at her again.

“You’re a writer,” she says, finally. She wears a mask too, but I can tell that she’s smiling because her eyes arch with delight; they look like little umbrellas on her face.
“Yes,” I say, recognizing that this is the first time I’ve called myself a writer, out loud, to a stranger—much less a doctor. “I am.”

“Wow,” she whispers. She shuffles the papers attached to her clipboard before setting the ensemble down onto the table behind her. “Writers are powerful. They’re also one of the hardest things to be.” She puts her hand on my shoulder softly and assures me, “That’s great, Jocelyn.”

I’m speechless. This doctor, who has likely spent an agonizing amount of time and money to get to where she is, who saves lives on a regular basis, is sitting here telling me that I’m powerful? She has my life in her hands—she placed it on the table beside her earlier—yet, what piques her interest is that I’m a writer? There is no response I could ever write to express the way I’m feeling.

I settle for this: “Thank you.” It’s all I can say. Again, I see the little umbrellas. I obsessively replay this encounter in my mind: I have to remember this.

“How long would you say you’ve suffered with your mental health?” she asks me towards the end of my appointment.

Oh, easy. “Since I was fourteen, but I didn’t do anything about it until about last December.”

She looks at me for a long time. I long to see the umbrellas, but I don’t this time.

“Six years? I’m just so happy you’re starting to feel better,” she says, but I feel her pity in my sinuses.

Now, I’m sitting in my car, the one carpeted with the paper bags from various fast food restaurants and the stench of sour milk from a latte I’ve yet to discard. I wipe away tears with a used napkin, trying to avoid the dried up blobs of ketchup. Are you proud of yourself? I jot down details of the visit on my phone. I smile into the blue-tinted screen, creating a ramp for my salty soldiers to follow in the process, inspiration sizzling in the back of my mind. To be a writer is to use yourself as just another source for content. It’s upsetting to me how much I miss out on; my existence, according to my brain, is a database and there’s no room for “living in the moment,” as they say. There is only the craft. And as much as I bargain with myself, Just live, silly girl, live! Those moments aren’t for me.

I title the page, “To Be Used In A Future Piece.”
Stephen J. West’s *Soft-Boiled: An Investigation of Masculinity & the Writer’s Life: A Review*

Stephen J. West’s *Soft-Boiled* follows the writer as he shadows the private investigator Frank Streets. Though much of the book takes place in rural West Virginia, West is a western New York native and attended SUNY Geneseo. To say the book is a memoir is a limiting description, as West also writes as a reporter, critic, and essayist—not only does he report his interactions with Frank Streets, but he also reflects upon his childhood and adolescence, his relationship with his wife, his experiences with fatherhood, and his purpose as a writer. In addition, West attempts to answer a question that many of us as writers grapple with: why do we write? And what does it mean to be an artist?

West’s title, *Soft-Boiled*, is a pun upon the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction, which the book both analyzes and scrutinizes. Intertwined with discussions of masculinity and artistry, West takes time to talk about the purpose of “escapist reading” and cites passages from W.H. Auden. In particular, West analyzes how these “whodunits” connect back to the idea of the Self-Made
Man—a concept that West interrogates in detail in his book. He compares, alongside Auden, the mystery stories such as Sherlock Holmes to the hard-boiled, “depressing” stories of *The Maltese Falcon* kind—a story that Auden believed to be “works of art.” However, West proposes a different conclusion: as the narrative concerning Frank Streets culminates in his arrest, West drops the fiction analysis, and begins comparing his motivation to write to his own metaphorical Maltese falcon. He begins to wish that Streets is guilty, so that his book can conclude with excitement. In the end, however, he finds himself ashamed of this fact—while also finding it ultimately inconsequential to the heart of his own story.

The Self-Made Man is a concept that is central to this book—it is one of the main ideas West seeks to understand, and it is discussed alongside other concepts such as “traditional American masculinity” and “authentic American brand of manhood.” These concepts seem to arise out of West’s questioning of his own motives: why is he writing in the first place? Very early on, West recounts an interaction between him and a writer friend, where he confesses that he is “uninteresting at a macro level” and could be described by sociologist Erving Goffman as “the one unblushing male in America.” However, West continues on about his experiences with gender theory, and writes, “Yet I blush, dear reader. I blush for my desire to matter more than my privilege. I blush for my need to make art, even when my art is not needed.” This raises an important question that is, perhaps, unanswerable—however, by the end of his book, West makes a strong attempt to answer it.

West’s analysis of masculinity majorly remains focused on himself throughout the book. However on occasion he also extends his internal discussion to the subject of his writing inspiration, the private investigator Frank Streets. As previously mentioned, West is motivated by an interest in detective fiction; it is for this reason that he chooses Frank Streets to interview and shadow while writing his elusive first book. In West’s description of his first meeting with Streets, there are numerous comparisons between the reality that West experiences and his previous knowledge of fiction: “He’s no hard-boiled private dick,” West writes, “he is a man of obtuse angles, not the stuff dreamed up in a hard-boiled novel.” However, this is not to say that Streets completely subverts West’s expectations, or that he is something beyond West’s conceptions of masculinity. In fact, West writes that Streets is a “bear of a human” and that “the room felt smaller with him in it,” all familiar descriptors for a stereotypically masculine man.

It is evident in West’s recounting of interactions with Streets that he views himself and Streets in high contrast—West, in dissatisfaction with his own masculinity, describes Streets as incredibly masculine, and himself as unfortunately feminine. This is most evident in the handshake the men share: “My hands are not small [but] grasped in Frank Streets’s calloused paw, my hand
looked girlish, like he might crush every bone in it by accident.” This is perhaps one of the most common ways that West reflects upon his masculinity throughout the book. In his descriptions of the interactions he has with others, he commonly writes his actions and dialog with negative and/or demeaning descriptors. Later on, during a meal shared with Streets and others, West describes himself as the following: “I sniffled and swallowed…I squawked…I chuckled and buried my face in my soda.” I found this detail to be intriguing; instead of using neutral descriptors, West chose these—why?

Perhaps because it lends itself to the idea that West embarked upon writing this book not only as “An Investigation of Masculinity” as the subtitle says, but as an investigation of “the Writer’s Life.” Aside from his chronicling of interactions with Frank Streets, West also analyzes his relationship with his wife and his experiences with fatherhood. In his recounting of a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, to support the writing of his wife K, West laments, “that was before El and I nearly missed our flight because he wasn’t listed on my boarding pass; before I learned that a man traveling alone with an infant is more likely a human trafficker than a father…” What follows is a moving account of West struggling with his purpose in Oaxaca, his importance to his wife and child, as well as what it meant to be an artist. Following a tense conversation with K and an interaction with a street artist, West truly seems to open up to the possibility that he will never be a “writer smirking with the secrets of the world.”

It is at this point that the main ideas of the book come to a head. To be a writer has been West’s primary motivation for writing the book—a perhaps cyclic philosophy, but not one that has gone unquestioned by West. “Fuck books. Fuck art. Fuck the desire to be petty,” West writes. “Fuck all of it. I like being ordinary…Can I also be a man? Can I also be an artist?” Eventually, Frank Streets is cleared of all charges. Despite this, it appears that West has departed from his reasoning to writing about Streets. K has received a position teaching at SUNY Geneseo, and the pair have left West Virginia. West does not return to speak with Streets about his story; instead, he takes the final pages of the book to define himself. He reflects, once again, on the idea of his purpose. At the end of the exploration, West becomes content with his insecurity, and leads the reader to become content with theirs, as well.
An Interview With Stephen J. West

Stephen J. West is the author of *Soft-Boiled: An Investigation of Masculinity & The Writer’s Life*, a book-length essay published by Kelson Books in July of 2022. In describing West’s book, Lucas Mann, author of *Captive Audience*, perhaps says it best. He writes, “In tackling a subject as ever-present and fraught as masculinity, it’s easy for writers to retreat to the two poles of the conversation: romance or ridicule. All the more remarkable, then, that Stephen J. West dances around that trap, with prose that is wry and funny and skeptical, but also deeply heartfelt and true. *Soft-Boiled* leaves no stone unturned in its investigation of this unified myth of American manhood, and West is a smart, fun, kind-hearted investigator, willing—like Frank Streets, the enigma at the book’s center—to let us ride along and see what happens next.” In addition to *Soft-Boiled*, West’s work can be seen in *Brevity, Ninth Letter, PANK*, and more. He is also the curator of the Undead Darlings broadside series. He currently lives in Rochester, NY, where he is a visiting assistant professor of English at St. John Fisher College.

*Gandy Dancer: Soft-Boiled: An Investigation of Masculinity & The Writer’s Life* is a book-length essay that encourages leaning into discomfort, and your narrator leads by example from the beginning, defining himself as someone who “blushes over [his] immense privilege” as a straight, white man. Was this vulnerability and self-awareness in your writing something that you struggled to reach, and if so, how did you manage to find this authorial voice?

Stephen J. West: My comfort zone as a writer has always skewed toward self-consciousness and wide-openness on the page. I think this is part of the
reason that as a teenager and college student at SUNY Geneseo, I didn’t feel fully comfortable writing poetry and fiction even as I felt a strong desire to write. I hadn’t really heard about creative nonfiction at that time, and felt a little lost without a “home” genre. I mean, how can someone call themselves a writer if they don’t have a form they are comfortable writing? I would fill notebooks with ideas I had for stories, outlining plots and character conflicts, thinking through metaphor and meaning, and really all of the “ideas” of writing without any of the art.

After I graduated from Geneseo, I went to graduate school for a PhD in English at the University of Iowa. But really the main reason I applied was because of the reputation of their fiction and poetry programs. I think it was a bit of luck that I discovered the Nonfiction Writing Program at Iowa. I was able to take grad workshops in CNF and learn about the essay and, 

GD: Throughout Soft-Boiled, you explore the differences between Frank Streets and your narrator, between a private investigator and a writer, while also honing in on the similarities. At what point in your writing process did you start to make these connections, and how did that inform this book as one that explores masculinity and what it means to be a good man?

SJW: I’m glad you see that the book cares about the work that writers do! I had a feeling early on that the dialogue between a private investigator and an essayist could lead me to explore the ways that writers—particularly in creative nonfiction—pursue the truth of their experiences. After I graduated from Iowa, I was skeptical of how truthful CNF can ever really be. So much of the “truth” of the genre hinges on the trust of the writer-as-narrator. I was suspicious of even my own relationship to truths, how easy it is to manipulate information into outcomes and meanings that I desire as a writer—the tail wagging the dog (I’ve always hoped to find a time to use this cliché, and here we are!). So, before I even started writing the book, I knew that I was interested in using the context of private investigation as a means to explore the relationship between writer and reader—and writer and self—that is fundamental to the genre.

The masculinity part came later. I came to realize that a project aimed at questioning the core values of creative nonfiction and how it goes about presenting subjective truth could feel too academic, too impersonal, unless I aimed that scrutiny and investigation at myself. After a few encounters with Frank Streets and my awareness of how different he and I are as people—as men—I spent some time drafting meditations on my relationship to masculinity, and then the larger cultural conversation surrounding hegemonic white masculinity became necessary the further into the writing I went.
GD: A large part of the journey in your book seems to revolve around connection with place, and how for so long your narrator “forged an identity in feeling displaced” until he makes a conscious decision to accept where he came from—Western New York. Can you talk more about the way that your perspective on place has changed, and what that means for you as a writer?

SJW: I still think the book could be even more about place. One big craft question I ask in the book is: what responsibility do writers have to the peoples and places that they present in their work? And this feels even more pressing when talking about creative nonfiction, and a book like *Soft-Boiled* in particular that uses the lives of real people and the places they identify with as an engine for the writer’s self-investigation. Place is a vital marker of identity and culture in Appalachia, and I think writing this book helped me see how important that is to the people that live there. How that place is represented matters, and I’ve been thinking more lately about how even a region like Western New York and its displacement—are we Upstate? Sub-Canadian? Eastern Midwestern?—has meaning to the people that call it home.

GD: In your book, you tell the reader so much about yourself and your inferences about the people whom you speak to, but draw the line at telling your wife K’s story of her vision loss. In your experience, how do you know what is your story to tell and what isn’t?

SJW: I don’t really know which stories are mine to tell and which aren’t! Making inferences is one thing, but the tricky nature of assuming the experience of someone else’s trauma felt like a point worth emphasizing in the book, given the importance I wanted to place on that larger question as it relates to craft. I guess for me the interesting part is the question itself—and I know that is an evasive answer.

GD: How do you deal with the imposter syndrome that you describe feeling in your book, and has that changed since *Soft-Boiled* has been published?

SJW: I wish I had a good answer for how to deal with it, but I don’t. It is so common. I saw a post on social media where someone was saying, “it’s impossible for everyone to have imposter syndrome but it seems like everyone has imposter syndrome,” or something like that. And it does seem so pervasive among writers and artists. I kind of think it is a good thing? Because doesn’t it suggest you are self-critical? And shouldn’t that be good for artists and writers, especially if they are trying to capture something real and truthful about the world? It can go too far of course, but I think some self-scrutiny is a good thing.

GD: Near the end of the book, there is what seems to be a pivotal moment while you are comparing “quiet and quarantined” art in a museum to the street art that you see in Oaxaca, how that street art was “the kind you can
touch.” How does the idea of having art “you can touch” inform this book and the type of artist that you are today?

SJW: Thank you for pointing to this moment! I think it has to do with authenticity. What is an authentic experience with art? I think that “quiet and quarantined art”—art that is finished, archived, respected, hallowed, etc.—feels like an exercise in historicizing. I want art that is an exercise in what is here and now, raw and unfolding.

GD: In Soft-Boiled, you discuss the importance of the mundane, of being satisfied with a “small and simple life.” What advice do you have for writers who worry that their lives aren’t interesting enough? Your narrator, for instance, says that he might have “a transcendent moment looking at the time stamp on an ATM receipt.”

SJW: I still worry that my life isn’t interesting enough. I’m convinced that it isn’t. But the essayist in me says that the mind can be just as important as the events of a life when it comes to writing, the thinking and the processing of it. You can aim your mind at just about anything, from the flickering lightbulb to the infinity of the universe, and trace that thinking on the page. How many essays might be written from a meditation on a single ATM receipt?

GD: Lastly, in addition to your writing, you are the curator of the broadside series Undead Darlings, which publishes pieces of authors’ works that did not make it to their final drafts. Can you say a bit more about this project, and what inspired you to create it?

SJW: I’ve always been interested in visual art along with writing. I proudly have a BA in studio art from the now defunct SUNY Geneseo Art Program. When I went to Iowa, I continued to take art classes and became really interested in bookbinding and letterpress printing through the University of Iowa Center for the Book. I’ve kept up with my self-education on printing techniques at Flower City Arts Center in Rochester, NY, and that’s where I work on Undead Darlings. Undead Darlings is a series of broadside editions where I collaborate with authors to come up with print editions that feature selections of text they deleted out of published books—the cuts that hurt the most for them to make. It’s been a rewarding way to use my training in printmaking, build more connections among the literary community, and make pretty material things as a result. You can see some of this work at undeaddarlings.com.
I’m Going To Free Myself from the Shackles of Other People’s Expectations of Me

I write in the dark after all night dancing at the disco. It’s with friends, really, that I don’t want to bash my head against the constant rotating mill of needed income and adulthood and nice pleated trousers.

I rip the adhesive bra from Amazon off of my nipples and think, /Thank god. It leaves a crust and a feeling of inadequacy—they’ve always been too far apart, and it takes the strength of an industrial ropes course carabiner to bring them together in any sort of way that screams Sex or money.

I’m writing now because Jared was high (off half an edible) at a bar in the absolute gayborhood of Philadelphia and said grace, of anyone else—I believe the most in you. It made me sweat in the kindness sort of way, when I somehow can’t believe someone would be genuine to me and not just out of convenience or marijuana or transactional flattery. We went out to smoke a
cigarette and I laughed when Jared crawled all the way up the stairs. Later we
found a black Bic lighter on the sidewalk after ours ran out of juice and he
said, You know it might be hard at first but then it will be just fine.

It's the shirts with preset boobs that really bother me because I have enough
awareness about roles I can and cannot fill.
I've had about twenty job interviews that haven't gone anywhere and a lot
of nodding that makes me embarrassed about who I really am as a person.
Dancing takes about thirteen minutes to get into and in those thirteen min-
utes I feel as if I'm slowly choking and everyone else can drink water except
for me.

I bought the Bug at twenty-one right after the worst day of my life which was
college graduation.
I had just left an abusive situationship (with a woman, no less, so more
difficult to explain to family) lost all our mutual friends and spent about
twenty-four hours in the psych ward that made me familiar with every local
homeless person in Rochester NY and there are quite a few.

My father took me to the dealership in a crude attempt at bonding.
We looked at cars he liked and I hated everything but the rogue gray Bug and
he said are you sure ok you're an adult I guess it's your money.

It had 10,000 miles and was previously owned by a woman with Alzheimer's
who lived in rural New York.

When she forgot how to drive her husband would back it in and out of the
driveway for five years until she finally forgot how to live.

They told me this as I signed the extended warranty paper not knowing what
extended warranty meant and neither did my father. My first time alone in
the car, I found a Peter Paul and Mary CD still left in the disc player.

Now at the end of an era the engine keeps coming up busted and I'm already
mourning the time I've had freedom, peter paul mary, and a loan from the
Key Bank.
It's an anointed prison, ownership, and you just don't know when you get to keep anything and when it'll all just end.

It comes with no surprise that the thing I learned the most from my father is to pretend I know something when I don't.

Sitting in the dealership he pretended to know cars. He wore a big trench coat and tried to match the sleazy newsboy tone of the dealer who saw right through him and I didn't have the chops to critique his acting.

Instead I daisy-chained a list of things I'd accomplished rattling it all off to my father.

It was one of those things where I hated every word I said as I said it and the fluorescence of it all didn't help. We stirred our Styrofoam cup black coffees with black stirrers that were the world's most ineffective straws and it was silent except for the cars lights and expectation which all bothered me.

I'm proud of you, he said awkwardly, couldn't be prouder, and I felt embarrassed that I'd seen him about three times in all of college and he felt the need to reassure me and I felt the need to need it.

And so after years of trying not to disappoint your family it's in a boyfriend's parents' basement where you feel you have to confront yourself against a quilt that isn't yours.

Laying dizzy tits out in a room with nothing familiar after passing twelve billboards that scream When you die you WILL meet god it gets hard to distinguish the carpet and family photos and stuffed bunnies from the guts inside your body.

Without the added distinction of expectation and disappointment you sip your water quietly and feel like nothing at all and a credit score thinking alas.

There is a Reformation dress and a dream for all of us.

Where is the outline of this person you keep trying to fill?
About the Authors

LIDABEL A. AVILA is a senior English (creative writing) major at SUNY Geneseo with previous publications in the college’s MiNT Magazine, Iris Magazine, and Gandy Dancer. She mostly works on poetry connected to her Afro-Caribbean background, challenges with mental health and identity, and relationships with herself and others. However, she also indulges in speculative fiction writing. When not writing, Lidabel can be found practicing new drawing styles or deep-diving on the internet about scientific theories.

ZACH BUZZELL is a father, a learning artist, and a 100% disabled veteran who recently found the healing powers of art, sculpture specifically.

ERIK CARRIGAN suffers from a rare disease known as Visual Snow Syndrome, which is an incurable disorder that gives his vision an active, static texture that leaves colors, shapes, and lighting difficult to distinguish. He was then diagnosed with vertigo. Further research proved that it all may be neurologically related. This motivated Carrigan to return to school and become a student to further explore art as a means of translating how his eyes perceive the shared world differently.

alyssa cusimano is a senior at SUNY Cortland. She is a BFA candidate with a concentration in painting. She uses her paintings to capture personal experiences with mental illnesses and living in this social climate.

MARTIN DOLAN is a writer from Albany, New York. His fiction has appeared in Barzakh and has won the 2022 Andrew Bergman Award. Find him online at dolanmart.in

GRACE (GE) GILBERT is a hybrid poet, essayist, and collage worker based in Brooklyn. They received their MFA in poetry from the University of Pittsburgh in 2022, and are a SUNY Geneseo alum. They are the author of the closeted diaries, an essay chapbook from Porkbelly Press (2022), and NOTIFICATIONS IN THE DARK, a poetry chapbook from Antenna Books (2023). They were the MCLA Under 27 Writer-in-Residence Fellow at Mass MoCA and have received support from City of Asylum as an emerging poet laureate of Allegheny County and from the Bread Loaf. Writers’ Conference. Their work can be found in the Indiana Review, Ninth Letter, the Offing, the Adroit Journal, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Diode, TYPO, ANMLY, and elsewhere. They currently teach hybrid collage and nonfiction courses at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts.

KIEL M. GREGORY teaches poetry workshops for the Binghamton Poetry Project, serves as Guest Curator
for Bartle Library, and works as an administrator for Binghamton University where he is an MA candidate. He is currently working on his thesis, a collection of poetry based around the themes of family, fatherhood, and loss. His prose and verse appear in *Lips, Stone Canoe, Hypertext Magazine*, and other fine journals. Visit kielmgregory.com for more.

Ashley Halm (she/they) is a senior at SUNY Fredonia double majoring in theater 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.

Stella Karapian, originally from California, enjoys anything mango flavored. After moving around quite a bit, Stella can confirm that she prefers the familiar mossy woods of the East Coast to the stark, lonely deserts of New Mexico, thank you very much. Some of her favorite creatives include Tamara De Lempicka, J.C. Leyendecker, Roald Dahl, Oscar Wilde, Claude Monet, and Lady Gaga. She is an English major at SUNY Geneseo and will graduate in 2026.

Bryce Levac is a creative writing major with a minor in English. He’s currently in his senior year at SUNY Oswego and plans on graduating in the spring of 2023. Along with writing, his interests include comic books, movies and video games.

Jaden Lynn is a biracial poet who finds writing to be her preferred escape from reality, along with an unhealthy obsession with Sour Patch Kids. She currently works as the editor-in-chief for a university literary magazine. She has been published in issues of *Jigsaw*, St. John Fisher’s *Angles*, and collections of *Talented*.

Aimee Maduro is a freshman at SUNY Geneseo studying creative writing and film. Outside of the classroom, they’re bound to be spotted playing guitar or staging photoshoots with their cat. A wordsmith since day one (or so they claim), Aimee aspires to be a singer-songwriter and published author.

Jessica Marinaro is a junior English (creative writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. Her work has previously been published in *Iris Magazine*, and she is a writer and editor for Geneseo’s chapter of *Her Campus*. When not at her desk writing, she can be usually found snuggled up with a book, jogging around campus, or jamming to Taylor Swift.

Mollie McMullan is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo. In her work, she explores themes of patriarchal control, the role of womanhood, and the concept of permanence.

Savannah Meyer is a junior creative writing major with a concentration in poetry at SUNY Purchase. She lives in the Hudson Valley and is a poetry editor for both *Feral Feline Lit Mag* and *Italics Mine*. Savannah is a mother to two tree frogs and loves to write about body horror and forests.

Chris Murphy is a junior English (creative writing and adolescent education) major at SUNY Geneseo. He lives, works, and plays in Rochester, New York and plans to pursue a career
in teaching and creative writing. Some of his recent inspirations include his new nephew, instrumental post-rock, and reruns of *Lost.*

**Jocelyn Paredes** is an emerging writer based in Long Island, New York. Currently, she is working to obtain her BA in English and writing at the SUNY Fredonia. Her work has been previously published in *Gandy Dancer* and her short story “Captured” received the Mary Louise White Fiction Award.

**Susan Romance** is a senior at SUNY Geneseo studying English with concentrations in creative writing and film studies. When on campus, you can find her writing poetry, playing Microsoft Solitaire, and chit-chatting with her friends for hours. After graduation, Susan hopes to study library sciences and become a librarian.

**Noah Rust** is a senior studying creative writing at SUNY Oswego. Their poems “Groom” and “To Kill a Girl” have been previously featured in the *Great Lake Review.*

**Frances Sharples** is an English (literature) major in their last year at Geneseo. Frances is the editor-in-chief of *The Lamron* and *Iris Magazine.* They write a lot and talk even more. They also cry a lot at *Marcel the Shell with Shoes On* and love all of their friends.

**Shawna Smith** is a senior at SUNY Geneseo, double majoring in English and theater. Her favorite historic event is the sinking of the RMS *Titanic.*

**Sebastian Nguyen Snow** is a sophomore creative writing major. They were born and raised in Berkeley, California until they woke up at SUNY Purchase. When they’re not writing, they’re reading the same page of a book three times and drinking chai lattes.

**Sophia Turturro** is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo. She is majoring in psychology in an attempt to better understand the abstract thought patterns that can be inferred from the nature of her slightly unsettling and mildly inaccessible art. Sophia is also proficient in MS paint and considers that to be her most marketable trait for absolutely no reason.

**Harry Wyatt** is a senior at the Fashion Institute of Technology studying Fine Arts. His classmates have helped buoy up his spirits during the pandemic. He also enjoys the fine drinking water of New York City.