



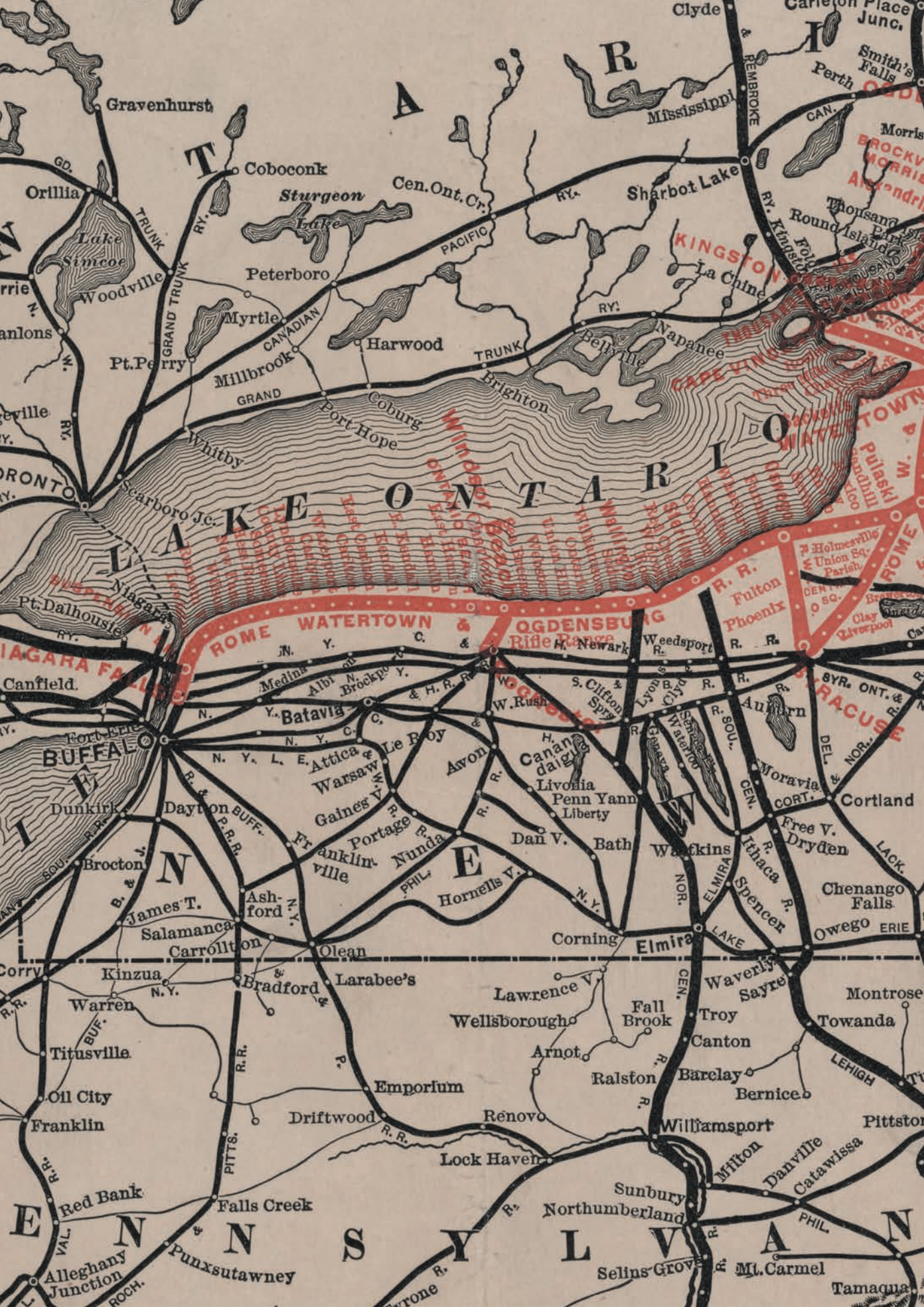
Gandy Dancer

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

Issue 12.2 | Spring 2024

gandy dancer /ˈɡɑːndi ˈdɑːnsər/ *noun*

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



Gravenhurst

Orillia

Woodville

Pt. Perry

Scarboro Jc.

Pt. Dalhousie

Canfield

Buffalo

Dunkirk

Brocton

Warren

Titusville

Oil City

Franklin

Alleghany Junction

Coboconk

Peterboro

Myrtle

Millbrook

Whitby

Niagara Falls

Buffalo

Dayton

Brocton

James T.

Salamanca

Carrlton

Kinzua

Falls Creek

Sturgeon Lake

Harwood

Coburg

Port Hope

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Brighton

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Kinzua

Falls Creek

Smith's Falls

Perth

Round Island

Belleville

Napanee

Brighton

Whitby

Buffalo

Dayton

Brocton

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Salamanca

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Falls Creek

Red Bank

Alleghany Junction

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Falls Creek

Emporium

Lock Haven

Wellsborough

Renovo

Lawrence V.

WilliamSPORT

Fall Brook

Milton

Troy

Danville

Red Bank

Alleghany Junction

Punxsutawney

Falls Creek

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Lock Haven

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Danville



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Special thanks to the Parry family and Kristen Gentry

Dear Readers,

Another semester come and gone in the blink of an eye! A final one, for some of us. It feels as though we were just saying hello, and here we are months later, with more stories, more poems, more art—for you, reader.

Managing editors of the past have remarked on how the journal and its inhabitants have made us consider the passage of time, the moving trajectory of our lives, the moments that stick with us and allow us to reflect on the past. This issue does just that. The magic, though, is the different ways in which we look back. Fondly? In abject horror or embarrassment? Enamored by hazy romanticization of the memory? Wondering what we would've done differently?

In Martin Dolan's story "Shelter," we have an evanescent view of a long drive home from a funeral. The three boys are in shock, each thinking of life and death, their existence connected and complicated. Aidan "does cosmic calculations in his head," struggling with the thought that perhaps he'd tempted his mortality too eagerly before. Max, in the backseat, can't shake the image of the man he once briefly knew, placed in a coffin and made up for grieving family. He can't even stomach the glimpses of himself in the rear-view mirror. Chris, our driver, is forced to think of the present, of the road, but he can't help but to think of family. He considers how his own family may shrink over time, and fears the position of having to "shake hands at the wake [and let] his friends watch him grieve in real time." They take a much needed rest at Lorena's diner, where Lorena and Oscar, on another terribly slow shift, watch them with sympathetic eyes. The piece asks us to slow down, to allow ourselves to be sad and maybe dwell on the past, because sometimes, that's what the body needs. The five of them share the space, watching each other, because at the end of the day, "all they can do is eat, rest, and be together."

Madolley Donzo's poem "Thanksgiving Conversations," follows a young woman, drinking to make it through an unbearable holiday with family. The speaker agonizes over what she knows will be difficult conversations. Donzo's dynamic use of white space and line breaks (like our favorite, most ominous line, "Dinner's over / but—") invite us to share the speaker's struggle; the overwhelming, chaotic, fragmented moments come through with palpable discomfort. "Watershed/Waterspout" by Kirry Kaufer also explores complicated relationships and how perception may change over time. This poem makes its impact with vivid and bizarre imagery. The intense contemplations presented are written in an unceremonious yet evocative way: "He once said,

there ain't no devil, / Only a god when he's drunk." The matter-of-fact voice of this poem's speaker was comforting in the most uncanny way.

Brianna Gamble's essay "Elderberry Wine" envelops the reader in a nostalgia both comforting and painful. Gamble demonstrates how seemingly small details can open the floodgates for old memories to come rushing back—with the mention of honey the narrator is transported, "like a dreamer remembering the waking world." Her grandfather returns to her in misty fragmented pieces. When brought to the surface through sensory experiences, memory is often something we try to rein in. Gamble captures this intensity with artful language, reaching across time and space. She writes, "laughter bubbles out of my belly, across the years, to ring the cracked bell of my heart. And here, now, I am laughing again, and the sun is reaching across two decades of hurt to warm me."

And here, now, we part ways with *Gandy Dancer*. Complications and loss are a part of life, but so too is all the love, joy, and laughter. These thoughtful and resonant stories, poems, and art pieces demonstrate what it means to be human—and unite us in that fact. We couldn't think of a better way to send off our college careers than producing and sharing this issue. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we did making it—we will carry the memories we've made here far into the future, knowing that they will return to us in the most unexpected and beautiful ways. Thank you to everyone that contributed to *Gandy Dancer*, 12.2.

Signing off,
Lili Gourley, Jess Marinaro, and Sara Wilkins

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Gandy Dancer

Love Like Damocles

The coffee pot lilted a low gurgle as I hooked my keys by the door. Imara was washing up the past night's dishes; the sleeve ends of her beige sweater stained darker by the sink water. As I removed my off-white sneakers by the entrance, I noticed a smudge of crimson trailing up the front of my left shoe. I feared it was my landlord's blood, a remnant from the lobby.

"Good morning, love," she said.

"Hi there," I smiled. "Morning."

I placed the mail from downstairs in a kitchen drawer.

"There were cops in the lobby," I said.

"Cops?"

"Yeah, it was fucking insane. Our landlord fell down the stairs, they said he died. Accidental death."

Earlier, three police officers had been chatting in my building's tight lobby. The hardwood flooring was cleaned of its usual layer of dust. The gleam of its bright clarity felt more invasive than the police, disturbing my meticulous familiarity. An officer informed me of Miller's recent death; the elderly landlord had fallen down the first floor staircase. Bled out post-mortem by our main doorway.

"I heard. Saw him too." She shut off the sink, drying her hands with a kitchen towel.

"Fuck, you saw the body?" I pictured Miller's strewn out corpse, his loose marionette limbs posed like a sick, sleeping dog beside a bed of rich red. There was a quick pang of instinctive sympathy, followed by a conscious retraction. Miller had referred to me almost solely as "cunt" with the occasional slur sprinkled in. My apathy was karmic, a cyclical redistribution of his apathy towards our black mold, prior bed bug infestation, and failing A.C.

"I saw him die." Imara chose two mugs out of the cupboard: sage green stoneware and a white ceramic with blue paisleys.

"You *saw him*—" I said.

"I pushed him," Imara said, nonchalant, but not without eye contact. Her words placed magnets on opposite ends of my esophagus, airflow slowing quickly.

Imara laughed, "Jamie, Jamie, I'm fucking with you. God, your face!"

"You're a piece of shit," I breathed out. My face flushed again, for a different reason.

"Sorry, sorry," she said, biting the inside of her cheek to stop a grin. The switch light on the coffee pot went off. "Never mind that, I wouldn't have pushed him down the stairs. Dumb way to kill someone."

"Oh, and how would you have done it?" I went to sit at our kitchen table. I had found it at an estate sale a few years prior, a small square of mahogany littered with natural scratches of well use.

"Nails in the floorboards. I would add a few extra nails, high and loose and unexpected, so he'd trip. His fucked old-person balance and our shit staircase would handle the rest." Imara poured the coffee as she continued, "Can't imprison a nail. No cameras in that hall either. It would be his fault too, we told him those stairs were dangerous months ago. He had the money to fix them, but not the empathy." She placed the pot back on the counter.

"That is horrifyingly detailed," I said.

Imara often wrote of well-executed, ingenious crimes. Her literary work was contained to the genre of psychological thrillers, crime, and horror, brewing a pensive psyche laced with abnegation. Her success was unsurprising to me; I'd always felt that Imara was born for a singular purpose: to write. Her writing was stitched into the double helix of her DNA, threads of her work pooling to every waking aspect: her dialogue, bedroom, appearance, mannerisms, and so on.

"He's been torturing us for months, you can't blame me for thinking about it. Although the coincidence is a bit insane. You never know, maybe God was listening in, loosened a nail Himself as divine intervention." She grabbed milk out of the fridge, adding a splash to her coffee. I took mine black.

"Are you calling yourself God?" I asked as she returned the milk.

"Fuck you," she scoffed. She sat across from me, placing the hot mugs between us. Her hands tightened around the handle, brows furrowing above fogged eyeglasses. She took a sip, and relaxed.

"Accusing me of murder before breakfast?" she joked. The fog on her glasses receded.

"No." I smiled. The coffee burnt my tongue slightly. The drink's simple bitterness framed the conversation with the comfort of routine. "Maybe."

She frowned. I've had my curiosities, as her writing required her to empathize with humanity's most evil. I read an article last month, about a writer who committed a murder depicted in his debut novel. I pictured the author as Imara, out of sick interest. I went through each motion of the crime within this thought experiment, detailing her expressions, duplicitous actions, and reckonings with guilt. I wanted to see if my love would persist after such a thorough betrayal.

"Would you sleep beside me, if I killed him?" Imara said. She took a sip, leaning back. "Would you feel safe? With the consistent threat of new evidence, or worse, of the constant doubt?" Her fingers drummed against the ceramic. "Signing your life away to indeterminable years of uncertainty. Say ten years pass, and your friends ask you in the end, how could you not have *known?*"

She grinned, slow. "You'd stay? Is it possible that you'd still love me?"

The coffee between my palms was warm. "Yes."

JOYCE SAFDIAH

instead of holding

my fingers wove through trampled grass
at the creek you brought me to
hidden out on the side of the road
told me it was “make out creek”
like i’d kiss you again for aptness of name
watched me twist and braid
the waxy green tendrils
splitting them up the side
when i couldn’t tell you how i felt
i’d say it with my hands
you watched my mouth spill out
excuses
calling bullshit on every single one
you cried
heavy pink and green greatlash tears
tried to muster up water to my eyes
you didn’t know how much of an actress
i always was
the typewriter in my head
plagiarized every movie
we didn’t finish watching
couldn’t come up with an excuse
good enough for you
sat there with a pile of grass
wilted and torn on my lap
you wouldn’t let me walk away
until i said it

Elderberry Wine

The geese leap into the air in a snow-feather storm, startled by the thunder of my mother's voice. The lightning of her words will roll between her, and her mother, until we three flee the cabin hoping that the barometric pressure of my mother's hate will loosen. We walk the shores of Farlington Lake, one of the largest strip pits for which Pittsburg, Kansas is named. We walk along the edge of the pond, its bowels pregnant with black water, blue tar, old coal. The stink of the lake will walk with us, louder than even the queasy silence.

A little shop sits along the shore of Farlington, serving both lakeside and Route-66 customers. A pragmatic sensibility for a midwestern folk. Inside I find a smiling woman, whose years sit on her shoulders comfortably, like a well-worn, well-loved, coat.

She implores me, "Try the honey! It's local."

Like a dreamer remembering the waking world, I remember the man who raised me. My grandfather was a beekeeper, a farmer, oft-divorced, and ceaselessly kind. Not far from these poisoned shores, his gentle hands tended to hives, crops, wooly beasts, and the child I was—all with the same tenderness. My aunt said his craggy face smiled when he spoke up and said, "I can take the fella," when the courtroom said my mother couldn't. That same craggy smile would beam as he traded sugar water for comb-covered gold from amber-clad queens. He'd hum with the razor in his hands, as he used it to separate sheep from their roasting blankets, just before the summer would turn the dial of the sun so high that all living things trade breathing for baking in the oven of the world. Those same hands would tenderly, tenderly bandage my skin, boiling from the wasp stings an adventurous child tempted.

I wonder if the bees that gave the old shopkeeper her honey were descended from my grandfather's. After he passed, and the courts passed me back to

the cyclone from my past, my mother told me his hives were to be donated. If these bees were in the same line, could they know how noble their lineage?

The shopkeeper clears her throat politely, bringing my mind back to the here, back to the now.

She says, "If you're a fan of local, the elderberry wine is good too."

The berries are printed on the bottle in blood black with the ichor of nostalgia. Quickly I will swap cash for memories, and—abandoning mother and grandmother—rush back to the cabin alone, my hands holding treasure. The first taste is harrowingly sweet, more berry syrup than wine. The second is stupefying. I drink and I am sinking, falling, entering a place long ago. There, I watch my grandfather's bent back as he tends to his own elderberry crop.

A hose is coiled in my hands like an emerald serpent, and the thumbs of my three-year-old self are covering the open maw of the hose. The hose's mouth is open only a little, the pressure blasting water across the blue horizon. The water flies like a crystal arch across a cerulean sky. My eyes had seen the same shape in the metal arch of St. Louis. Here, now, in the past and the present, this arch of water is landing on my grandfather's straw hat, splashing onto his work-shirted back.

Soaking, he turns and says to me, "You cut that out."

Laughter bubbles out of my belly, across the years, to ring the cracked bell of my heart.

And here, now, I am laughing again, and the sun is reaching across two decades of hurt to warm me. I don't remember the sound of his voice, but I remember the cadence, the rhythm. And I am crying, my tears arching back across the tempestuous years between us to soak his work shirt again.

And he says, "You cut that out. I'm still here ain't I?"

And when he says 'here,' he is pointing at my belly, still bubbling with laughter, now thick with the bittersweet of elderberry wine.

My Grandfather Taught Me How To Read

No one warned me that the dead visit in dreams.
Or that the smell of gasoline sticks to memory the way it sticks
to skin—my childhood bus stop at the end of the street—
But visit, they do, and stick, it does,
With no reason to wish for them to stay
Until daybreak comes again and
What's left is the irksome feeling of
Forgetting where you are—the crosswalk by the high school—
How you can be two places at once:

Around the corner from your grandparent's house / in a town you've never been to.

A gas station at six in the morning / a stop sign off a main road.

Dead / eating at a restaurant that doesn't exist.

JENNA COBURN

revolving doors, what have i done?

i get lost on purpose
drive into the mountains like
maybe i'm waiting for a cliff

like maybe route 44 will go off the grid
unmap itself
from my neurons and from google both

i brake disgusted
reminded of the guy who took the hairpin too fast
and didn't even make a dent in the ridge
reminded how it looms so large with every rev
till all i see is rock
 , road
 , and impossibly the flightiest glimpse of

vanishing point

so distant from the guy who escaped the sky

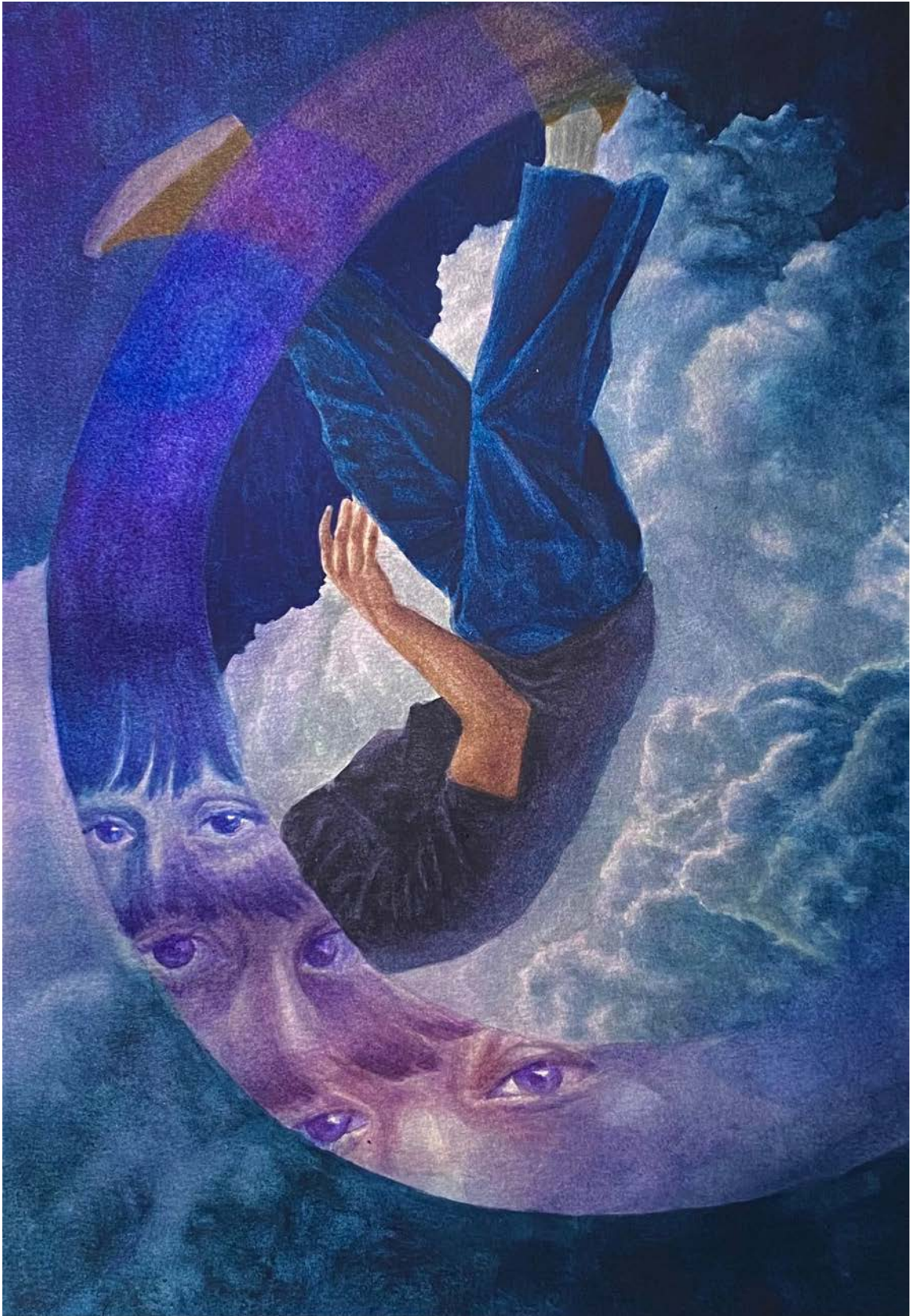
i pull over next to smoking trucks and their smoking drivers
silhouetted against a valley so vast it may as well be nothing
a pipedream projected somewhere
beyond

some etching from the silurian period
that i won't understand (not even when i'm older)

i'm sorry i'm late

i get lost on purpose
but i still repeat myself:
the second the county signs change color
i'm shivering at the lookout
i'm swinging around and glancing nervously at the sun
i'm slamming my brakes at the hairpin
neither earth nor air nor new
just home.

sorry i'm late
but i'm here.
i parked at the end of the driveway
like always.



Carl and the FlipFlop Swindlers (watercolor), Sophia Turturro

in my free time i haunt the hurricane house

the cymbal crash of rain holds firm till the a.m.—warm-lit walls sing as
thunder strips them of saturation—downpour pools to gutters of
sepia tile—do wet socks bother you?

the power's gone out—along with the sun chased in fear by the tempest's
guffaw—*look this is how to make light* dad indicates to a potato
chock full of serpentine metals, since wax is drying low

(go, go look out the front door where the hurricane wails
HELLO MAY I COME IN)

in the ivory tub, mom's hands kiss my head—eucalyptus shampoo
suds and she tells me so sweet: *the storm is inside already, no need
for her to knock*

i watch the firmament form from the living room sofa—damp cushions
perpetually cool in the hurricane house—warping book sticks my palm
with weeping ink—what was the title?

there on the wall contorted by waist-level water, is that a photograph or a
painting? regardless it will disintegrate—remember
the house is sinking

soaked blaze drips to decay—hard maple water-weakened to soft wood
—for always i cycle in the hurricane home—do you ever remember
having dry socks?

Julia

Your youthful laughter full of innocence fills the air. Julia lies beside you, and together your tiny hands mend the worn-out blanket. You both giggle on the couch as you play an R-rated movie, something you two, once again, are not allowed to do. Within thirty minutes, you're screaming at a jumpscare. This alarms Julia's mother, your "Aunt" Erin. Aunt Erin, with her arms flailing in the air and her forehead vein protruding, storms into the living room yelling, "What business do two eight-year-olds have watching this film? You both have no business watching a film filled with blood and gore, but that's probably why you tried watching it." The two of you laugh in defiance and rebellion.

And there you both are...

"Three...two...one...MINT!" comes out of both your mouths synchronized. In a garden of youth, four tiny hands are suddenly ripping leaves from a mint plant and shoving them into seemingly ravenous mouths. The mint leaves burn, but you disregard it because that is the entire point. Julia, ever determined, is scarfing down many more leaves than you are. You are sweating not because of the scorching sun, but because of the leaves you are determined to consume. As your body temperature rises so does your hand, signaling a forfeit. "I CAN'T!" you exclaim. Julia mimics and mocks you, perpetuating her streak of victories, and leaving a trail of memories in the sun.

And there you both are...

You and Julia are wearing neon colored bathing suits with frills and polka dots, and bright pink burning skin on the apples of your cheeks. You two are blowing air into your swimsuits, causing your tops to inflate, giving the illusion of breasts. "I can't wait till we get older and actually look like this,"

she exclaims, her voice leaving echoes of teenage dreams. In what she thinks is a teenage-sounding voice she blabs, "Look at these boobs! I kiss so many boys with these boobs!" The pool contains more laughter than water. The thought of you two being teenagers together thrills you both, but provokes a dark punch to your gut and you know it punches hers too. You two are thinking the same thing but neither of you dare to mention it.

And there you both are...

You're fully immersed in the pool's embrace as Julia stands with her toes on the edge of the diving board, water dripping from her short curly hair. She's wearing a massive grin paired with goggles far too big for her face. Sunrays beam on your skin; the chlorine and friendship-scented air feels refreshing. "Ready?" she snorts as the goggles press down on her button nose. At once you smile and begin waving your arms, screaming for help in your high-pitched voice. The playful charade prompts Julia to jump in to "rescue" you. The splash from her jump fills the majority of your vision, but out of the corner of your eye is Julia's grandmother sprinting. Not knowing this was all a part of your game called "lifeguard," her grandma is in a state of terror. Just about to leap into her pool fully clothed, she recognizes snickers of mischief she knows too well. Yours and Julia's laughter prevails in the face of her grandmother's scolding and your friendship is immortalized in the sunlit waters.

And there you both are...

Once again, your parents and Julia's parents fill the backyard with whiskey breath, music, and obnoxious laughter. The back door slams behind you as the two of you approach your parents, who welcome you with applause and hysterical screams. You get into your not-very-well-thought-out positions, fixing the wigs that cover your eyes and identities. You hear your mother whisper about the old costumes you're wearing, wondering where the hell you found those. You yell, "HIT IT!" and the two of you begin flailing your tiny limbs in various directions. You two are not dancing to any music other than the melody of true friendship. A dance of sheer delight in a symphony of giggles. Howls of laughter from your parents fade into the background as you lock eyes with Julia. She really is your best friend.

And there you both are...

"JULIA!! Do you think we're being too mean?" you ask innocently while your fingers slam on your keyboard, typing cruel insults to a virtual penguin. "Who knows? Who cares?" she scoffs with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. You giggle and rearrange how you are sitting at your dining table. On a cup of water next to your laptop is Julia mischievously smirking through your iPod screen. You look at the screen and notice she has really long hair today; you

compliment it because she usually wears bandanas or hats. “NO WAY!” she yells. You do not question her yelp because you know what just happened to you both. “Banned from playing Club Penguin. Are you girls fucking serious?” hisses Julia’s mom over the phone.

And there you both are...

“GRAB THE WATER GUN RIGHT NOW. IT NEEDS TO DIE!” she demands with her eyes fixed on the intruding insect. You’re paralyzed in horror as a massive bug you can’t even name asserts its presence in front of you both. Julia notices your hesitation and catches a glimpse of your fear. Without a moment’s hesitation, she darts out of the pool and swiftly grabs a yellow plastic gun, showcasing her unwavering bravery. Precisely loading it with water as if preparing for battle, she courageously fires it at the bug. She was always the brave one. “BITCH!” she barks after confirming the insect’s death. She turns to you with her hand on her mouth acknowledging her profanity. You both exchange glances, knowing that if Grandma hears that you’ll get in trouble again.

And there you both are...

You and Julia, partners in digital adventures, tap away on your brother’s laptop. With laughter as your guide, you download an endless stream of Minecraft mods. Consequences arise as the laptop’s screen flickers and goes dark. Your brother erupts in frustration at the sight of this, but his frowns and reprimands couldn’t dampen the spirit of two girls caught in the enchantment of their own world.

And there you both are...

Jaws, the shark movie the two of you have been looking forward to watching all day is interrupted as Julia hesitantly blurts, “What do you think happens after we die?”

Her slim finger hits her tablet screen pausing the film. She’s bundled up in her wool blanket, looking cozy and adorable with her doll-like face. But that wool blanket is wrapped around her as if it was armor shielding her from the impending reality. You, her best friend, know what she’s feeling. You gaze into her wise doe eyes and let her dreadful feeling, an impending sense of doom, transfer to you. You do not respond for a moment, letting those words linger and tighten the air in the room.

“I don’t know, Jules. I just hope we see each other again.”

“*Please God... Please let her live,*” you whisper with a fragile plea, desperately clutching onto the remnants of hope. Your eyes ascend to the ceiling that holds Jesus on the cross. Your quivering index finger presses a tiny brown

button that illuminates an electric candle. A deafening silence surrounds you as dark turmoil consumes you.

There is no sun in the sky; there is no light at all for that matter. The lights are on but the room feels exceptionally dark. The carpet is red, the walls are beige, your dress is black, and the air is suffocating. With a somber weight on your shoulders, you take slow and measured steps toward the hushed room full of adults. Your parents follow behind you, helping you carry the weight of your sorrow. You reach the doorway, a gateway to the brutal reality, as your heart reaches your stomach and your hand reaches your mouth. Your feet follow your eyes that beg for your best friend.

And there you both are...

You stand as Julia lies before you. There is a cushion to kneel on, but your knees are locked in place and your eyes are locked on her. Soft copper curls frame her beautiful porcelain skin and her lifeless face. Her white dress is nice, but she would have chosen something with color. Her makeup looks pretty, but cannot mask the absence of her vibrant spirit; she would have chosen red lipstick. You see her bracelets that will forever rest in silence, but you imagine the sound of them clanging together. Her spirit is now stilled and her familiar face is now frozen in a serene repose. Your gaze lingers on her chest, hoping it will suddenly move again, attempt to take in air. Your nine-year-old hand grazes her forever ten-year-old hand. Her hand is cold, and you want to warm her, but you realize a few things: she is cold but she doesn't know she is cold. You cannot warm her; you will never warm her, laugh with her, get in trouble with her, or be with her ever again. The finality of the moment crashes upon you. *You realize this is the end.* You weep and wail into the pools of grieving tears that are your palms. Adults approach you with comfort, but only deepen the pit of grief because how come they get to grow up? There is a void in your life that only she could fill.

You feel different. The world feels different. Regardless of sunlight, the world is darker, colder, and infinitely more complex without your companion. The echoes of your shared laughter cease in the ache of her absence, now only resonating as whispers in the wind. In fact, laughter becomes a haunting soundtrack that reminds you of what used to be. Your hands, once seamlessly entwined with Julia's, now fumble in the shadows of sorrow, desperately trying to hold onto intangible memories slipping through the cracks of time.



Anna (left), Julia (right)

Platoon Manager

I

I didn't know you very well at all.

You used to show me a DJ's equipment in the garage of the Pennsylvania house your father owned,

You started doing Ketamine at 12, and I'm just as sure as everyone else that wasn't the only indulgence of your youth

There was a son,

a teenaged mother,

a father with a gun waiting for an excuse—

You, the great and grand firstborn son:

You, the marine, brother, addict, protector:

You, uncle I barely knew until my mother screamed from across New York State and I came running.

II

My brother idolized you.

He too, first son, wanted turn-table happiness, graffiti artist misunderstood by a society that sees boy bodies as expendable.

It is a curse.

When he was 12 he would scream and bite at his own flesh like a cage,
and mother screamed

and I came running.

and now you—brother I barely know, tamper with pill

bottles and the idea of hospitals, as you take a gummy bear laced with Ketamine.

I saved you for four years.

I went away and didn't hear the screams.
And I saved myself because that's all I thought I could do,
because I was also just a
child.

III

Now the uncle's liver has turned yellow like the pus in marine warrior boots,
swamp foot. Called my mother a thief, and her sisters harpies, but you were the oldest
and I was the oldest,
and our first instinct was to run away.
And now you are a garden of tumors, just like your father. In the house where his garden
became a grave—
And my mother ran to Pennsylvania to beg forgiveness of
her brother
while her son's eyes blinked

one day,
one day.

The Pagan

She spoons herself
asking forgiveness of Winter
He pities her
Autumn was not so kind,

She wears her beaded belt
The Pagan curses
*I am different from you,
for the love you give
starves me,*

She dances to
singing woodland winds
*I am free, I am free,
Your little girl
is dead.*

Into the hands of God
She clings to her father's robes
with her red clippings—
wings once sewn to shoulder bones.

Made for begging
daughter's love—bent like Spring,
she sings like a rabbit howling
*I want it all, for the moon
cradles me.*

The idea of a mother
to a girl so broken—
*Take me. I am still
waiting for summer. Mother
I want to go home.*

*Ah, my other self—
Forgive me. I did not mean
to become such a weight.
My season has come to
break me further, so sister,
Let us sink.*



A Bit Maddening (charcoal & pastel on paper), David Santillo

Downstream

Wanda likes to dress the dogs in pink and frills, paint their nails fuchsia or lime green, with matching little bows twisted up in their matted ears. Not even Clyde, the swaggering boy dog, is saved. Instead, he waddles through the sandy backyard in his tiny shit-stained tutu and mounts anything that moves while the family watches and laughs, the ugly thrusts, his bottom teeth jutting out sharp and yellow from his lower lip while the tulle at his waist bunches and wilts in tandem.

Andy takes quick gulps of his beer and tries not to watch too long. He's been drinking since the morning and still isn't as plastered as Russ, who can't hold himself up. He's laughing so hard, hat first in the dirt. Behind him, the sun is sinking easily into a sky like velvet, just approaching the final moment of hereness, the crown of her head like a bald strip interrupting a placid night. "Andy-boy, oh Andy-boy—" Russ likes to sing when he's wasted, hands on his brother's shoulders, trying to cajole him into some kind of jagged waltz in the porchlight. "Baby-brother boy, pouting-like-a-bitch boy, stick in the mud—"

Once he would have shoved him off, kicked for good measure. Tonight, he is tired. His hands are cracked and dry, stained white from the plaster at work. Russ's wife is standing beneath the veranda with her arms wrapped around her middle, and he doesn't feel clean enough to argue. He turns and heads for the garage, the laughter sharp at his back.

When he'd moved back in with his mother, he'd been embarrassed. Mostly he'd been relieved. The past twenty years of adulthood had never felt quite right on him, like the church shirts Wanda had bought for him secondhand as a boy—always too short and wide for his lanky frame. His childhood hadn't

fit quite right, either, but he'd known it was his the way unpleasant things usually are, so much more willing to be claimed.

His childhood bedroom still looks the same, the model cars on the windowsill, his signed Cavalier's basketball half deflated on the corner of his desk. The same nudie poster remains undiscovered on the back of his closet door, three Playboy bunnies in varying degrees of toplessness. The miniskirts he'd fantasized endlessly about slipping his fingers under, feeling the creases in the fabric from beneath. He could have pinched those hems between his fingers with his eyes closed, careful and reverent, like the lid of the cardboard box still buried somewhere under his bed, that hallowed stash passed from Ward brother to Ward brother as a parting gift.

Legend has it the box was once their father's. It was carefully curated over his own rumored adolescence, and that he'd only bequeathed it to Russ once their mother had finally found it and chucked the forty he'd been sipping straight at his head. This all happened when Russ was four, and so Andy has his doubts; it's difficult to imagine their father being challenged and not getting his way in the end.

He feels a pull, some ancient and morbid curiosity, but tonight Andy lets the box remain buried. He takes off his clothes and climbs into bed. The way his feet hang over the edge, the same as they had since he was fifteen, is almost enough to make him smile.

Sometimes he dreams of nice things. Pleasant things, like the crisp pop of a beer tab, the unhurried fizz. He sees the creek bed he had laid near as a boy, watching the little current snarl up the weeds and the silt. In his dreams, he can wiggle his toes right into the mess of it, let the water pool around his ankles and then his calves and then his knees. In the best dreams, he gets to his shoulders and then watches as his body dissolves like sand, his sunburnt skin staining the water a fleshy pink, whirling out and away until he is only a pair of eyes floating downstream, taking the world in without the pains, the desires of a body.

Sometimes he dreams of bad things. The things he doesn't like to look at in the daylight: the bruised cheek, the car alarm. Sometimes he watches in mute horror as a doorknob turns (it isn't him turning it, it can't be. He's outside himself and the world and is watching with the world and God as a doorknob turns) and a doorknob turns again, and again, and it's only when the dreams are really bad that the door opens. Sometimes the door opens to a child's bedroom and Andy doesn't always know what happens after that. Sometimes he doesn't know when he's awake either. Sometimes he lives in the creak of that door, its shadow slipping out impossibly behind him, and he curls into that darkness and finds that the sun is coming up and he can't bring

his eyes up to it, they're still spinning downstream somewhere, as if trying to draw down the light.

Wanda doesn't just keep dogs. She keeps lizards, and fish, and parakeets, and a fat cockatiel inexplicably named Pluto. The house at all hours of the night is alive with noise, the bubbling of tanks or the whistling birdsong, the growl-bark-whimper of one of the girl dogs sick of Clyde's shit. Somehow his mother sleeps in the thick of it, in the armchair in the sitting room off the garage with the newspapers plastered all over the windows, the air and gray light thick with cigarette smoke and pet dander.

She snores. Loudly. Sometimes she chokes on the sound, hacking like she's dying. Only once did Andy rush in to try and save her, frantically shaking her by the shoulders until she shot awake and glared at him.

"Pussy," was all she said, before turning back over in the chair and settling in.

"Pussy," Pluto confirmed from the corner.

He went back to bed.

Tammy sometimes asks him about it, only in the room, their strange sacred space where words mean both less and more. Tuesdays during Russ's bowling meet they drive separately to the motel out in Hampton, on the corner near the liquor store and the adult movie place, a perfect trifecta of a strip. The dirtiness helps him pretend he's someone else, grimy and greased over. He doesn't shower before he gets there. Tammy says she likes that, the stale sweat still clinging to his skin.

"Have you tried to call her at all? To see her?"

Once he'd driven halfway to New York, six hours in the middle of the night, the lights on the interstate blurred together and smeared like soft butter. No music, no talk show. Just the rattle of empty beer cans from the back seat, their tinny rumble with the engine's grinding. His teeth chattered together as he cried and smoked, and cried again. He'd made it to a rest stop just past the state line before he pulled over and called her again for the forty-second time that night, Just to say he wasn't going to leave her, that he'd flatten himself under an eighteen wheeler if she didn't call him back just the one time. Just to tell him she hated him and that it was over.

"A little," he tells Tammy. "She doesn't pick up anymore."

"Probably for the best."

She brings his head to her breast and strokes his hair. If he looks her in the eyes he'll know what he already knows, what this is, the pity so inextricably tied to lust and shame and need. He knows that Tammy, the same as

him, can't pass a mirror without flinching, just a little. The recognition is too forced, too painful to muscle down.

He doesn't look at her.

Sometimes he dreams of good things, sometimes of bad. When he drinks enough, he doesn't dream at all. There's maybe a secret second of warmth, flashes of things: the pull of a sheet, the fleeting sensation of a woman's hair brushing just under his nose, the sweet clean smell of it. The feelings come over him like heat and then like a mask, and then just like darkness, plain and simple and ordinary, the backs of his eyelids or the beats of his name, the familiar mouth that shaped them, once. It fades and the fog rises and he sleeps like a baby in the dark gray clouds, lost in nothingness, blind and forgiven.

When Andy was sixteen, his father beat the shit out of his mother on the front lawn using a glass bottle and a wooden baseball bat. She'd needed nine stitches and two staples, most of them on her scalp, and surgery on her left hip, which had never really healed and left her with a permanent, painful limp. Several doctors said that she was lucky to be alive. Lucky that the head trauma hadn't put her in a coma, lucky that the neighbors called the cops before her husband murdered her like a dog out in the street.

She'd raised hell every time someone mentioned pressing charges. Threatened to get out of bed, to rip her stitches out. She once grabbed a scalpel and placed it to her wrist, eyes red and wild, spittle flying from her mouth as she wrestled with nurses and security staff.

Coming home from college to the situation, Russ only chuckled and slapped a hand down on Andy's shoulder.

"You want to know how to keep a woman? You keep her fucking guessing, bud." He laughed again and watched their mother slumped over in bed, sedated at last. "Bet you he's got the dogs on her. She's not fucking him over now, I tell you what."

The county held Red for about three days before he was released on bail, and no one in the Ward family ever heard from him again.

Once he did make it to New York.

He drove ten hours and got sober on the way. He stopped for gas and snacks. Newports, just like his daddy smoked. He remembered smoking for the first time with him out on the front porch, the way Red had handed one to him silently, without either even asking. Andy had lit it and sucked too

hard, coughed like a bitch, almost to his knees. When he was done he looked up, scared. Red only nodded.

“Gotta breathe it in, boy. Don’t waste what’s mine,” he’d said, and Andy had felt almost proud even with his neck out, his hands trembling, still holding the cigarette even with the smoke burning in his eyes and lungs.

He drove three hours more in circles until he saw her car parked at a Day’s Inn on the edge of town, barely lit even in the rising dusk. He got out the baseball bat and wished he’d stopped for liquor but knew he could, just after. He got out of the car and knocked on multiple doors until she was the one who answered. He forced his way inside and shut the door behind him, and then he just looked at her. Beautiful, even in hysterics, makeup running down her face, frantic and afraid.

He was ready, and then he suddenly wasn’t. He could have done it, could see the bruises still on her face, the evidence that he had before and wouldn’t need to work that hard this time. That she was already half-done, exhausted from the running. But then her daughter stepped out of the bathroom, young, so young. When they’d met she was only seven and now she was a runt of a nine-year-old, thin and haunted looking. She looked up at him with an expression so blank and brave it struck him like a blow.

He remembers the time she let him up even though he was drunk and out of his mind. She said the kid was asleep and to be quiet. He stumbled and knocked into the side table by the entryway cluttered with angel figurines looking up at him faceless and demure. He let three of them clatter to the floor and break solidly into eleven different pieces, like some slaughterhouse’s nativity scene. When he looked up bleary and confused, the girl was there looking at him. Suddenly, he thought it must have been God that brought him to his knees, hugging her to him and crying.

“I love you,” he’d said, simple, drunk. Bewildered, she’d said it back, automatically like children do when their parents say it a little too often, trying to make a point of it, and he knew it wasn’t real but still he tried to feel cleaner, somehow. Forgiven. He tried to believe it.

That night, he stayed. This other, darker night, he looked at them both and he left.

“Do you know where that old box is, Dad’s old stash?”

Andy looks up from his desk to see Russ in the doorway of his childhood bedroom, grinning.

“Why?”

“Thinking of passing it down again. Gabe’s getting to be that age, you know.”

Andy pauses and thinks for a moment. He tells him to check the attic. Otherwise, it's long gone.

When he dreams tonight he makes a point of finding the door, of looking at it. The doorknob is trying to turn, but he stills his hand and turns himself instead, placing his back on the solid wood. He slides down and wraps his arms around himself, placing his head on his knees. Waiting.

He hopes there will be something. Some peace offering. A note slid beneath the door, or a smooth stone, something from the creek he can cling to. He imagines the door creaking open to the bedroom lit in white, the little girl waiting for him, not saying a word but looking. He imagines she tells him she, too, knows that it hurts to be left.

He doesn't know what he hopes for, but he waits.

KIRRY KAUFER

Watershed/ Waterspout

I swallow from your straw sixteen times.
A man on the city street sings into a paper cup.
He once said, *there ain't no devil,*
Only a god when he's drunk.
Everyone wants to be God on a Saturday night.
Everyone wants to be touched tonight.

My upper thigh: the freshly trimmed
olive trees against the sky. Pearly cream
plunges the sidewalk, side ledge
against the branch. The insides of olives are actually red,
but you didn't know that since you never got
your first taste of blood.

My waterspout is turned on.
twisting, writhing like the numb tips
of our snowflaked noses.
I dread the watershed.
Light washes over my face,
coloring the backs of my eyelids acid yellow.

Can you feel the butterflies
drowning in my stomach acid?
I glaze honey around the cooler parts of your stove.

I'm thirsty. I want a Coke.
I want to feel its sticky sweat down my throat.
I once had a lover

who said I make beautiful things sound
disgusting. My sweet insides
disjoin & decrystallize into the yarn
I never learned to crochet. Your tongue
arcing the pink caterpillar of my mouth
has me foam frothing, whiting your landscape.

Why the hell are the walls painted white?
A white chocolate sweater is folding
at the collar of your rim. Sometimes
I like to dress your demons in warm
woolen sweaters while you cradle my bottom lip.
Is my skin keeping them out or locking them in?



Aslan deconstruction III (charcoal), Aslan Hernandez



Aslan deconstruction II (charcoal), Aslan Hernandez



Aslan deconstruction I (charcoal), Aslan Hernandez



Aslan (charcoal), Aslan Hernandez

Raise the Dead

Maybe I wasn't supposed to be there in the first place, but what else is there to do when you are ten and like an older boy, so—there I was. The funny thing is, I don't even think it was summer, the chill of autumn—maybe even winter—hung in the breeze. To be frank, we were bored, and the boys could only be in the house for so many hours before their mother kicked them out to go play, so Noah suggested we go explore by the creek.

They were my grandmother's nextdoor neighbors, and the only other kids in the neighborhood; what other choice did we have than to have my two siblings and I, like ducks in a row, cross the threshold between their two yards and give a polite knock upon the door. We'd spend our days over Hulk video games and increasingly more violent games of hide and seek, chasing one another around the house endlessly, too proud to be the only one to wear shoes as we traversed over their rocky patio that poked the arch of the foot. When together, there was no need to ask where their dad was, or why we were only at our grandmother's every other weekend. In these moments, for once, we were all just kids.

Mason was a year younger than me and an absolute crybaby. While I enjoyed him to an extent, I always found myself paused, waiting to see when he decided that Noah had committed a grievance worth crying over—which I usually perceived as a spilled-milk equivalent. He was a curly mop of a boy, with freckles like a speckled rock and pale as proofed bread. Everything about him was like fine china, which is my kind way of saying he was sensitive, which is my kinder way of correcting my harsh “crybaby” dubbage. He was always sick, always injured, always wanting something else for dinner.

There were times that I would hold my breath, wait to see if—for once—he would decide he felt too sick to play. If the holding of the breath was more

than metaphorical, I would have gone blue in the face and passed out on the floor.

Now Noah was as close to what a ten-year-old could conceptualize as a Greek God. I make this comparison for the fact of his nose. It is the one of any Greek statue my mind can remember—beak like, dipped at the top of the bridge with a bony protrusion to mark the start of the slope proper. He was four years older than me, and he was our ringleader.

He had wanted to explore the creek a little bit outside of the cul-de-sac and there was no way we would have been allowed to go over if we asked so—our solution was not to ask. The five of us toddled our way through their backyard and a small field before entering the treeline. Goosebumps coated the skin as the breeze from the rushing water pushed into us.

We walked along the edge over rocks and twigs, sized up branches and bits where the terrain became steep and uncertain. I don't even remember how it happened. One minute I was up over the water just cresting the beginning of the depression and then I was in it. I must have just plopped, I don't remember a roaring tumble, any scraped knees, not even wet hair. Just white hot regret.

Noah must have ran to get someone. He seems like the only one who had it in him—a boy scout through and through. The others tried to coax me out of the water, told me to come back to the edge and climb up, or to walk across the creek and get up on the shallower land. All I could seem to do was babble and half cry. The water was too fast, my legs were frozen and shook in fear, I couldn't catch my breath.

Then, the sound turned all splashing. My father fought against the current, looking nothing short of barbaric in his fear. It is the only time in my working memory that I can think of him lifting me onto his shoulders. He hoisted me up, heavy with water, and carried me back up to the shore.

How was I to know that in this moment, I had allowed a past to be rewritten? A grave to be pulled from the dirt—unlidded.

He died the first night my dad ever drank. Being the oldest of five in an Irish Catholic family inspires a certain degree of rebellion—and there was little else to do at twelve years old in the 80s than cause a little trouble. I imagine he staggered home a little hazy, but cognizant enough to put on a good show.

I only know my Uncle Brian even existed due to tidbits exchanged from my mom's mouth when Dad wasn't around to hear. His very existence—some unspoken absence everyone seemed to have agreed upon without my knowing. The events of the night piecemealed together in some panoramic collage, still left unfinished.

I imagine the first thing my father saw were lights. The blue and red flickering across the side of his childhood home. The front door was left open, and the house empty, unsure whether it would be wise to approach the scene still alcohol-laden.

Brian had fallen into the creek and gone blue in chill and death. You know, it is often said that history has this pesky little habit of repeating itself, maybe as some fucked up test to show it you have learned.

While my father warmed his spirit with spirits alongside some neighborhood boys down the street, his siblings were playing outside—waiting for the call of dinner. They had been exploring by the creek, four of them, missing their fifth, and Brian had slipped. His body cracked through the ice upon impact. I'm not sure what my aunts and uncle might have done. Looked around at one another or the water in shock, called out to Brian, one of them making some daring escape to the side yard where my grandfather spent his afternoons fixing bicycle chains and refurbishing tables? Wished my father was there? Wished the eldest child was there to tell them something, anything was the right thing to do in the way only an eldest can?

The ice had frozen back over before Brian could pull himself back up to the top, his body a dark and squirming shadow growing cold and panicked. I imagine he gulped the first water into his lungs, his instinct a deadly hyperventilation. I imagine his thin arms, his legs—still growing—kicking against the water, against the current his body was in the process of swallowing whole. I try not to picture what it is my aunts and uncle could see, finding my mind pulled back again and again to the view of Brian buried beneath the winter. I try to forget he was seven.

My father received three DUI's before he was nineteen and lost his commercial driver's license before he quit drinking. I wonder if he liked the way it combated the creeping cold. If it was the only way he could play through the motions again and again. In one rendition, he does not go to his friends and stays alongside his siblings. From there he poses two possibilities: the one where he dives for Brian and the one where he dives for the house.

In the first, his body would arch gracefully into the Brian-shaped ice fishing hole, pull him to the edge of the bank and wrap his own body around him in an attempt to return the warmth. Brian would cry into his shoulder.

In the second, he goes running for his father, the only man he knew with hands more calloused than his own, and the ice is broken with one of many tools, Brian is retrieved, turned over to his stomach on the bank as his father pounds between Brian's shoulder blades until all the water has come up and a gasp, as sweet as a baby's first cry, finds the frost.

He attempts to play through the reality of the night—he is not there. In every rendition of these hypotheticals—Brian dies. This is the way the story goes. This is what he likes to forget.

What do we do, with all that we do not yet know? What do I do with my imagined life, zombie uncle and all? What does my father do with it?

My father dropped out of high school his sophomore year, two years after Brian's passing. I often imagine my father walking across the stage. Taking graduation photos in the middle of the football field. Maybe he would have picked up a formal trade, like his father. Maybe he would've had it in him to stick with it, try out community college. Go into healthcare, like his mother.

I imagine him flipping adamantly through his anatomy textbook, learning every part of the lungs, imagining the contractions of Brian's, of his throat as he expelled imaginary water onto an imaginary shore inside of this imaginary imagining.

What is it my father felt when Noah told him what had happened? Who did he picture as he trudged into the creek, twenty years sober, and pulled from it a thin-armed body gone cold from the water? When he placed me on the shore was he surprised to see a blonde? Was some part of him pulled from fantasy and back into grief? He finally got his chance to show what he had learned and pulled up—me.

I cannot help but to think he must have paid for my life with his. The price of his life, some butterfly effect's wager. How do you determine what one child, maintained alive, is worth against that of the figment of one, now realized?

What kind of sick reincarnation tale can be found here? What sort of patient god?

BRIANNA GAMBLE

Wheatstalk

My mother was the germ from which my life sprouted,
her hands my axiom in discipline.
Backtalk meant open palm pushing face into wall.
Classroom failure was merit for head to lovingly meet table.
When med school granted her acceptance, we gloried.
And when the coursework stress came,
 I learned to walk like ballerinas—tiptoes and landmines.
When she tutored the girl I loved in biology,
 she explained hormones, called ovaries and me “estrogen-machines.”
Now once a week I flick needle tips, clearing air bubbles,
 and the irony of injecting estrogen is not lost on me.
These days it’s hormones and not fists, reshaping my face.
But when I look in the mirror, sometimes I jerk in fear.
And when coursework stress has me clinging my hands to weary temple,
 or bottling screams for roommates who dare walk near me,
I weep.
I don’t know what to do.
Even when I grieve I look like you.

Things that bother me

I'm wondering when I'll finally sit and churn out that kind of poem, that kind of poem that looks at the quiet beauty of life but in a different and special way, and it does it in a way that is so thought provoking, so subtle, so perfect in its mix of show not tell, but telling and showing at the same time, and I pick the right title and it maybe even comes with a double entendre of some sort, I love that word, entendre, to intend, to mean it, mean something so directly and indirectly but not so directly that it makes the whole thing annoying, annoying like my brain right now as I make this, but I have to get it out now, see? This is what swirls in my mind each day, the poem, many poems, their infinite structures and boundless forms and subjects stretching from the obscene to the rage filled, rage fueled, rage induced, even, to the mournful and nostalgic and dream-tinged works that arise out of the deepest parts of the psyche, my psyche, in a place tucked in far more cozily than all that rage that pulses in my veins when I think about things too much. Too much! It's all pouring out of my fingertips to the keyboard at once now, and it's the same feeling I used to get hunched over the toilet bowl with a bout of that childhood flu that comes through and knocks everyone on their ass at least once during youth and then you never experience it again until some new bug comes in and you're there again, heaving, begging god to let this hurl be the last so you can just get some fucking sleep tonight god dammit. You feel awful but the weight of whatever was in your stomach gets replaced by air and your eyes are watering for the first time in ages because you don't let yourself cry enough, but that's because you can't find a place in the house that isn't the bathroom

that feels secret enough to you in order to truly have a cathartic, soul-healing sob. And so you bottle those in, those physical releases, and you store them up in the crevices of your brain to age them like fine wines. I started with me and I, and now I'm talking to you. Who are you, are you me? No, no, you're the reader, and then so am I, as I make this. Glad we made that distinction.



"That Hamstring Band is Playing Too Slowly, Hogging The Stage," Says The French-Spanish Cat, Irritated That They're Playing Legato (markers), Sophia Turturro

the same way she fits into their family. Ambs enters with a fiance-
 less Ish, talks of trips & (not) Forex an after taste on her breath;
 conversation clipped at the door, words lost
 like her money in that pyramid scheme.
 K & her boyfriend take up the space my brother
 doesn't. He's busy, an excuse to hide his distaste for the family.
 I am forced to mingle with people I
 only talk to while we give thanks. My sister's surrounded
 & jackets thrown on worn-out couch. Her fingers fly to side
 across her screen, my phone pings:
next year we aren't hosting dinner.

III

I stay back in the kitchen:
 check the bread, use the blow torch for crème brûlée,
 do everything anything nothing.
 Fix shirt. Fluff hair. Don't reach for the bottle calling
 out to me, begging for a quick
 return. Don't ask. Don't ask. Don't as— *How's school?*
 Not *fine.*
 Shut eyes. Sit down. Open eyes. Shut eyes. Hope I don't
 cry. It's not fine. Never fine.
 Failing. No sleep. Can't relax. Not now. Not with them here.
 Fix my shirt.

IV

K's white boyfriend (not the one from her birthday in August)
 scrapes fork on ceramic plate.
 I stare (emphasis on) her white Boyfriend;
 my sister stares (emphasis on) her White boyfriend;
 nobody else stares or talks to him.
 Conversations about broken engagements—never
 Ish's because we can't, it's too soon—, broken
 promises—(not) all the ones D's made to his (not) wife (maybe) girlfriend
 baby mother—, broken bonds—we only share niceties
 at this table. I shove dry turkey in my mouth—spoon fulls of salty mashed
 potatoes. No mac & cheese. Need more dragonberry.
What are you studying now?
 They always ask. It never changes. I'm a *psych*

major, but I'll *never make money.* They hope,
like my parents, I change my mind. I won't
if it means their disappointment. Revel in that feeling & wish
they were the mac & cheese (not here).

V

I need another long sip of not water—maybe
the brown liquid because they won't
leave. *Let's play a game?* Is this gathering not charade enough?
Please, it doesn't have to be home, just go anywhere.
Give me space to mourn my peace. If I must stay home,
enjoy this meal, provide a bottle of wine to wash down
the inconvenience. Lights dim & conversations become crystal.
Dinner's over
but—

Shelter

The three boys drive in silence.

It's March, the ugly part of the winter when the snow on the sides of the road is brown and spiky and refuses to melt. Late enough that the darkness beyond the cone of their headlights is black and heavy and seems solid enough to lean against. The boys' eyes are forward, avoiding each other, studying the night. They're dressed for job interviews—rumpled baby blue button-downs with ties that don't quite match—because they're too young to own funeral clothes. Or to know that wakes don't serve much more than cheese and crackers. Their groaning stomachs echo in the otherwise silent car.

Max is in the backseat. He catches a glimpse of his face, thin and pale, in the rear-view mirror and wishes that he hadn't. He can't shake the image of Wyatt's dad in the open casket. Dressed smartly, in a suit, but the face had been all wrong. Bloated, like they'd pumped him full of something. Flesh colored makeup caked between his hair and his ears. Max hadn't known him well, but Wyatt's dad was a loud, boisterous guy. A presence in every room. The type of person that you could not see for months and still practically hear his voice in your head. Seeing him like that, stuffed into a box, made Max nauseous. At the wake, after hugging Wyatt and his mother, Max hovered at the far edge of the room, staring at the ceiling. Hours later, he's still antsy. For the first time in his life, he's uncomfortably aware of the fragility of his body. Just a sack of skin keeping everything in place.

Aidan, in the passenger seat, tries to fall asleep but can't. He's thinking about the wake abstractly, less about Wyatt's dad in particular than about death

itself. He and Wyatt had been in a car accident the month before. Aidan had been driving. They'd hit a patch of ice on the highway's shoulder, skidded across two empty lanes, and ended up in a snowbank. The front of Aidan's car crumbled, totaled, but he and Wyatt were completely fine. After the shock wore off, they'd laughed about it, leaning side by side against the folded metal as they waited for a tow truck and the cops. They'd felt invincible.

Now, driving home from the wake, Aidan does cosmic calculations in his head. Had their dumb luck cost Wyatt his dad? Aidan feels guilty, then ridiculous for having such a self-important thought in the first place. He doesn't mention it to the others. Instead, he watches the beginning of a snow flurry on the other side of the windows, terrified, for the first time since his accident, of the road. It's as if every rumble beneath their feet is the car losing traction. The start of a slide. Their dumb luck from the month before finally running out.

Chris, behind the wheel, is too exhausted to feel much of anything. Nearly three hours, with traffic, to Westchester that morning. And two more till they're back home. The snowfall has him on edge. The roads aren't well lit. His eyelids droop during the stretches of dark road and are jerked open again by the rush of light from each passing car. Chris knows he needs to stop, rest his eyes, or get a coffee, if he wants to make it home. Still, he can't bring himself to stop. He's thankful for the distraction of driving, of having something to do with his hands. Anytime he made the mistake of relaxing, letting his guard down, his thoughts would wander back to Wyatt's family, to Wyatt's brother in particular, fifteen and suddenly fatherless. Standing last in line at the wake, shell shocked.

It makes Chris think of his own family, his own brother. Ten years older than Chris, almost thirty now, with Down syndrome. Living at home with Chris's parents because all the group homes and inpatient services are a crooked mess. The brother who, in an unspoken understanding, everyone in Chris's family knows will be the first of them to go. Then it will be Chris's turn to shake hands at the wake. Letting his friends watch him grieve in real time.

Chris focuses on the road. On reality. On *now*. The stress of driving in the snow keeps him sane.

A blip of yellowish light pokes through the trees. The boys, stomachs growling, round the a turn in the highway and the light grows, comes into focus. Tucked between an exit ramp and a wall of barren trees is a little two-road town. Most of the buildings are dark and abandoned looking. But close to the exit ramp, a few building lengths away from the others, is the source of the

light. An old-timey diner with reflective metal walls and an empty parking lot, clashing like a bad joke against the dead winter night.

Lorena eyes the boys as they walk inside. She doesn't like what she sees. Three of them, college aged, overdressed in boat shoes and loose ties. She sets down the glasses she'd been hand drying to keep busy and intercepts them by the front door.

"Can I help you?" She stands between them and the bar.

The boys squirm, steal glances past her. For a moment, Lorena is embarrassed—for her empty dining room with its scuffed tabletops and reruns playing on the TV. For running the type of place where she, the owner, was pulling triple duty as hostess and server and kitchen help, too. For how pathetic it was that any through traffic, any customer, might make the difference in affording the lease.

"It's just the three of us," says the tall one. He's at the point of their triangle. The only one looking Lorena in the eyes.

She leads them to a table by the window, overlooking the parking lot, far away from the kitchen. They sit down without a fuss. There's snow still caked to the bottoms of their shoes.

Behind the kitchen's double doors, Oscar, the only other employee working, shoots her a look. "What's up?"

Lorena just shrugs. "Guess you should fire the flat top back up." After the week they'd had, she'd told most of the kitchen and wait staff not to come in. Things were slow. Losing-money-each-night-they-kept-the-lights-on slow. Telling-Oscar-not-to-prep-*anything* slow.

She walks back to the boys with a handful of menus, preparing herself for whatever bullshit they're about to pull. Fake IDs or made up allergies or any of the other issues that the highway traffic Lorena depends on inevitably drag up. But the boys just thank her quietly and stare at their menus, seeming glad to have something to do. Lorena leaves them alone.

As Oscar fiddles with the grill, Lorena watches the boys over the lip of the kitchen window. The tall one is playing with a paper straw wrapper, absent-mindedly shredding it into smaller and smaller and smaller pieces that Lorena knows she'll have to pick up later. The small one is just sitting there, blankly. There are dark, deep bags under his eyes. The third is typing furiously on his cellphone. Then he stands up, walks out the restaurant's front doors. Through the smudgy glass window, Lorena watches him pace the length of the parking lot, cell phone to his ear. He talks with his hands, looking frustrated, and hangs up aggressively. When he comes back inside, his cheeks are red from the burn of the wind.

“They look sad,” says Oscar. Lorena blinks. Oscar’s English isn’t great but, for once, it doesn’t have to be. Lorena turns back at the boys. They really do look sad, she realizes. Their eyes trained on the ground instead of each other. Their slouched backs. She feels antsy, uncomfortable with how she’d misread the situation. She feels like she should go say something to them. Apologize for her earlier gruffness.

Next time she comes out of the kitchen, she greets them properly. “Did you guys just get into town tonight?” She knows her tone is too chipper. She hopes her smile isn’t too pushy. The boys look at each other, uncomfortable with her attention.

“We’re just passing through,” says the tall one. “We have a long drive.”

“Well, stay as long as you need,” Lorena says. “It’s getting nasty out there.” She gestures out to the half-inch of snow already covering the parking lot. As if they hadn’t noticed.

The boys thank her, but Lorena can tell they’re eager to eat and get out. To get home. She takes their orders with a cheeriness she hopes comes off as comforting. The first two boys order the cheapest entrée on the menu. The sick-looking one just asks for a cup of soup.

Oscar hums as he works, matching the melodies of the oldies playing out of the restaurant speakers. The music reminds him of his grandmother’s house—songs with lyrics he can’t understand, but the melodies that had once struck him as old timey and quaint are suddenly lush with memories. Good memories. He hopes that, even forced, his cheeriness can cut through the tension in the restaurant’s air.

Next to him, prepping the vegetables with an untrained knife, Lorena is flustered. Well, Lorena was always flustered—had been every day for the eight months Oscar has been working for her. Longer, if the other chefs were to be believed, constantly in the middle of one crisis or another—but something about the boys in the dining room had set her off even worse than usual. She’d been almost angry when they’d walked in, as if they’d ruined the illusion of her empty restaurant as something other than what it really was. And once Oscar had built up the nerve to say something, her sudden hospitality was just as overbearing. In English so fast that Oscar couldn’t decipher any of it, she’d lingered at the boys’ table with questions that they didn’t want to hear.

Oscar flips the chicken over in its pan and sprinkles more seasoning over the half-cooked flesh. To his right, there’s a dull thud of metal on wood as Lorena fusses with the vegetables. Oscar’s fiancée teases him about Lorena, saying the only reason she keeps him around on slow nights was in the off chance he’d sleep with her. But Oscar knows Lorena isn’t like that. After so many shifts like these, selling so few entrées that the entire night was a loss, he

feels bad for her. Middle-aged and childless, mad at the world for the dying restaurant dragging her down with it. And she was the one paying him, wasn't she? Eighty bucks out of the register at closing time, untaxed cash. Eighty bucks the restaurant hadn't earned. Lorena knows about Oscar's baby, knows about the second one on the way, and kept giving him shifts when she could barely keep the lights on. That had to count for something.

Spending night after night with this sad woman his mother's age, an entire language barrier between them, Oscar wishes he could do more. He feels a guilt he can't articulate that, after everything Lorena has done for him and his family, all he can do for her in return is cook her a meal with ingredients she'd paid for. A meal they'd split in silence, standing side by side at the otherwise empty bar.

Lorena sweeps the peppers she'd been cutting onto the grill. They sizzle in the oil, harmonizing with Oscar's hums.

"I love that sound," says Oscar, in English. At first, it seems like Lorena doesn't understand what he means. Then she shakes her head, snaps back to reality, and turns to him.

"Me too," she says. "The smell, too. It reminds me of cooking with my mom." She talks slowly and articulates enough that Oscar can make out every syllable. He smiles but focuses back on the grill. Lets the sound of dinner cooking say what he can't.

Oscar watches as Lorena brings the boys their food. They have a quick exchange that Oscar can't make out. But after, Oscar is glad to see, she leaves them alone. The boys take giant bites of their food, even the sick-looking one. They're finished in a matter of seconds. The snow outside is still falling, and no one seems eager to pull his coat back on and march into the cold. Then, so subtly Oscar almost doesn't notice, there's a hint of a smile on the quiet one's face. Color in his cheeks again. A little bit of warmth.

And then, stomachs full, fingers thawed, the boys start talking.

The five of them are like a diorama, frozen in time, backlit by the restaurant's yellow light. Outside the storm picks up. A half inch of snow covers the parking lot and the tops of the cars. Their footprints have long since filled in. But inside, protected from the wind by a thin layer of glass, the five of them huddle for warmth and for food like animals in a cave. The young man watches the old woman and the old woman watches the boys and the boys watch each other but really, it's not important who's watching who. They all watch each other. They're an unlikely pack just trying to make it through the night. All they can do is eat, rest, and be together. Maybe, if they can muster up the strength, howl at the moon.

Twilight

It's August. The sky hangs over the lake. There is no wind. The evergreens stand at every point along the lake's shoreline. The surface is wrinkled like the back of an old woman's papery hand; the color, like the iridescent neck of a pigeon. The clouds look like white jellybeans melting in the blue flame of the sky. The air shimmers. The lake and the sky and the trees and the air and I could all be described as expressionless.

I have to remind myself to look out across the lake rather than stare at my feet on the metal dock. I have to remind myself to look at the lake because I am afraid I will stop remembering it as soon as I leave it. It's happened many times before—my memory is fickle in that way; I get this from my father—so I take great care to remember now.

My father swishes backward into the lakewater with an audible chill. The expanse of it all makes him appear far away, although he is right in front of me. The evergreens seem to grow taller.

He says that the water tastes the same as it did when he swam here forty years ago. This makes me feel dreadful. I smile.

I'm afraid I will know how he feels—if in forty years I'll have memories forced upon me like water forced up my nose after jumping into the same lake. *Real* memories, not just a recitation of facts, not just an amalgam of other family member's recollections that I've poorly stitched together and placed myself in the center of, not just an empty nodding of my head plastered with a phony thoughtful gaze so that the conversation can continue and I can hear more about these memories that are supposed to be mine.

I pick my eyes up from the dock and *look* out across the lake again.

If the lake were a room it would be caked with dust, musty as all hell, stacked to the ceiling with things that people left here for good keeping but have now rusted and lay unremembered. It would be filled with things that

were loved and left there out of love—but abandoned, still—so that new people could find them and love them anew. If you walked into this room you would not feel sad.

A quick sound of splashing water resurfaces me. My father points to an eagle in the sky returning to its nest to feed its hatchlings. “Look,” he says. We watch together. I remind myself to remember this.

All that can be heard is the sound of thousands of insects chittering as one. I know—without knowing—that this is exactly how it sounded when my father was a child here and that it will be exactly how it sounds when I am gone. When I listen for too long I feel like I will be swallowed whole by guilt that I can hardly explain. I see my father swimming in this lake and I am seeing time crushed onto itself like a tin can.

This is real memory—a full-bodied possession of the senses, nostalgia gone sour as soon as it lands on the tongue. It’s one thing to be able to recall the lake, but it’s another thing entirely to taste the water and become rigid with the knowledge of forty years passed.

The eagle leaves its nest once more and once more we watch it fly. I make special note of this so that I may experience the full weight of this gut-punch memory when the time comes.

The sky *hangs* over the lake. The water looks like a mirror but it’s too murky to reflect my face. He says that the water tastes the same as it did when he swam here forty years ago and I don’t know how he can stand it.

I sat on my heels in the sand with my sister making sand-pies and sand-meatballs. We were young and hidden around a corner from Grandma’s beach house. My mother kneeled with us in the sand to look at our pseudoedible creations and we invited her into our world. We wanted to be praised and she praised us. This was when my mother felt most like my mother. The sun was setting over the ocean, and the sand and she and my sister and I were softly glowing; around this corner, we were three haloed angels. The waves lapped upon the shore in front of us, our backs were to the barnacled wave breaker, and we were pressed tightly together between the sand and the setting sky; these were four walls. Then, there was the sound of splitting wood and a chilling bellow. I remember my mother telling my sister and I to *stay there* in the instant before she was running through the sand and disappearing around the corner. We were young and hidden and scared, so we stayed for a while before we slowly got up and abandoned our sand pies and sand meatballs to make our way to the beach house deck; twilight, with the tide way out and our feet cold in the damp sand.



Blibber? I Hardly Know 'Er (markers), Sophia Turturro

Bread Blue Planet

I'm a bread blue planet.
Among a crazy shuffle of blue.

I'm like
too intense
for the malt of the run.

For the sake of the gun.
I was a child that ate leaves.
Now I'm an adult among a wintry hail.

A wintry wait heaven.

When you touched me
you thought you had a firm grip
on a girl body.

When you touched me
I felt like sky.
Like cry.
When you touched me.
I didn't even whimper a bit.
Didn't even feel it really.

Every time I'm touched I feel like heaven.
I feel like grip.
Everything moves within me and I become responsive.

And I become a bold sparkle.
Yes I become responsive.
I wish I had a way to talk
But please know I'll just respond.
There is a baby in me.
That's not my daughter:
But it's my spoke.
That rinses at the world.
That craves the world.
That bleeds the world.
Boasts the world.

It's an animal
and it's a blunt
hand.

I wish I knew how
to greet you
in a way that can
make you understand.

Understand.
My body split in two.
Reclined in a malware.
Cold rhythm. Scope.
I'd love to be blue. ●
The whole color. The whole
world. God!
I'd love to be the whole world.
Watery + blue + baltic.
But you touch me.
I'm just a touch.

Whole Again

And violence becomes an addiction
when you do not love it enough
when you do not lean into it

you have to eat enough of it
like a star
like a gourd
like a vision
lit by echo

you must get used to how it spins
in your mouth
like a hunting rock
like something
that breeds flowers
gecko son
perused topaz diagon
blankness

yeah
it wreaks so much havoc on the body
and the soul,
it designs so much mythology
on your shoulders
tears into the bone life
loots its good structure

leaving everything so
dead

beetled jewelry bugs
brittle branch love

and poetry comes easy to me now
to the whole of my
self
borne out the skin
almost
breathed
out

so
easy
blushing
seeping

out the papery clouds

and beauty is in
so so so much to me

mostly in nature

in the bodies it has melded

three stones

grifting together

crafting organs

out of fertile

entranced

dough

and always, always in sound

the half-weeping
smoke of it
billowed
and
protected by pixies

slinking into
love odes
collapsing onto me like a
bleeding pen
shifting me slowly
out my mind
so I become a type of insane
that roots me
lizard

it stirs inside,
something patterned
something seamless
as if I'm something more
than I thought I was
and today it is here:

in

this breath
this breath
this breath

.

and what I want most now is:

to become

whole again,
whole again,
whole again,

Kristen Gentry's *Mama Said*: A Review

Kristen Gentry's debut, *Mama Said*, is a collection of twelve short stories that offers an intimate look into the lives of young women. More specifically, the stories examine family relationships made complicated by substance abuse and depression. Having recently lost someone to alcohol addiction, a topic often overlooked or glossed over, this book struck an intense chord. With addiction, we often feel as though we've lost someone before they're truly gone, and this kind of loss is demonstrated eloquently throughout *Mama Said*. The cover alone is a marker of what one can expect: an evocative painting called "The Illusion of Peace" by Ton'nea Green, a Louisville artist. It features a young girl with her eyes closed and arms raised gently as if dancing, a beaded bracelet on her wrist that says "MAMA." Her cheeks glow and she wears a purple striped bow in her hair. There is a sweetness and a sadness in that image, something that Gentry, who visited campus in April, says she was struck by, as she felt it accurately and beautifully portrayed the complexity of children.

Mama Said is set in Louisville, Kentucky. While the stories are set during the crack epidemic and opioid crisis, there is a timeless quality to them. They explore motherhood, masculinity, and the Black family experience, all issues that remain salient. Hailing from Louisville herself, Gentry paints this composition with understanding and care, drawing in the reader with descriptions of the Ohio River and local Derby Day celebrations. The collection moves from the main character JayLynn to include her cousins Zaria and Angel, and their mothers.

The opening story, “Mama Said,” is compelling, not only in its clear description of setting, but more interestingly, in the utilization of the second person perspective. Within the first few sentences, the audience is in the place of JayLynn as she moves into her college dorm. Second person point of view is risky, but here the payoff is powerful. I found myself very connected to JayLynn, and not just because I was addressed as her. The toll of carrying a parent’s mental and emotional baggage is cumbersome and Gentry’s matter-of-fact style of writing cements us firmly in that place. “Zaria understands your situation because she has her own situation with her mother Dee and Dee’s crack addiction” Jaylyn observes, and this comment shocks with its direct and honest nature. In a time of change in JayLynn’s life, she is still hyper-conscious of her mother’s wellbeing rather than her own. While strangers help JayLynn move her belongings into the dorm, her mother Claudia sits in the car with the air conditioning blasting, listening to James Taylor.

These moments are the ones that stick to JayLynn, and show up in different manifestations throughout the book, like being unable to reach her mother on Thanksgiving day and having to be the buffer for her family’s frustrations while dealing with her own feelings in “A Satisfying Meal.” In terms of language, there is a striking balance between the blunt and the poetic. When JayLynn, leaving for college, watches her mother break down and cry, she’s torn between “want[ing] her to feel the disappointment [Jaylyn] felt when her mother didn’t show up or buried herself under the covers,” and still wanting her mother’s attention, “a love letter you’ve desperately wanted to read all your life...”

Claudia’s struggle leads us to “Introduction,” the shortest story at only five pages, something that Gentry says surprised her as she wrote it. Nonetheless, the story carries the same emotional intensity and depth of the longer pieces. Once again following JayLynn, Gentry switches to first person narration. The emotional maturity forced onto JayLynn from a young age is evident here. As a 20-year-old, she watches as her mother prepares for an AA meeting, rubbing lotion into her legs. As she watches Claudia, she thinks of how her mother’s body houses her insecurities, her choices. She wonders about the cosmetic surgeries she’s had, and why she’s unable to “see her perfect parts.” Jaylyn shares the bathroom with her, putting on makeup that she doesn’t usually wear because “I just wanted to be around her, to soak her up like sun.” Claudia’s invitation to the meeting is a big deal for the both of them, and later at the meeting, Jaylyn can’t help but think of that moment in the bathroom. She’s afraid to tell her mother that she’s beautiful, knowing Claudia won’t or maybe can’t believe her. As a reader, I was enamored with the way Gentry creates characters we can empathize with, characters at once deeply flawed and worthy of love. When asked about the quick yet resonant ending, Gentry said, “thinking about and claiming an addict as a mother is enough of an

event” for our main character. “Introduction” is among my favorite stories in the collection for its brevity and its powerful ending.

While the collection examines mother-daughter relationships, Gentry also subtly and artfully examines masculinity and its impacts on the women characters. Only three of the twelve stories are told from a male perspective. We meet Parker, Claudia’s ex-husband and Jaylyn’s father in “A New World,” Waylon in “A Good Education,” and Damon in “To Have And To Hold.” In “Origin Story,” Zaria’s boyfriend comes over to help get rid of a bat from her new home. Again, utilizing different points of view, Gentry reveals the way relationships shape our sense of self. While Parker contemplates the things he should’ve, could’ve, would’ve done in his relationship with Claudia, we wonder if he might have been able to make a difference if he had “flush[ed] Claudia’s pain pills down the toilet, [gotten] in her face and yell[ed].” The likely answer is no. When Zaria watches her son absorb what it means to be a man, she is forced to recognize the limits of her ability to protect her son. The reader is left wondering how Malik will cope. Certainly the male characters are affected by the mothers’ addictions, too, but Gentry’s focus is always the daughters. “I wanted it to be about the daughters,” she said, “not about the mothers [or fathers].”

The final story, “Everything You Could Ever Want” mirrors the opening story in a fulfilling and satisfying way. Also written in second person, we see how JayLynn has internalized the role of the good daughter, even in the most difficult moments in her life. When she miscarries, she thinks, “...you feel like your girl is so like you—uneasy and unsure how to insert herself into the world. So timid that she didn’t try, didn’t want to be a bother.” These devastating lines reveal the damage that ripples through the generations. Gentry makes space to grieve with JayLynn, Zaria, Claudia, and countless others. Alongside this, there are moments of connection, too, and Gentry ends the collection with one such moment. In the end, Claudia does show up for JayLynn and wisely tells her “Of course you’re not okay. But you will be... You’re gonna be okay.”

An Interview With Kristen Gentry

Kristen Gentry is an award winning fiction writer whose work has been published by journals such as *Crab Orchard Review*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Electric Literature*, among others. She is an alumni of both VONA and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. *Mama Said* is her debut short story collection.

Gandy Dancer: *Mama Said* is an exploration of the love, joy, and resilience of a Black family in Louisville, Kentucky. What were your motivations in choosing Louisville as a setting?

Kristen Gentry: Initially, the stories were set in Louisville simply by default—it was the place I knew best—and, to be honest, the setting description was pretty paltry. When I met editor Liz Van Hoose at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, she advised me to highlight Louisville as a setting because it's not often featured in books. With her advice, I developed Louisville as the setting and it became a prominent element in the book. I wrote the bulk of the collection while living in Rochester, New York. Being away from home sharpened my clarity about how Louisville is distinct. It also revealed how my knowledge of the city and its people differs from popular media portrayals and stereotypes.

GD: The characters in *Mama Said* are almost all connected by family ties. What are some of the challenges that come with writing family dynamics? How often does a fiction writer have to reach into their own experience, and how does that influence the finished product?

KG: I think one of my biggest challenges with writing family dynamics is not overloading the present moments with the characters' backstories and relationships. It's important to let readers know the history that the current conflict rests upon, but it can be hard to balance that history and maintain the plot's forward momentum.

How often a writer feels it necessary to reach into their own experience is going to depend on the writer and the stories they want to tell. I did so often for the stories in *Mama Said*. I wasn't always pulling and recounting actual events in the fiction, though there are nuggets of true life woven into some of the stories. My mother did actually tell me she wished she could drive off of a bridge, as Claudia tells JayLynn in the title story, and my family had a horrible Thanksgiving when my aunts ate all of the chitlins but contributed nothing and my mother was supposed to show up but didn't as events play out in "A Satisfying Meal." However, I made a lot of stuff up, too, because it's fiction. Nigel and the Thompsons are completely fictional. So are Melissa and Beverly. My goal in writing is to capture an emotional truth in the story, and that emotional truth doesn't have to originate from true events.

GD: There are a lot of characters in this collection, all of whom feel vibrant, alive, and grounded in their own experience. As you wrote, did these characters develop together as a family/community unit, or was it easier to consider each character more separately at first?

KG: I always imagined JayLynn, Angel, and Zaria within the context of their family. "Grown Folks' Business" was the first story I wrote in the collection. In that story, readers are introduced to Angel. She and her conflict become known through the juxtaposition of her voice and her parts of the story set against the voices of her mother, Maxine, and Aunt Sandy. "A Satisfying Meal" is the second story I wrote for the collection. JayLynn is the protagonist in that story, but she's set against the large cast of her family. Family shapes the daughters in such an integral way; I mirrored that shaping in the writing and development of their characters.

GD: The title, *Mama Said*, speaks to the thematic significance of motherhood that is a consistent throughline across these stories. The daughters are torn between emulation or rejection of their mothers, such as Angel's imitation of her mother in "Animal Kingdom." She notes, "Maxine rested in her mouth, a second tongue she couldn't speak yet but echoed in her laugh" (191). Can you talk about the complexities of mother-daughter relationships in this story, in which Angel has two contrasting mother figures?

KG: Angel is old enough to recognize that her mother is flawed. Maxine is reckless and suffers from addiction. But Angel also sees her mother's redeeming traits. She knows that Maxine is not the villain Aunt Sandy often paints her to be. Maxine is beautiful, funny, and simply fun to be around. This is

everything that Angel wants to be, the inheritance she feels she's due as Maxine's daughter, though Angel begins to understand that it can be difficult to separate the redeeming traits from the flaws. Maxine's recklessness is what sometimes makes her funny or fun to be around, but it also played a role in creating her drug habit. Her beauty attracts danger and men that could do her harm. Drugs change people, and I feel that many children of addicts are often negotiating between their parent on drugs versus the parent as they knew them before the addiction and/or who they imagine they could become clean of the drugs. It feels like the parent is constantly flipping and changing, flashing redeeming traits and flaws, because they are. Really, we *all* are, but drugs create extremes.

GD: Female friendship, especially Black female friendship, is an important element in many of these stories. How does friendship united by both gender and race—such as friendship between Black women—differ from other kinship or family ties in this collection?

KG: Black female friendship outside of blood ties is most prominent in “Animal Kingdom” and “In Her Image.” The biggest difference I see playing out in the friendships in both of these stories is the freedom from those family ties. That freedom gives the character an opportunity to shape who she wants to become rather than feeling burdened or bound by the narrative of who she is within her family. In “Animal Kingdom,” Angel is with Kayla and Jade, away from Aunt Sandy's judgment. She's free—and encouraged by Jade—to explore a freer, wilder self that is not unlike the behavior she imagines of a younger Maxine. In “In Her Image,” Stella teaches Claudia how to pray and manifest a life full of romantic love and domestic bliss, unlike her mother Jean's lonely single life. Friendships for Angel and Claudia offer support and a chance to reinvent themselves.

GD: All the unique perspectives the readers get as we move through the collection culminate with the final story “Everything You Could Ever Want.” Within this story, JayLynn finds a moment of connection with her often distant mother, “Come here baby; she says so quietly that you aren't sure the words are real, that you haven't imagined them or the jasmine scent of her... Your mother is here” (268). How did you decide that this story made the most sense to place at the end?

KG: The overarching narrative of the collection is driven by JayLynn's desire for Claudia to be clean, to be present, to be the mother she used to be before depression and addiction. Actually, that's the hope for all of the daughters. “Everything You Could Ever Want” seems like a natural end because it presents a culminating crisis moment and resolution for that desire.

GD: There are so many important moments in these stories that stuck with me, and will continue to stick with me after reading. What are some of the

moments that stick with you the most after writing this collection? What do you hope readers will carry with them from *Mama Said*?

KG: The final image of Claudia sitting alone in “In Her Image,” thinking of her mother, Jean, haunts me. As does Nigel pleading with JayLynn to tell Claudia what has happened in “Everything You Could Ever Want.” JayLynn’s intense fear of not messing up Claudia’s sobriety or sully her happiness is actually what clings in that story. It’s incredibly heartbreaking that JayLynn’s afraid to even attempt to get what she wants the most, which is her mother’s comfort and support. But that story’s ending also stays with me, and that lingering is much more positive.

After reading *Mama Said*, I hope readers carry a sense of being understood and a greater understanding of the complexities of addiction; it is not simply “a personal problem.”

POSTSCRIPT



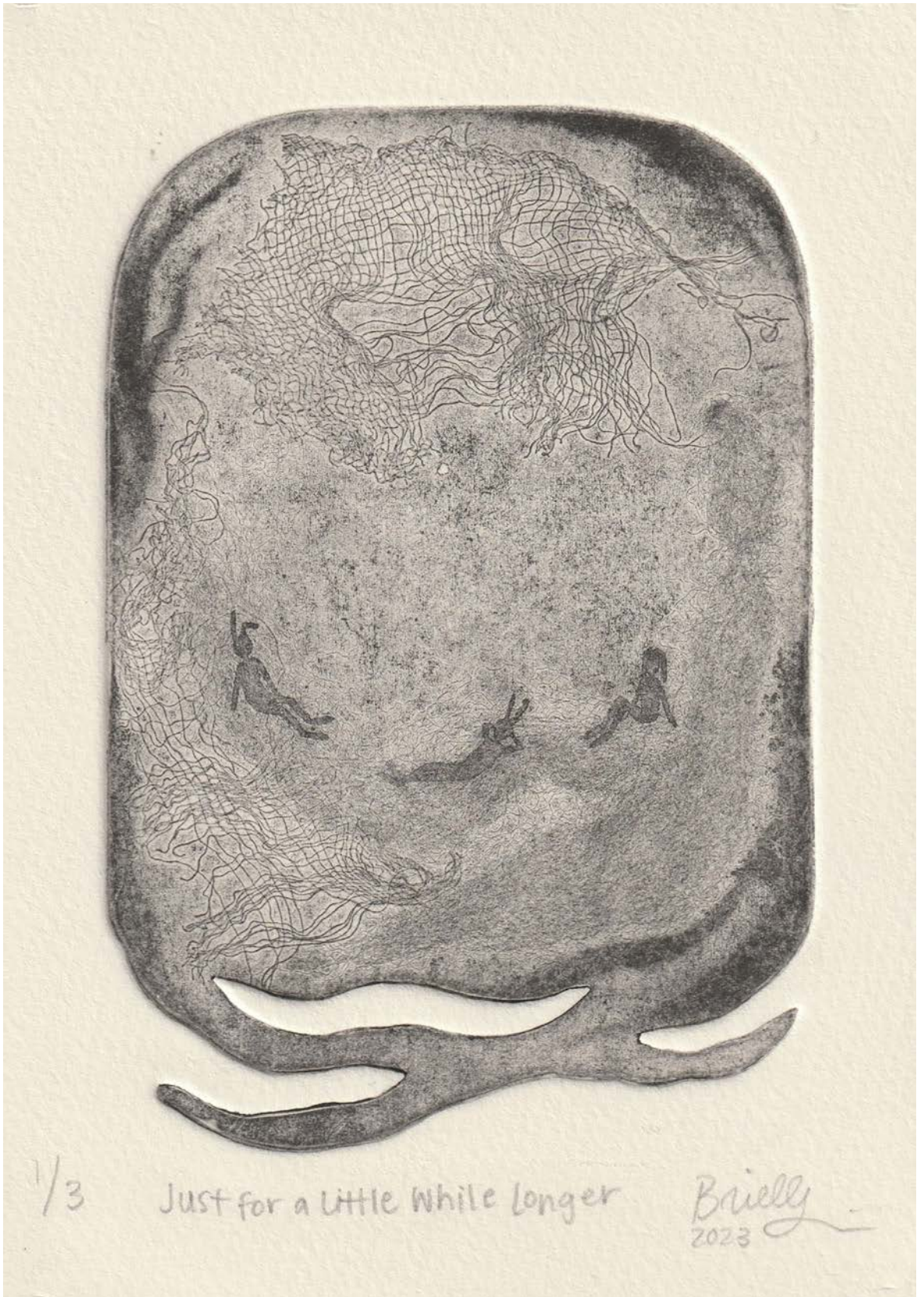
Inevitable

Brielle
2023

Inevitable (drypoint plexiglass engraving on handmade cotton paper), Brielle Sarkisian



Washed Out II (additive & subtractive monotype), Brielle Sarkisian



Just for a Little While Longer (hardground & softground etching with aquanit spit bite), Brielle Sarkisian

About the Authors

KASHI BAKSHANI is a queer, South Asian poet from New York City. She is an undergraduate university student pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in spatial experience design at FIT. Her work explores multidisciplinary intersections of the arts and sciences. Her writing has been published to Columbia University's *State of the Planet* and *W27 Newspaper*.

JENNA COBURN (SHE/THEY) is a graduate student completing her master's degree in clinical mental health counseling at SUNY New Paltz. She hopes to continue work as a therapist in the Hudson Valley after graduating. In her free time, she enjoys knitting, playing *Stardew Valley*, and petting all the wonderful dogs in her life.

KENDALL CRUISE is a junior at SUNY Geneseo studying English (creative writing) and adolescence education. They have been previously published in *Gandy Dancer* and *Iris Magazine*, and are the current managing editor of their college's newspaper, *The Lamron*.

MARTIN DOLAN is a writer from Upstate NY, currently studying at Binghamton University. His work is available online at www.dolanmart.in.

MADOLLEY DONZO is pursuing an undergraduate degree at SUNY Geneseo in psychology and English (creative

writing). She has been previously published in *Recess Magazine*, SUNY Geneseo's only BIPOC, student-run literary magazine. When she is not working on editing different drafts of her pieces, she can be found in a reading nook with a fantasy novel in hand.

BRIANNA GAMBLE (SHE/THEY) is a student in her final semester at Monroe Community College. She studies creative writing, vampires, and how to make a mean gumbo. She has not previously been published.

STELLA GLEITSMAN (SHE/HE/THEY) is a poet and artist based in Brooklyn currently attending SUNY Purchase. Their poetry is focused on the visceral texture of language and explores alienation in body, mind, and life through newfound poetic architecture. Their work also explores the radical feminist transmasculine perspective as a potent poetic politics. They hope to delve into sound poetry, poetic painting and sculpture, and printed matter.

JAY GREEN is a writer, reader, and avid napper. After graduating from MCC in the spring, he hopes to continue on to a four-year and receive his bachelor's in creative writing with an emphasis in creative nonfiction. His favorite book as a child was *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch.

ASLAN, previously known as Virginia, HERNANDEZ, is a gender-fluid individual studying art and design at SUNY Westchester Community College. His work, particularly in charcoal portraiture, delves into diverse perspectives, aims to transcend conventional boundaries, and capture the nuanced complexities of identity. As a student and artist, Aslan aspires to contribute to an inclusive artistic space, where emotions and authenticity take center stage.

CIELO N. HOWELL is a Purchase College creative writing major from Westchester County, New York. She has an intrigue for the unanswered, the chaotic, and the natural world. She is the managing editor of *Italics Mine*. When not writing she can be found in trees, antique shops, and feasting on seasonal goodies.

KIRRY KAUFER (THEY/THEM) is a senior at SUNY Purchase who studies creative writing with concentrations in both poetry and fiction. They are the recipient of the Ginny Wray Prize in Poetry (2023), and co-manage Purchase's literary magazine, *Italics Mine*, alongside their roommate. In addition, they are a poetry editor for *Chaotic Merge Magazine* and *Small Orange Journal*.

ANNA LANZE is a freshman at SUNY Suffolk Community College. She wrote this piece in the fall of 2023 when she was studying at SUNY Oswego.

HOLLY MICHELSEN is a psychology & English double major in her last semester at SUNY Geneseo, where her love of poetry and creative nonfiction has grown immensely. She pulls inspiration from writers such as Alice Fulton, An-

nie Dillard, Bob Dylan, & anyone who manages to string words together with enviable competency.

DIANA MORLEY is a senior English and adolescent education major at SUNY Geneseo. She has one previous publication in the *Songs of Survival Literary Journal*. She primarily shares her work on an Instagram account, @deempoem.

LAUREN ROYCE is a senior at SUNY Oswego, where she is studying journalism and creative writing. She is currently working on both creative and news interviews. She is happiest living as a bridge between these worlds. Her work consists primarily of news stories and entertainment reviews in *The Oswegonian*.

JOYCE SAFDIAH is a poet and undergrad studying anthropology and communications at Purchase College. She derives inspiration from the everyday and her inability to be normal about anything. Her work can be found in the notes app, love letters to friends, and scrawled in bathroom stalls.

DAVID SANTILLO is a multimedia artist who primarily utilizes charcoal, ink, acrylic, and melted beads in his work. He is currently enrolled at SUNY Ulster as a fine arts major. He loves creating work that allows expression of himself in a way that he can share. Additionally, he loves creating work that contains recognizable and nostalgic subjects from franchises. Check out his work on Instagram, @nachdraws.

BRIELLE SARKISIAN is a printmaker, papermaker, and illustrator with a BFA from SUNY New Paltz.

SOPHIA TURTURRO commonly describes herself as a recovering entrepreneur. Due to unforeseen economics, she's currently looking down the barrel of bankruptcy. However, not all hope is lost. To get herself out of this rut, Sophia has begun selling business advice for \$300 an hour. She can assure you there have been no unsatisfied customers. Contact her if interested—and hurry, don't miss out on the honor of being her first customer.