

# Gandy Dancer Archives

---

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 4

---

12-1-2015

## Sinkhole

Sarah Steil  
*SUNY Geneseo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Steil, Sarah (2015) "Sinkhole," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol4/iss1/4>

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gandy Dancer Archives by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact [KnightScholar@geneseo.edu](mailto:KnightScholar@geneseo.edu).

# Sinkhole

Picture a large open pond, man-made and frozen in February. The pond my mother's husband carved into the earth of my backyard, after tearing down our childhood swing set with a chainsaw. Criminal to have such an open body of water, exposed, waiting for things like this.

Picture Bandit, our old Boston terrier, on his twelfth birthday, shuffling through the snow, peering through the ice of the pond, searching for the fish at the bottom.

Picture my little brother, Ollie, at the screen door leading to the backyard, calling the dogs in from the yard. Picture him hearing splashes in the back pond, thinking of the fish, and growing angrier when the dogs don't come. *What's taking them so long?*

Picture Bandit, focused, placing his paws, his weight, on the frozen section of the pond, leaning forward, falling through. His black legs churn against white snow, his nostrils flare, searching for air. He kicks one last time, and this last splash will replay in Ollie's mind for years: *Why didn't I go out there?*

Picture Ollie, frustrated, stuffing his feet into cold boots, trudging through the snow, calling the dog's name, "Bandit! Bandit, come!" Looking for him, confused, and then finding him on his stomach, wet, cold, eyes still.

Picture me, miserable and enraged, searching for a fight, fists swinging but missing contact, accusing my mother: "We never should've had that fucking pond."

Picture my mother, tired, shaking her solemn head: "It's not the pond. It's the dogs who go near the pond."

At six years old, I spent a great deal of time on my living room couch watching *Emergency Vets* on television. My mother ran after my younger siblings and my father was never home, and the man in glasses on screen filled entire months. The show featured an old veterinarian with white hair and a mustache greeting sick and disgruntled dogs, cats, lizards, and birds. I marveled at this man's healing, how at the beginning of the half hour episode a wounded dog would stagger in with a bleeding leg, and by the end he would be healed, saved, running, and happy. Even then, when I was too young to understand my own desire to be saved, the concept of saving someone else overwhelmed me. My mother, tending to six frenetic children by herself, refused to get a dog, and thus I never asked throughout my hours spent inside watching the show.

One day, my mother sat me down in the kitchen with all five of my siblings. We didn't have enough chairs for all of us, so the younger, more fidgety children got seats, while my older sisters had to stand. My mother, a beauty, possessed physical traits I craved, attributes that defined her in a crowd. While most of my siblings were brown-haired and brown-eyed, my mother was redheaded and hazel-eyed, but always tired. While I wiggled on a creaking wooden chair, she folded her arms and addressed the six of us. "Listen," she sighed, "We're not getting a dog. We can't afford one and we don't have time for one. I'm sorry." My older sisters, twelve and fifteen, threw up their arms in exasperation, denied the one item on each of their Christmas lists for another year.

I, however, had never considered owning a dog. I watched them on television, spellbound, but the idea of living with one seemed completely foreign, impossible.

But a few months after I turned seven, and after a few bouts of particularly nasty fights between my parents, my mother caved. My mother, possibly trying to compensate for my father's absence, or finally being convinced by my older sisters, walked into the kitchen one morning with a small black puppy in a blanket. While my siblings screamed, I stood back, confused, insisting he was a stuffed animal. My mother told us to sit in a circle with our legs out and feet touching, forming a misshapen star, and placed the puppy between us. Our arms reached and grappled and inevitably one of us would cry out, "Mom, it's my turn!" when another had been holding him too long. We watched him like he was made of ice, fragile, as though if we turned around he would melt, disappear from our lives.

Even my father, who actively avoided my siblings and me on the rare occasions he was home and not fighting with my mother, seemed taken by our new friend. My mother and father had struck a deal: the dog stays but my

father got to pick the name. He named him after a cartoon he watched when he was a kid, *The Adventures of Jonny Quest*, and I began to view Bandit as a gift from both my mother and father.

A month or so later when I'm home from college, Ollie and I sit around the kitchen table together, and he stands to get food from the fridge. At fifteen, he is three and a half years my junior, and I see myself mirrored in the roundness of his cheeks, his freckles, his timidity. Standing across the room in baggy clothes, he scans the contents of the fridge, slouching forward. When I ask questions I don't look up at him, instead I stare down at my hands. "How was Bandit when you found him?"

Ollie stands in the light of the fridge and stops when he hears me. "What?"  
"How was Bandit when you found him? That day."

One hand rests on the door of the fridge, the other remains at his side. I take furtive glances at his pensive face, as he focuses and pictures himself in the snow again. "On his stomach. With his head sticking out of the water."

"Were his eyes open?"

"Yeah. But when I came back out with Jesse his head was under the water."

I am entering this information into the database of my memory, editing the image I had of him floating on his side. Now, when I spend hours picturing him in the water, he will be on his stomach.

He tells me about trying to get our brother Jesse to come outside with him, not being able to find the words. How Jesse, on his bed in his underwear, had refused. "It made me so mad," he tells me. "I kept calling, 'Jesse, come here, Jesse, come here, Jesse, come here,' and he kept asking what I wanted."

He tells me how finally they had walked out silently together in a blanket of snow, how he had led Jesse to the pond, to Bandit, unspeaking, crying silently.

"What did you do when you found him together?"

"We called you."

This is where my memory cuts in, when a phone call from Jesse at 11:18 on a Tuesday morning had confused me so greatly that I stared at my phone for a few seconds before answering. *Why would he be calling me?*

There was a beat of silence before I answered, standing outside a college biology classroom, and my heart knew before his mouth could form the words: *Someone's dead.*

And then Jesse's voice, slow, choppy, wet, over the phone: "Bandit's in the pond."

And my own confusion: "Can you get him out? What's he doing?"

In the summer when I was little, my mother drove us to Massachusetts to visit my older sisters' aunt on their father's side. She wasn't my aunt, technically, but we grew up calling her by the name. Aunt Mary Barbara lived on a farm with a huge pond in her backyard. She would give my siblings and me nets to catch the frogs in the pond. We would wade out into mucky water and she would warn us of the snapping turtles.

One day, I went too far out into the slime water and had tipped over, mud filling my pants and shoes, my feet sucked into sludge. My siblings laughed on the grass, and my mother hosed me down in Aunt Mary Barbara's large driveway as I cried.

On the way home, my mother and my siblings sang in unison: "The day Sarah fell into the pond. No, she wasn't fond, of falling in the pond, the day Sarah fell into the pond."

When Ollie tells me about finding Bandit, he's eating chips at the table and I have that song running through my head. *The day Bandit fell into the pond.*

My questions form slowly as I approach issues I have obsessed over, as I pretend I am not putting Ollie on trial.

"And you heard something outside when he fell?"

"Splashing."

"And you thought it was the fish?"

"Yeah."

I am sitting in the chair, eyes on my feet. "It was quick?"

He thinks for a moment, chewing, shakes his head. "No. I didn't want to tell anyone. But it was a long time. I heard it and went inside and went back outside and still heard it. Like, over five minutes."

Bile runs up my throat and I feel a seed planting, a resentment growing, questions I can't ask brewing. *How did you not know? Didn't you know the fish aren't even out when it's that cold? Why didn't you walk out and check? How did you not know?*

Ollie changes the subject and I answer absentmindedly as my head swirls, imagining Bandit clawing on the side of the pond for so long, his legs churning with adrenaline, ice shocking his nose and throat. I picture Ollie sitting inside, hearing loud splashing and struggling, in the warmth of the house as the dog choked outside.

My head cuts in. *It wasn't his fault.* But my heart, wounded, beats faster and I'm afraid if I look up at him he will see the disappointment on my face.

"Well, it wasn't your fault," I sigh, feigning calmness, assuredness.

"We never should've had the fucking pond," he says. "It's just a death trap waiting there."

I nod.

My memory relies upon his information, descriptions. He tells me how our mother's husband had come outside, stood before the pond, pulled the dog from the water, and stuffed him into a garbage bag. How he tossed the garbage bag on the curb, how the molecules of water that had killed Bandit had leaked out of the plastic. "I told you to keep the dogs away from the fucking pond," her husband yelled. My mother conceded: "I know, I know. I'm sorry."

Bandit was the first of many dogs, as my mother realized that her pain over her fighting with my father could be soothed somewhat by being needed by someone else. A month after Bandit entered the kitchen doorway, my mother returned with Cricket, a small, frantic Boston terrier.

"They'll be friends," my mother told us, holding Cricket up like an offering to Bandit, who nosed her intently. My mother flushed, scared, had locked my father out of the house the night before, and was now actively ignoring our ringing phone. She invested herself in our new dog, babied her, carried her around the house, and brought her to the grocery store.

When my father finally left us a few years later, I told the dogs first. "He's not coming back, guys," I mumbled, staring at the two of them on the kitchen floor, searching for understanding. My father's leaving was otherwise secret information, and I shut out any friends I used to have when the idea of explaining everything got too hard. I mentioned it casually, years later when I was sixteen, to my friends in high school when they asked about my five dogs. One of them asked if I'd always had a lot of pets, and I answered distractedly, "No, I only got the first two a few years before my parents got divorced. So, what? Maybe nine years ago?" They looked uncomfortably back at me, and I realized I had shared private information. I tried to change the subject when my friends insisted I'd never told them that my parents were divorced before.

When I was young, I didn't want to be known as the girl whose father left, whose mother couldn't support her children alone. So I didn't make friends. I didn't talk about myself and didn't invite people over, and instead, I spent my time inside, confiding in Bandit.

Sometimes I dream of him, walking near that pond, his nose to the ground, ears erect. I see him looking for fish, placing his toes on the ice before realizing the mistake he has made. I picture him hearing Ollie's calling, his lungs filling with ice water, hoping someone will come for him. Sinking to the bottom.

But in my dream, I'm the one standing by the door, and when I hear his body hit water I know. I'll run barefooted into the snow and jump into the

pond, and my lungs will fill and my feet will mash into cold sludge, but I'll pull him from the water. Bandit will be cold, but I'll pound on his chest, and his heart will beat for me again.

When I wake again, I remember I didn't come for him. He was not pulled from the water. He sank to the bottom, heart cold, when his legs became exhausted with the weight of keeping him afloat. He sinks, and I sink with him.

I'm at college hours away and still I feel the blame nesting around my shoulders. *Why didn't I know?* I placed miles between my family and me, and thought about how it would feel good to leave my life behind. I realized, soon after, that miles are a technicality, and no matter how far away I get, I'm still sitting in my childhood living room. I will be hours away from home in a classroom and I'm still in the bedroom I share with my older sister, fighting with my mother. I'm nineteen years old, and somehow still twelve years old, and I'm asking myself, *Why didn't I know? Why wasn't I there?*

Bandit was the fourth dog we lost in only a couple years, and it was beginning to feel as though we couldn't be trusted with anyone or anything. The losses kept coming. We lost Leo, our bumbling bullmastiff, when he fell down the stairs to the backyard and broke his spine. We lost Todd, our young Chihuahua, when he ran out into the street the night before my senior prom. We lost Fatty, our chubby French bulldog, when my mother got drunk and accused us of loving the dogs more than her, and dropped her off at a shelter while we were at school. I felt as though bringing dogs into my house was sounding a death toll, that my hands were stained with blood, that I could no longer be trusted with anything. That when I wanted kids one day my body would smell the loss on me, gasp at my maroon hands, and stop me. "Are you sure you can handle this? You've already lost so much." I ask myself, *what can I be trusted with?* I see my dogs now and feel the fear rising in my gut whenever I leave the room, knowing the loss is coming, one day. Knowing the feeling of failing someone who had so much faith in you. Wanting to apologize for a loss we haven't even suffered yet. I feel it—a backbeat, a humming, a pulsing—knowing that the losses and sadness and failing are part of me now and will return soon enough.

I am sitting on the living room couch next to my sister Sam, watching the news halfheartedly, as my dachshund, Bruno, stretches across my lap in sleep. On the television before us a newscaster smiles, and a picture of a small black lab in uniformed arms appears in the left hand corner of the screen. I am kneading Bruno's ear in my distracted palm as the woman tells us about the "lucky Labrador" who fell through the ice in the pond in the backyard

of a four-year-old girl. The girl told her parents, who called the police, who went in after the drowning dog and pulled him out from under the ice. He must have been swimming four or five minutes before anyone found him, the woman tells us. Must have been at least another ten minutes before he was saved from the water.

Beside me, Sam mumbles, “A four-year-old has enough brain power to go out when she hears splashing.”

I wonder how long Bandit had held on before succumbing to frozen water, and when I feel the anger rise, my mind runs on repeat: *it's not his fault.*

While my father worked, my mother stayed at home, frazzled trying to keep up with the six of us. When I was eleven, my father left, and the new men came, then the money stopped, and the drinking started. My mother continued to bring dogs into the house, as she replaced my father with another bitter man, as she struggled in her new relationship, and with her drinking. The dogs came and went at such a rapid pace that when my mother told her friends that we lost another, they gasped, “You really wouldn’t be good with grandkids, huh?”

Cricket, Leo, and Fatty have all come and gone. When my mother found the small, broken body of our Chihuahua, Todd, in the street, I felt extinguished. I’d let him out in the backyard and he slipped under the fence. When I saw his tiny, unmoving body lying on our porch, I asked my sister, Sam, if he was okay. She cried heavily and shook her head. “His neck feels like sand.”

When I reentered my house, Bandit charged up to me, and I wanted to push him away, tell him what I’d done. “I’m so sorry, Buddy.” I sat against the cabinets in my kitchen crying, but Bandit didn’t leave my side. He sniffed at my face. I wanted to ask him to forgive me, but I knew I couldn’t.

My mother bought a young, similar looking Chihuahua before Todd’s blood had been cleared from the street, and while a new puppy tumbled around our house, I stared at the small stain in the street and saw it as a warning.

At twelve, I hadn’t yet forged the bonds with my siblings that saved me from drowning. It was a few years before my siblings and I confided in one another in that way, and I’d cut out any friends I might have had. So when the depression came and it felt as though I had to fight with my lungs to keep them expanding, I spent my time outside with Bandit in the sun. I didn’t need to tell him the ways in which I hurt, or missed my parents, but I thought he understood, and we sat outside for hours on the old porch swing.



Caring for Bandit kept me afloat—I needed to feed him, take him out. He whined anxiously when I'd laid in my bed so long that I wondered if my skin had developed sores.

I rocked us back and forth on the porch swing, one hand resting on his side, on the reassuring constant of his breathing. When the heat burned our skin, we moved to the shade, and when the wind began to chill our bones we searched for the sun again. We seemed to spend years on that stained swing, and only when the sky blackened did I enter the house again, Bandit following close behind.

I was sixteen, and my mother had gotten drunk and passed out on the couch on my birthday. I went to bed that night without waking her to remind her. I laid in bed, eyes opened to darkness, my sister, Sam, sleeping in the bed across from me. I wanted to cry, reverse the day, to stop getting older without my own permission and without anyone else noticing.

I heard a scraping at the door, and I quietly slipped from under the sheets to open it and found Bandit looking up at me. He had a slight underbite and in the light from the open door I saw he was biting his tongue, cocking his head as I stared down at him.

“Hey, Buddy.” I sighed and leaned down to scratch him behind the ear.

He walked in, sniffing around the floor, searching for a soft spot to lie. I knelt next to him.

“I think she forgot this year,” I said, stroking his side.

He pressed his head into my hand, and I rested my forehead against his.

“I know you didn't, though.” I pulled a blanket off my bed and laid it on the floor next to me. “This is pretty soft,” I whispered, patting the fabric.

Bandit smelled the blanket, pawed at it, circled and circled until he'd made it into his own bed, and slept in a tight spiral.

I laid in bed, watching his rising and falling silhouette in the shadows on the wall.

Bandit's tenth birthday felt historic, like a victory we didn't deserve. My siblings and I baked a cake, as Bandit and the new additions barked at our feet. I knelt beside him as he sat by the kitchen heater. It was February, and the dogs crowded around the heating vent in the kitchen, and we struggled not to trip over them. I hugged Bandit tightly and his sticky, slimy tongue rolled along my cheek. “Ugh, Bandit!” I sighed, rubbing the spit from my cheek. But he stood in excitement, his entire body wriggling, waiting for food or to play.

We had four other dogs by then, and though Bandit was not very old, we imagined he'd speak with a shaky drawl if he were human. We imagined

who he would be, how he would walk and sound. And though we made jokes about his age, he seemed like a pillar, immortal. I was only seventeen, but I told my siblings Bandit was walking me down the aisle, that he would meet my children and grandchildren.

“The one we got right, huh?” Ollie mused from across the table, eating icing off a spoon.

I stand in the backyard over the pond, listening to how quiet it is, seeing flashes of orange fish hidden in the muck in the bottom. It must be at least eight feet across and four feet deep, but it feels bottomless, like quicksand pulling us under. My mother has blocked off the wrought iron gate to the pond with a dog crate, a burning reminder of what was lost along the way. Perhaps she intends the crate as a warning to the other dogs, as a marker to remind us what we’ve done and lost.

The dogs still get past the dog crate and the broken fence, however. Now, while I stand over still water and try to see Bandit clawing his way out, Bruno stands next to me, waiting.

Bruno, my dachshund, is prone to severe separation anxiety and back problems. He led Ollie to the pond when Bandit fell, barking in the grass on the side. I like to think Bruno was calling out to Bandit, that he was encouraging him, telling him one of us would find him. But I don’t know how much of this a dog can convey or understand.

Bruno follows me throughout the house, sleeps in my bed, howls and whines and paces when I leave him.

Standing next to him, I realize how hard it is to love someone, how much it hurts to care for someone and worry endlessly. How sometimes I wish I had never met any of them, because then I wouldn’t hurt so badly. How difficult it is to grow up with someone only for him to leave you behind. How loving someone is trusting him not to hurt you. And how, by design, we can never fulfill that promise.

I have nightmares of the ways in which I will fail Bruno, realizing that the being I shared my life with, whom I thought of as unchanging and undying, left me just as the others did. Realizing that I failed him just as I did the others.

I carry Bruno down stairs, watch him when he enters the backyard, take him for walks, and clutch him against my body when a car passes. When I wake in the morning to his body curled against mine, I rest my hand on his chest to check that he’s still breathing, that he didn’t leave me in the night. I wonder who needs whom more.

I want to say that while I stood over that pond and imagined myself falling in beside Bandit, that I was freed from my anger, my disappointment.

That while my head knew my brother and I were innocent all along, my heart had finally caught up to speed and forgiven the two of us. That no one could've known, that I couldn't have been there. But my self-reassurances are newborn deer—they rise, stumble, and fall. My sadness is a hardened kernel in the gut, and I will not stop dreaming of saving him.

Bruno looks up to me, and I'm once again filled with both sadness and appreciation. My love for Bruno sits upon my chest like a weight, a clock ticking, a premonition whispering: you will fail.