

Gandy Dancer Archives

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 3

12-1-2018

Searching for Eurydice

Colin Sharp-O'Connor
SUNY Purchase College

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



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sharp-O'Connor, Colin (2018) "Searching for Eurydice," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol7/iss1/3>

This Fiction 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.

Searching for Eurydice

The sun is not up at five sharp when we set out for Taughannock Park in my beater of a Corolla, and this time of year the condensation comes so thick I need my wipers just to see the road signs. In deep fog this road takes on a different shape than in clearer weather. Vaughn, my flatmate, has reclined the passenger seat as far back as it goes to allow his bulky frame to fit comfortably in the cabin. He's on the phone with Noah's parents, speaking in a soft and serious voice that doesn't suit him. Vaughn is robust, broad in the shoulders and sandy-haired, with a healthy face that usually reminds me of those pictures of old Ivy athletes posterred all over the college gymnasiums. Grinning footballers in grainy Kodachrome. But he isn't smiling this morning.

"I understand. Yeah," Vaughn says, probably to Noah's mother, although I can't hear the voice. "Luke and I are on our way now, it's just the weather—" He leans over the stick. "Any idea when we'll get there?"

"Still a mile or two out. Time?" I say. The clock on my dashboard is long dead.

"Five-thirty. Ish."

"Tell her another five or so," I say.

Vaughn says so.

"We won't be late, sounds like," he tells me. "She's just—yeah." Then Noah's mother says something, and Vaughn says, "Really, a whole rescue crew? That's good," and then, "Sounds like we're in good hands," and then, "We'll find him today, Mrs. Alterman. I promise."

He hangs up and taps the phone on his thigh. "I think she blames me," he says.

"She say that?"

"You know how I mean."

"Yeah." I wish I had more to say. "Just you?"

He sighs. A heavy sound. "Who knows, man. I guess she's not wrong, if that's how she wants to play it." And this is true.

"Was the both of us looking after him."

"Was my idea to do all that stuff with him, though."

"I don't really remember," I say. True as well.

"You wouldn't," he says, and laughs, shortly. It sounds pained. "If they find anything in his system, I'll take the heat for it."

"Have it your way."

"I had it coming, I guess. So long as he's okay I don't care what else happens."

I look at Vaughn's face then, easing off the gas. He stares out the windshield into the fog ahead, eyes blue and wet, jaw tight, the muscles of his cheek standing out in relief. You promise. I wonder what he thinks, this boy from California. Whether he understands that Noah is dead. Whether he believes it.

Noah was mine and Vaughn's other flatmate. A freshman. Last Friday he fell into the gorge. Vaughn and I were at the park with him. We didn't see it happen. We didn't see when he slipped away, but Noah fell and I know he died there. I feel it, and gut sense from a local in this respect is more than fact. Noah fell. A blank recognition suffuses through my memories of that evening like staring too long at the sun. What's left are remnants, a fragment of memory, a roll of film pulled disfigured from the fire. Losing the night in full would be preferable to this. It hurts just to picture his face.

We reach the park earlier than expected, driving across a wide cobblestone bridge and turning into the entryway. So early in the morning of course the park is closed, and a firefighter stands out in the road by the ticket booth. He has casual clothes on under his hi-vis jacket. No turnout gear today. Only helmets and harnesses. I crank down my window and pull up beside him with mine and Vaughn's IDs in hand, but he must recognize me because he waves us on without asking for them. I turn into the lot. A few cars here and there, not one adjacent to another. There's one fire vehicle, plain white, a faded yellow maltese cross on the door. I park next to it and we step out into the chill.

Taughannock Park is a series of oblong fields, several loose colonnades of trees, a worn and patinated amphitheatre, a pavilion, a playground, a rocky beach, all arrayed against a convex portion of shoreline. It's punctuated at intervals with white billet jetties left freely adrift in the water like decorative strings and on the northern end by sailboats moored in an inland mari-

na—startlingly small but pretty enough on sunny days. But the park takes a different shape on these mornings, too, like a forest clearing in a dream. All detail erased in the mist that pours off the lake's surface, transforming the land around.

A hundred yards from the lot an ambulance idles on the wet grass outside the pavilion, its emergency lights diffused into soft coronas. In the pavilion a dozen figures of no fixed uniform or order huddle in the relative shelter provided by their open building. As we approach two of them step out to meet us, ill-shapen in their nylon parkas. I recognize the face of Noah's mother, broad and lined, hair wild in the mist. She hugs me tightly. So much strength for a woman her age. I am embraced for a long time, and when she releases me my hand is clasped as if by some supplicant and I find myself looking at a man I do not recognize and whose eyes I will not forget. We step under the pavilion and the firefighter in charge takes down our names and address perfunctorily. Then we stand with the rest, people I have never met who greet me softly by name and shake my hand in turn, as she explains the procedures and precautions, the zones of activity we will be assigned to, the intervals at which we will report. It strikes me that I have stepped into a church of sorts. Like it is a wake we are attending. Perhaps it is. When she is finished I volunteer to carry a GPS locator and a little laminate map of terrain I know by heart already. When she hands them to me this woman shakes my hand also and nods to me as though it were some noble choice. But there can be no protests now, no subversion of the ritual. Vaughn and Noah's parents and I will go together, and this is another rite. When we step out from the pavilion and onto the grass again it is in three curious diverging lines, like hooded Franciscans in prayer.

The firefighter from the park entrance joins up with us as we head back toward the road along a little stream that feeds into the marina. His eyes are a clear and pale blue and he walks with a professional briskness that sets his rescue harness clinking and he answers all questions put to him by Noah's mother with the same demeanor, though kindly. I see his crinkled face and wonder how many bodies has pulled from these waters. The stream flows under a wood bridge and then gradually broadens from ten feet to a dozen yards, still shallow enough to make out the darting shadows of fingerlings on the flatrocks beneath. We walk under the cobble bridge by the entrance and the shadow of the bridge turns the stream to softly rippling jet.

"And how long will you be once we find him?" asks Noah's mother.

"Depends where he is," says the firefighter. "How he is." He scratches his chin and then, remembering his bedside manner, says, "Might need to call in more responders if he's somewhere needs rappelling. Helicopter can take a while in this weather. If it comes to that."

"But not long otherwise," she says.

“Not long otherwise.”

The firefighter helps Noah's parents down the long slope of the gorge mouth, the only real descent to be made. This place is really the inner boundary of the larger lake basin. The land ahead but fill displaced an aeon ago over a period equally unfathomable. Like fingers tracing their long marks in the dirt, so goes the old story. The gorge is a slight westwards fissure in this neolithic berm. Shallower even than the basin, terminating just miles from its rim. Geological minutiae from such a vantage. The sides are exposed shale, pines growing over top, and they seem to me to stretch up forever, on forever, irregular rock striae forming vectors along each face pointing deeper into the shadowed valley. Soon the sun will rise and all this will be gone. We press onwards.

We walk through the fog on a small flagstone path that passes under overhangs dripping clear water rhythmically on the smooth rock below as if demonstrating their own massive trajectories. We pass by pale screes where the shale is scratched and sunbleached to the color of bone, even in this damp time of year and from which brown moss and wiry sprouts of buttercup grow in clumps, isolate from their like, and when the flagstones end we walk on the thin band of alluvial clay built up on the sides of the stream or in the stream itself, it scarcely deeper than an ankle and running mostly over stable flatrocks so eroded by millenia of current, though covered in a slippery filamentous lichen, and we travel slowly and search each crevice and eddy carefully. All sounds distant except the cold trickle of water running over rock. As if some greater rite were underway beside ours on this liminal ground now at its periapsis and should our exhalations or our footfalls in the stream prove too indiscrete for what unnamable convocation thereby gathered it would be desecration. I walk with the firefighter and behind us Vaughn accompanies Noah's parents, following their slower pace, making sure they don't lose their footing in the current. Their black parkas glitter faintly with condensation. The two look old, though I never asked Noah how old.

After a mile of walking the stream deepens into a natural pool of the type familiar to collegiate truants and rescue workers, visible by a sudden darkness on the surface, a stilling of the current. A minor cascade perhaps ten feet high feeds into it at a gentle trickle. There is little flow over the blackened slate, only a liquid shimmer and a dull babble that seems as well to come from the woods around as the falling water. The firefighter and I search the sides and find a scalable path.

“What're you thinking?” I say.

“What's that?” he asks.

“How—” I rephrase myself. “Well. What should we be expecting here, is what I mean.”

The firefighter examines me a moment. That look in his blue eyes again, casting around for his bedside manners. "I guess I wouldn't advise you to expect a thing," he says.

"All right."

"Give me a leg, here."

I boost him up and then take his hand and clamber up after him. The rest of the way is easy enough for us. Slate makes for simple climbing.

"Look," says the firefighter, sitting for a moment beside the stream. Legs swung out over the ledge. "I've been doing this thing longer than you'd guess. They all start the same. Kid goes missing one night. Drunk, stoned, clumsy, whatever it is. Sometimes—You get it. These public searches, no different. Follow?"

I wipe the grit and algae off my palms and squat beside him. "Yeah, I get you."

He scratches his chin. Vaughn and Noah's parents are making their way toward the still pool, speaking quietly. He carries on. "If his buddies aren't right there when he tumbles, they won't call it in for a full day sometimes. You all were pretty quick, considering."

"He isn't the wandering type." I shrug. "I got worried."

"Was a good call. Lot can happen in a day. Sometimes he might fall near a path and hikers find him in the morning. Hear him shouting, or see him. If it's out of the way he could lay there days until we go out ourselves. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," I say.

"Maybe laying there with broken legs, ribs. Damage to the organs, you know. Sometimes paralysis. If he hits his head, that's it. Same if he falls in fast water. Get twisted up in that, you go right under and you don't come up."

"I get you."

He looks at me again. "Don't get me wrong, now. Lots of them make out okay after roughing it a weekend. Sometimes they're just too scared to move. Young college kid, phone broken, all kinds of trauma going on in their head. Not unheard of to just stay put til rescue finds them. So that's what I mean. There's no good guesses here."

"You know better than me," I say.

"No one can tell from the start how these things end," he says. "That I know for certain."

I look at Vaughn as he leads Noah's parents carefully around the lip of the pool, that darker blackness in the water. He must be optimistic. Not optimistic. Desperate. The way Noah's parents are desperate, holding out not for hope but for the afterimage of hope, the same thought I clung to on the first day, that vanished on the second, that left in me on the third a more concrete

resolution. My flatmate is dead, is swallowed up here. We may never find the body. If we do it will not be him.

Noah's mother can't make the climb. She gives it a fair shake but neither Vaughn nor I are quite willing to pull her up properly and the firefighter doesn't take long to put an end to her efforts. He is gentle as a mortician. Doubtless he expects little more from her husband, and rightly so by the cut of him under that rubberized hood. Never seen a face gone to ruin like that. Too much to look at, too much to look at.

The firefighter speaks briefly at his pager in an approximation of English and then scratches his chin. "Well, I'm sorry."

He means it despite the brevity. Quiet apologies abound. An offer of escort, a sequent refusal. The tears that follow. A pitiful thing.

They offer to wait by the pool until the search is done but the firefighter is set on sending them back to the pavilion, and so it goes. Noah's mother turns away and my last impression of her face cannot be sadness. Nothing there could be encompassed in such a word.

"That's the way of things," says the firefighter.

"You think it's for the best?" I say.

"For you all?" says the firefighter.

Closes my mouth right up.

We make quicker time just the three of us. The firefighter and I are used to wading and Vaughn outstrips us both, striding out in front like a man driven by high accord, as though he might part the very waters, and it hurts my heart to think he might be searching for some second possibility hidden in this darkly hyaline stream. There is nothing submerged in it, nothing kept for closer viewing. The darting shadows of fingerlings against the rocks, the lichen, the ripples of our boots against the current. The shadows of those ripples too. Around us the fog thickens further, the raw outcroppings on either side reaching jaggedly up into that strange absence of sky. Not far now to the source.

"You say he's not the wandering type, huh?" says the firefighter, after some time spent in silence.

Vaughn looks back. "Could be he's not in the gorge."

"Where else?" I say. Vaughn shrugs.

"He took a hell of a trek for the middle of the night," says the firefighter. "Whenabouts he go missing again?"

"Late evening. Was past dark. Couldn't tell you any better."

"I think it was eleven or so," says Vaughn. He checks his watch now. As if the hands had froze in place the exact moment Noah had vanished. As if there was ever such a moment.

"Hey," says the firefighter. "Pick that up."

Vaughn turns around, looks down by his feet, stops. He stoops and picks something out of the stream. A soaking mess of fabric, vague in color, water pouring from the folds in gouts. Vaughn straightens it out the best he can.

"That his?" says the firefighter.

"Yeah, it's his," says Vaughn.

It's Noah's windbreaker. Forest green is hard to spot underwater. Vaughn goes through the pockets, comes out with ticket stubs and a shrunken leather wallet, wax all washed out by the current and settled white and filmy on the topgrain. The firefighter examines the wallet and finds its contents rotted and zips it up in a plastic bag and stows it. Nothing much to say between us. My hands begin to tremble.

"Time to go on," says the firefighter, scratching his chin. "Sunup soon."

We trek on in silence through the thickening fret looking much like ghosts ourselves. The stream deepens here into as true a river as any, rising up above my boot-collars, drenching my socks, but none of us steps out into the bank. The looming shape of the valley narrowing above us in uncertain shadow imposes a peculiar sense of vertigo, as if after crossing some antecedent threshold all gravity and direction had reversed along our course and by following the source of the current we are not moving up toward the surface of the world but impossibly downwards and deeper into the earth. I have a sudden urge to turn back, but then I remember the faces of Noah's parents and do not know which of us is for the worse. Too late now, anyway. I can hear the falls roaring.

It is by ear one first recognizes Taughannock Falls, but the feel of the place is what they remember. Even on a clear day the sheer spray of that enormous overhung flume bears down on hair and clothes, out nearly a thousand feet from the whitewater. Not a regal weight, as some naturalists might ascribe to the experience. Taughannock belies such personification. At the end of the gorge there is a deep and sheer-faced rondel canyon and at the westmost point of this canyon the falls pours out into a small lake below. A plaque somewhere on the visitor's trail far above in the ridges will tell the reader that Taughannock Falls is the tallest single waterfall this side of the Rockies but this comparison is meaningless. Stand close enough to feel the weight of that water crashing down and there can be no comparison. There can be no anything at all.

We reach the canyon just past sunrise, light tinging the fog a soft, opaque amber. The river has shallowed out again and broadened into a sort of slow-running floodwater only half covering the pale shards of slaterock scattered across the canyon floor. Or perhaps it runs to further depths after all and the rocks are piled up deeper than I see. Mist tendrils drift from the lake in front of us like ectoplasm, mixing with the fog, evaporating. Our own breath following in course.

"Give the fog time to clear," says the firefighter. "Easier to look round that way."

We find a rocky place in the river and sit and we watch as the fog clears. It takes five minutes to see the sky, midnight blue in the west and still faintly dotted with stars. As the day brightens further, a thin strip of rainbow manifests in the spray of the falls, vibrantly shaded, arcing across the canyon's width as if drawn by some illusory paintbrush. The wet erected rockpiles that litter the perimeter of the lake glitter magnificently and one among them is larger and darker than the rest and it too is soaked with spray.

The firefighter stands abruptly. "I want you all to wait here," he says.

It lies strangely equidistant from the little cairns that flank it along the shoreline as if, like them, it had been placed there deliberately by some unknown artist—as if its very existence had been presupposed for that endeavor. It and all around it perfectly clear and already memory in my gaze. A water-logged shape smaller than any person ought to be, a pile of wet hiking clothes, jeans and a hoodie, colors soaked close enough to black. Sneakers white but filthy. Not him. Not him.

"Vaughn," I say, and Vaughn is already standing to follow the firefighter now picking his way across the uneven shale with sure steps and raising his pager for words to be lost in the deaf roar of the falls. I say, you'll only get in his way, and feel my voice as air and vibration and no discernable sound, the words all hollowed out, and Vaughn stops but does not sit down and I feel guilty for stopping him so thoughtlessly.

"Is that him?" he says. "Is that him?"

I look numbly at the distant bundle. Do my best to look at it. Now I think that perhaps it is a mirage, is some impossible thing, and it seems so that I cannot see it clearly no matter how long I focus on it. A thought washes up against the bulwarks of my conscious, a dispassionate, conceptual thought, and I flinch from it and then force myself, nauseated by the contradiction, to review it. Noah is dead. That cannot be him. Nothing animate could look like that. When I was a boy a deer died in the nearby woods close to the treeline. It died in late fall and was covered in a thick snowbank all winter and was preserved like some natural taxidermy until spring. As the days warmed again the hide took on water and rotted and swelled and when it finally split all but the bones were gone already. When my father and I went out to bury it in the spring it seemed weightless and somehow graceful. That was a dead thing. That was death to me.

The firefighter puts on a pair of nitrile gloves and leans over the bundle and then reaches out and touches some part of it, carefully probes the bundle away, probably for our assurance more than his, and then he sits on his haunches and takes off his helmet and runs his fingers over his scalp and does not move a while.

Vaughn splashes across the loose shale and I follow him, shambling, the ground under my feet tipping forwards, and then I feel I would fall if I went a foot further and I stop in the middle of the stream, in the middle of the canyon and the spray, and am witness to that thing I cannot bring myself to see.

The firefighter rises and pulls Vaughn back by the shoulders, Vaughn already kneeling over on the shore. From the back he looks like a man arrived at the end of a pilgrimage, not a mourner at all. When he is pulled away he does not resist. The firefighter looks him in the eyes and speaks at him, the words a thrum in the air, and releases his shoulders one at a time. He walks back to me slowly, dragging his feet in the current.

"Jesus, Luke," he says.

The firefighter shakes out a foil survival blanket from some hidden pocket and drapes it neatly over the bundle and weighs the corners down with rocks and then he comes back to us and says somebody ought to call the boy's parents. Vaughn and I nod without looking at him and he says "When you're ready to," and he leaves it at that. We sit back down on the rocks and we sit there a while.

"He's," says Vaughn, and then he turns away from me and starts to cry, hiding his face in his hands. I put an arm around his shoulders. So much tension in that musculature. Like his body might tear itself apart. I look at the blanket and the shape under it and think that if there is any wholly cruel thing in man's design it is that we remember most strongly what we refuse to see. I look for a long time. I look until the rescue helicopter arrives with a thrum in the air and whipping wind up in the canyon, displacing the lake surface in broad concentric ripples, beating the foil blanket into a shimmer, and I look while the firefighter and more rescue workers lift the thing onto a stretcher and tighten the straps around it, lift it away into the sky, and the helicopter rotors beat the wind harder and the unrestrained corners of the foil sheet beat the air and I cannot see a thing from so far away but I see nonetheless a shock of hair slicked black against skin, a forehead, an ear, the white line of a neck, already memories forever. The firefighter makes his way back to us and I see the blue of his eyes and wonder how they stay so clear.

"I'm sorry you boys had to see that," he says.

Vaughn has stopped crying now; his eyes are red but dry. He nods slowly. "It's good we found him," he says.

"Either of you ready to make that call?" says the firefighter.

"I will," Vaughn says. Some kind of atonement, perhaps.

I don't cry until after Noah's parents pick up the phone.

"We found him," Vaughn says, and then, "I'm so sorry."