

5-1-2020

Resting Wings

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Recommended Citation

Esposito, Gabrielle (2020) "Resting Wings," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 20.
Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol8/iss2/20>

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Resting Wings

On Valentine's Day, it snows and you ask me to walk across campus to Naragansett Hall, because you want to see me even though we're not dating. I must've lost my spine in the holiday rush, so I say I will and walk one mile through the windy cold to see you. I'm numb by the time I make it to the dorm, and when I text you to say that I'm standing outside waiting, you tell me you're not there but you're coming, that I should wait. I do—two words I used to want to say to you.

Fifteen minutes go by. Snow gathers on top of my head, melts, and gathers again. I'm shivering on a bench that grows wet underneath my body. I don't go anywhere, because if I were strong enough to leave you, I would've done it two years ago, the first time you left me alone in your room while you went out on a Friday night, got drunk, and threw up in the recycling bin. We are semester-lovers, a convenience that distracts from the fact that we are far from home, and there is physically no one to say "I love you," except us to each other. Words easily formed on mouths but so rarely meant nowadays, especially by me.

I tell myself I'll leave if you don't show up in the next five minutes, but of course you materialize. You have a strange habit of appearing when you sense my patience waning.

Hello, gorgeous, you say. Your smile isn't as white as snow—it's yellow like the tobacco you smoke. I taste THC on your tongue; on your lips, a hint of cocaine grit. A cocktail of drugs, though you prefer keg beer found in basements or that barn down on North Street, the one with the space heater near the entrance.

Hey, I say. And I know I'll be around you for the next couple of hours, until I get hungry, or we disagree about something, or you want to go smoke.

Then we'll go our separate ways until you text me, and I misplace my spine again.

I have something for you, you say. From the inside of your jacket, you pull out a yellow rose. I blush, returning heat to my face. I saw some Alpha Chi Omega girls selling roses in the college union when I went to get my mail this morning, and I secretly hoped you would buy me one, because I feel like you owe me that much.

Thank you, I say. I hug you because I know I should, but also because I want to. The idea that you thought of me today is enough to make me forget the times you left me alone to get high or drunk or meet friends who happen to be girls. All those cool girls you tell me about, the ones who smoke and drink while I stay inside during cold nights—I forget all of my petty jealousy, and perhaps my better judgement, as I hold the rose in my hand. The stem is strong and waxy on my fingertips, the petals unfurled in maturity. Something beautiful to act as candlelight in the places where you rest.

You're welcome, you say. I stole it from a bouquet in the chemistry office.

Oh, is all I can think to say. The glow around your gift fades away fast. In the next few seconds, the cold finds a way to chill my bones even through my new winter jacket. As you pull me into Narragansett Hall, I look down at the rose and wonder if I want something that doesn't belong to me.

The rose winds up hanging upside down on my wall with sticky blue tack, the kind kindergarten teachers use to hang up arts and crafts. A week passes, and the stem begins to collapse. Then the petals wilt and crinkle until they are nothing but a ball of dead yellow. The rose is better this way—present, but non-functioning. Not that a rose ever has any other purpose except for aesthetics. Still, killing the rose makes me feel like I have some type of control over you, the who conducts this relationship that's not really a relationship, but used to be, back in the summer.

Now, we just hole ourselves up in your room for hours, doing nothing except lying on an uncomfortable mattress and watching comedy shows that are pungent with cruelty—your humor, not mine. Your arm wrapped around me and my head, a head filled with thoughts of being elsewhere, on your chest. Would if I could, go back two years, when I first met you outside Putnam Hall by chance, introduced by a guy in my dorm who happened to be showing me around campus. Back then, the light in your eyes had nothing to do with the sun but the way you saw life: a playground full of obstacles that you could overcome. Would if I could, go back to the night you held my hands and told me that life is a beautiful thing that needs to be shared with someone.

These days, your eyes are dulled by smoke. You've become jaded because being a senior chemistry student in college is harder than being a sophomore, and you're constantly struggling with what you want to do—party—versus

what you need to do—study. Your vices always win. You are a predictable creature of habit, but your temper is unexpected. When I see you, I never know who I'm going to meet: a figure made of smoke, or someone stressed because he didn't do the assignment that was due two days ago.

When I'm with you, I feel the restlessness everywhere in my body. My muscles ache to move, but I'm afraid if I do you'll get the impression that I don't want to be with you. Even though this is true, I can't tell you because you're far away from home, too. Psych 101 has me thinking that your drinking and drugs is a way to express self-hatred. I'm afraid to pull away, afraid to give you a reason to try to find ways to numb the pain of a separation. Because if nothing else, I've become a habit to you, a semi-solid fixture of your life. And maybe I'm clinging to you because I've accepted you as a part of this college campus, and I'm afraid something would be missing without you. I'm as responsible for wallowing in our toxic nature as you are.

It's the middle of March, and I've begun to hate you. I've started talking to someone else, a quiet and gentle person who loves writing but not reading, a sin I forgive because when he kisses me, he holds the back of my head as if he's afraid to let me fall away. The first night we're together, you're at a party. When I saw you earlier, you'd taken a capsule full of powdered mushroom, and told me you wanted to begin a new world order without money so you can end homelessness.

I'm not thinking about this when I first kiss him. In fact, I don't think about you at all, and when it's over and I'm resting my head against his chest—so different from yours—I don't feel any smudge of guilt. In the morning, I wonder if I'm sociopathic and realize I'm not. My emotions and patience are like a suicidal jump: an expansive, wind-rushing headspace until something snaps. Skull against ocean rock.

It's been six months since the summer, and it's hard to remember the way life was when it was warm. But I remember what the summer was like, waiting for a beheading, waiting for our relationship to die. We killed it together one night in July over FaceTime, decided we couldn't keep screaming at each other—our throats were sore. I was stupid to see you the first day back on-campus of our fall senior semester. I should've pulled away when you went to kiss me in the elevator, but I was lonely, and starving for the gentle touch of a hand that wasn't mine. To feel a heat that wasn't mine, someone outside of myself. So now we exist in gray light, an afterlife. If nothing else, we persist because it is impossible to kill something already dead. It is impossible to say, I'm breaking up with you when there is nothing to break.

April comes and the cold weather starts to break just enough to remind me that I won't be on this college campus forever, and neither will you. In May, you will graduate in a morning ceremony, and I will graduate a couple hours later in a ceremony dedicated to the arts. Our separate ceremonies are

just the beginning of a larger separation. As I begin to realize the temporary state of our relationship, I get more restless. You fall to the backburner as I begin to think about life outside of college, the next step.

It's easy to see the distance between us when we were once so close. We worked to occupy each other's space by laying on top of one another, sharing breath. You guess the reason. Your old intelligence shines through when you ask, Is there anyone else?

If I had less cushion between my bones, I would've said yes. Believe that I think about telling you, about ending this stupid merry-go-round of a relationship. Trust that I want to be honest with you, but think about the ways in which you could be cruel to me. I think about how small campus is, and the fact that this one mile stretch of academic buildings isn't the real world, that you'll know where I live because college is just an incubator for old teenagers and young adults, a stagnant place with moving fixtures. I think better about opening my mouth to tell you I've been visiting someone else in my head, heart, and body.

No, I say. I lie to you, a person I once let sit in the cavern of my ribs. I don't feel bad about lying because you don't believe me anyway; you just don't have any evidence. I've been careful about keeping myself safe and guarded. At the end of the day, what right do you have to be mad at me? We both see the way girls teeter-totter to parties with their makeup glowing, dresses skin tight. We both know I don't sleep over on Friday or Saturday nights when you go out, and we both know how promiscuous you are, and the way I haven't been letting you in lately. That I've been pushing you away when you reach for me in the night, an action I can't recall but feel a small swell of relief over when you tell me..

You use your suspicion against me, again and again. After we're done playing pretend-relationship, as you're leaving to go smoke, you say things like, "Are you going to suck his dick now?"

No, I'm going to be alone, is always my response, and it's always what I do, after I take a shower to rinse off the feeling of your fingernails. There is nothing sweeter than to just have a moment to myself, a real breath without anyone wondering who I'm breathing for.

April ends, and May comes with seventy-degree weather and flowers, as if it's apologizing for the colder months and just wants to make things right. I spend time with him while you're out at parties on Fridays and Saturdays.

He comes to my dorm room, and we make ourselves drinks. I swallow mine fast and collapse onto the bed, where he circles my body. We fit together like filigree on lace.

I'd like to come back and see you, I say.

That would be nice, he says. When I graduate and leave, we'll text a little, meet up once and then fall from each other's contact lists. There is no

budding relationship here, and I will come to resent him and myself for not trying harder to make something like our gentle moments last. But for now, I have hope that I will see him again and this makes it easier to leave you.

A few days before graduation, I want to press fast-forward but experience each nano-second of campus life because I know this phase of my life is about to end. The night before graduation, I let you sleep over out of respect for an old tradition. You come in at two o'clock in the morning and sit outside my dorm room composing a love letter that I will find three weeks later in a box of my books.

The letter makes me cry for old reasons because you sound so gentle in the words rounded by your hand. But I also cry at the irony of your wishes for me: find someone who respects you; remember that you are worth so much. I cry because I'm angry at a past self who stayed silent for too long, who couldn't help you. I cry because the girl—the woman I am now—can hardly stand you. Yet, I almost feel like I should thank you. My reserve for trust is shallow, my patience crescent moon thin, except when it comes to myself. I'm patiently awaiting the moment I forgive myself for not walking away from you sooner. I trust that I won't make the same mistake in trusting another person like you again.

We graduate, you in the morning and me in the afternoon. When I'm finished with my ceremony, I leave with my family in a caravan of cars. You text me: I want to take pictures with you. When you call me, I don't answer.

I'm gone, I text. Sorry.

Only I'm not. With my leather folder in my hands and my graduation cap still on, I feel nothing except a glow inside my ribs where you once sat. I lose the rose you gave me in the move, a rose that was probably grown in a nursery and artificially pollinated by botanists and not insects—the winged ones who land on petals and then take off, some of the pollen sticking to their fur.

Flowers and insects.

Butterflies are sometimes tethered by scientists and placed in wind tunnels for observation. Flowers are used as sweet bait, an incentive for the butterflies to keep flying. The exhaustive lengths butterflies will fly for the chance to taste something that is more than food, something that is close to the essence of life.

I understand butterflies in wind tunnels following flowers. I understand the pointlessness of flapping in one place and still hoping to move. I know, I know, I know that I'm not the butterfly, or the wind, or the flower, but if I've learned anything from this sick experiment, it's that being tethered happens to all of us.