Gandy Dancer Archives

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Gandy Dancer

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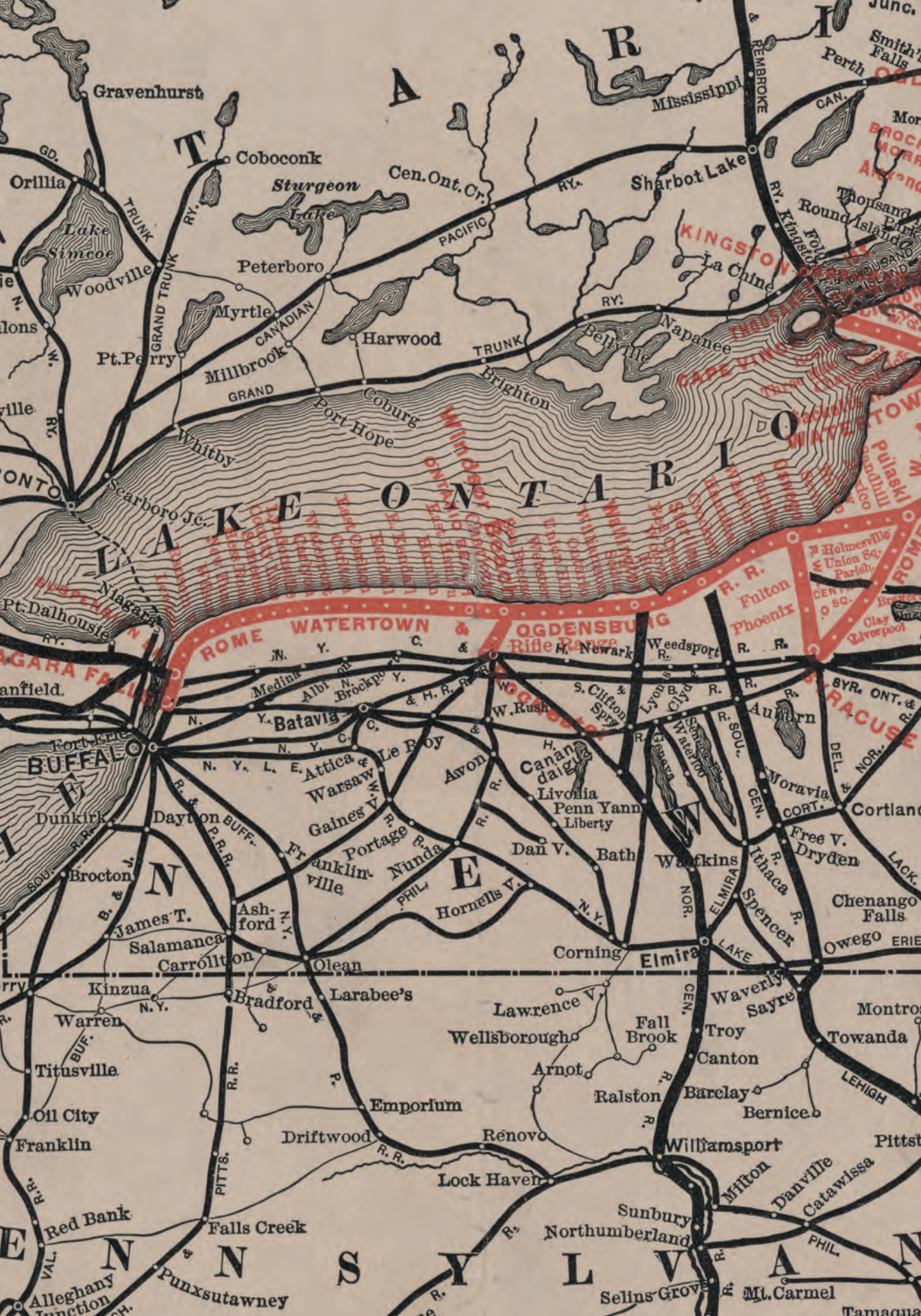
gandy dancer /ˈgan dē ˌdans ər/ *noun*
1. a laborer in a railroad section gang that lays and maintains track. Origin: early 20th century: of unknown origin.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LONG ISLD.

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

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

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.

Questions or comments? Send us an email at gandydancer@geneseo.edu

GENESEO

MILNE Library

Dear Readers,

How exciting it is to welcome another issue of *Gandy Dancer*! It was such a great first semester as Managing Editors, and we can't thank our team enough for their dedication these past few months.

This semester has had its unique challenges, between the rattling construction on our usually quiet campus and tackling new and exciting experiences: Geneseo hosted this year's Forum for Undergraduate Student Editors Conference under the care of our own Professor, Rachel Hall. FUSE is a national organization that fosters visionary magazine work and supports undergraduates interested in pursuing careers in writing, publishing, and editing. We had the amazing experience of meeting with our fellow editors from Wells, Fredonia, St. John Fisher, Cedar Crest, Shippensburg, and Susquehanna, and getting to know their magazines. We attended (and hosted) panels, like "What the Fuck is Up With C*nsorship," participated in a workshop on political writing, and learned how to bind our own books. We heard from the keynote speaker Becky Tuch, the founder of LitMag News, who roused our literary spirits. Overall, it was an invigorating weekend that reminded us of the strength and creativity of the literary journal community.

There is something truly special about seeing an issue come together. The work gathered here feels connected even though the individual voices and concerns are distinctive. Family dynamics, for instance, are explored in several of the prose pieces. Heather O'Leary considers what it means to be a big sister in her creative nonfiction essay "Can't Sleep." The pull between duty and self is evident as the narrator considers, "I couldn't help but wonder what might have happened if I had given in to sleep, told Beth to go to sleep, and pushed her to the side." "Dish Pit," a short story by Leah Beecher, examines Carlos' family trauma and its long reach. Readers hope his new motorcycle will offer all he envisions: "Soon, he would never have to pedal up that stinking, long Sunnyside Hill Road to Gramma Lewis's house again. He would fly up there." The poetry, too, examines generational connections and disconnections. Elianiz Torres' "as mother's flowers rot" provides such a glimpse when we see a mother tending a garden through her daughter's eyes: "Day in and day out she'd watch her watch them. / Wondering why she was the only one that ever held them. / *Your father is allergic.* She lied." Torres asks readers to witness how a father-daughter relationship might nurture or poison a garden.

We think the words on these pages offer the opportunity for growth. Our families, our homes, our relationships–they impact who we are, but they don't define us. As winter dawns on us, we hope you can find something here

to help you navigate the cold. These stories, these poems, they remind us to stop and think of where we come from, and where we might go from here.

This semester has come and gone with incredible speed, so we're happy to grant you a breather, a break—compliments of *Gandy Dancer*, issue 12.1. Cozy up and read on–

Sincerely,

Lili Gourley and Jess Marinaro

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Cover photo: The Firebird by Sophie Mejia

Gandy Dancer

MOLLIE MCMULLAN

Sugar

She asks me if I am happy he is gone. I ask her if she remembers me sitting vigil over angel hair spaghetti like a museum exhibit about the nuclear family. Cramming raw, masticated broccoli down my throat in order to be excused from the table. I think of Sunday mornings and large fingers probing beneath the skin of a grapefruit, of Father's Day when I scrubbed a kiss from my virgin lips with toilet paper after escaping from the oak table. The place where I became an electric fence, untouchable. Where I used to sit across from the man with hungry eyes, who wouldn't waste anything, even going so far as to lick crumbs from his collared polo. During dinner, as I listened to him scrape his knife against the floral trim of his plate, I used to wonder how far he was willing to go to devour me completely, too.

As a little girl, I would cry at the head of the table, the closest chair to the door, teardrops maiming the pages of my homework packets. He would coil like a snake, teeth bared, poised to strike. I liked to taste the saline tears from my Cupid's bow and roll eraser shavings between my fingers. He liked to groan at the wet paper and rip my pencil from my cramping hands. *If you just stopped crying, this would be over sooner.*

Some days, when my mother would come home from work, he would push his mouth onto hers. And I. Would watch. And freeze in tandem with her. In a dream one night, he appeared as a snapping turtle. I woke up feeling a chunk of skin missing. There, at the kitchen table, I learned how to play dead, hiding my face in the rims of ceramic cups, anything to dodge the iron-jawed man. Even the dumbest of mutts can learn a trick or two. This is a skill I haven't forgotten.

And now he's gone, nestled in a little house atop sand dunes, which is more than I think he deserves, sometimes. We eat in separate kitchens at separate tables, sharing nothing but the moon. On particularly quiet nights,

I trace the grain of the wood table, picking out crumbs with my fingernail. How many times can this surface be scrubbed before I can sit here without fear of filth? How many showers will I have to take until I rid the stickiness of grapefruit juice from my skin? I swear I can still hear him slurping pulp from a spoon, legs spread wide under the kitchen table. I can see the tangy nectar drip from the corner of his mouth and onto his shirt. I feel him nudge my arm, asking for more sugar.

She asks me if I am happy he is gone. I lick toilet paper from my lips. I think about what "yes" will taste like.

MADELYN MALGIERI

[OH, SEPTEMBER]

Oh, September
your gangly crawl, your towheaded
flirtations. And the evening
light, thinning.
      August once spoke to me in mealy
parables— leafed through me like
kindling   and tore into me
with its whetted stars, little prickly
embers, suckering like
lost candle-light, the warmth wending
into the September
air.

KAELIN MARTIN

devour me

devour me
wash me down
with the stars
in the darkness
savor the sweet
the savior
look to the trees
and whisper a sad song
wash me down
devour me
until you reach the soil
and find me there
feel the wind
and let her hold you
whisper a sad song
wash me down
the suds grow
in the kitchen sink
stones breathe
let them skip
whisper a sad song
and look to the trees
tell time
to come back tomorrow
the dawn
a moment longer
wash me down

with the stars
let them run
into the sky
wash me down
with the stars
devour me
and whisper a sad song
to the trees
never too long
they bend
they break
in light of days
see the grass
let them feel you
a gentle caress
she knows the way
wash me down
with the stars
bathe in the sunshine
and cry for the rain
blood of my love
eye of the earth
let the sky open
feast on my body
lay me down
let your hands run
whisper a sad song
in the darkness
with a breath
wash me down
with the stars

MADISON BUTLER

I Got a Boo-Boo From a Car Crash

Car crash!
My head lies next to the roots
of a poor baby sapling
only a few years old.
My stomach forced between the car,
the road,
too long, too far,
two traveled.
My heart locked in the trunk
confined to the claustrophobia.
My eyes with God
watch the blood spill out,
the oxygen rises from
heaven to hell.
My body lies under him,
his blood flow
a river of rot
from head to toe
which lies on the brake.
Pieces lost,
forgotten,
never to be found
again.

AILIE KINNIER

Foie Gras

I own a sixty-acre goose farm forty miles north of Rock Springs, Wyoming. The town is called Eden. Most of my property is gray dust; I give the patches of grass to the animals. I feed them acorns and dried corn and leftovers. The corn smells like the inside of an old dresser. When I let the pebbles go, I watch the sided eyes glare out as their gray siphons pick them up like cards. I know my birds aren't robots because I raise them myself. And I know the weather isn't engineered over here because I watch my own water evaporate from their drinking buckets.

The acorns fatten the liver. The finished product is a burnt buttery yellow. Thirty geese at a time, and I do it all myself. It's not what they do in the factories. It's nothing like that moral upchuck. You treat an animal like an animal before you kill it. Otherwise it's already dead. That's what most people are consuming. The livers of molested birds.

"Don't you know how much you could sell those jars of fat for?" That's what Casey asked me last night while straddling my bare stomach. She's twenty years younger, and we met via a dating app. She messaged me first. Casey is always regurgitating business tips; she goes to school somewhere.

"I'm sure with the wrong mind I could be making enough to get you all the pricey garments you always ask for."

She smiled and undid one of three of her jeans' buttons. "I read on the internet about a man selling half the size of the jars you sell for three times the price."

"Is that so?"

"Don't you see there's potential?"

"I like how I'm living."

"We could travel."

"I couldn't raise geese if I traveled."

She frowned and buttoned. “I’ve been living a fucking goldilocks narrative.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means, well, the last guy I saw was too gentle,” she said with strands of her hair stuck to her cheek. I grabbed at the back of her head, grabbing fistfuls of silk and scratching her scalp.

“It was always so slow and so polite.”

“Polite is good,” I told her.

“Polite is good,” she affirmed, “but polite is boring.”

She didn’t shave her thighs. I was rubbing those as she spoke, the hairs barely detectable.

“I was seeing this nasty fellow before that one—he would slap me down if I even thought about taking control.”

I nodded and continued fidgeting, remaining silent. I didn’t like talking about other lovers.

“You think I’m gross.”

“Not at all.” I squeezed her in reassurance. I don’t normally choose wild girls like Casey. They accumulate dirt. Ironically, Casey’s sneakers are as white as they were when she picked them off the shelf. I watch her tie them every morning. My ex-wife lost it to me. That’s the kind of woman I was used to.

It’s difficult for me to relate to Casey; I don’t always get her words. She’s usually talking about the internet or trying to convince me that I’d enjoy electronic music. Once, she came home after her night class, hopped on the bed, kissed me with her soft lips, and the first thing she said was, “You know that fucked up commercial where a pop tart is running from his suburban house which is really a giant toaster?”

“I can’t say that I have.”

“It’s funny. In the car I was thinking, what does that say about the American home?”

Casey tells me I’m the porridge that’s “just right.” Sometimes I have to pretend I’m tired to avoid her libido. She doesn’t realize how sexual our relationship is. She hasn’t been with someone long enough to find out there’s more to do than fuck.

One night, I dreamt of what was supposed to be her former lover. I saw him in our bed. He had her turned over and the bed moved as if it was floating in water. I saw lily pads in the dark surrounding the mattress, beneath a white moon. I heard the sounds of suffering geese, geese being force-fed. I saw them screaming inside silver cages, the metal rods scored into their feet. Their eyes were wild and untrusting, moving rapidly. Then the image of the floating bed returns and I get desperate. Suddenly I’m trawling my shins through the

water, my entire might against the tide. The lily pads turn into gray garments. Where I saw seaweed, I got old wires. Water bottles, loose bandages and half dissolved-paper. Then I was waist deep, and I felt truly cold. I looked up and distance looked at me like a man standing a mile away. I saw it anyways and heard it just as clear, the atrocities that kept on the convulsing bed which belonged to me, floating farther away and getting louder.

Then I woke up and walked to the kitchen. I looked out the window to see thirty geese a few yards away, asleep like dogs. I realized soon that the sounds in the dream were meant to be Casey's sounds. I stood in my kitchen for a while. Not eating or doing anything. Just standing straight. When I came back to bed, I found her asleep, naked, the blanket kicked onto the floor. I never met a woman so comfortable.

In the mornings I drink black coffee and stare at the kitchen table. Casey put a red and white checkerboard tablecloth over it. She laughed when she said, "It makes sense. For your *country* home."

I found a dark glossy stain on the side of one of the kitchen chairs. It was nail polish. One night I asked her about where the stain might've come from, and she pretended she didn't know what I was talking about. It was the night I made mashed potatoes and a roast chicken and string beans. She complained I used too much oil, and I got a call from my brother—my nephew was in trouble.

"Who is this?" Casey asked, moving her food around in a childlike manner.

"My nephew, Jerry's son. Kyle. Said he might get kicked out of college."

"Did he say what he did?"

"No, he wouldn't tell me. But he said he didn't do it."

"He probably fucked with some girl." She tried to push her plate to the center of the table to signal her miserableness, but the table cloth bunched up around the porcelain preventing its movement. Her fork fell. I looked out the window while she fetched it. A black square.

I never asked myself where Casey came from. Then I found the purple stain on the kitchen chair. I was less attracted to her. Even though she was blond and skinny, she talked too much, and she talked to seem smart or to provoke me. It made my teeth stick together. But her long golden head was there heavily sinking into the pillows when I left to feed my soldiers in the morning, and it was there when the birds were asleep, when they let the sun leave. When they manifested into the shapes of a bunch of fat rowboats she was there, crawling on the sheets like an insect on the water. Sometimes you say

a thing to a woman and it becomes like a hollowed out tree. Still full of life, to them. It goes back to their younger dreams about fairies and playing with worms. Making soup out of dead leaves, little berries, and damp dirt. But you don't mean to say it. And perhaps you say it because you know what it's going to mean to them. Even if it's not true.

You know they'll look at you a bit deeper which'll make them feel a bit warmer. The voice in them will hold more sound. All four limbs will tighten around you stronger, like they're dangling at a fatal height. Sometimes, I tell her because I feel that I have to: "I don't want you to love me."

But she is silent when I say things like that. Maybe she's smarter than I know. I reckon though, that women are more wary about saying the wrong thing when they find themselves in bed with a good man. Or even a nice one. Someone who works. Not just labor but sheer functioning. I still dream repulsive dreams. I asked her about the men she'd been with. She was more than glad to share it.

When she finished, I asked her, "So you like being pushed around?"

She was silent again. She was still. Wouldn't look at me. From what she told me, she did things I'd never pictured until then. Things not natural to me, though maybe things I wanted. But I knew she wanted those things. If she wanted them before. I showed her she wanted them.

In each group of geese that I raise, I suspect a secret agent. One goose that is aware of what I mean when I come out before sunrise, the usual feeding time, on a particular day in fall. My parents used to joke that it's called *Fall* after a guy who couldn't pronounce the word *fail*.

The man meant that he failed to do certain things when it got cold.

Outside, I walk slow but deliberately punch my feet into the frozen grass among the sleeping crowd. They get up. I'm still looking. Looking for one goose. One goose whose heartbeats faster than the others when I shine the big light slowly. Like I'm warning distant mariners. When I sing like a broken bell, and I do, and I bellow low so my mouth resembles an *O* trembling, they will collapse soon after. But I search quickly. In the crowd for a pair of eyes full of fear not hunger. Eyes wondering why no one else is flying away. I look for, even hope for it, my stomach sharp and raptured at the image—of a hesitated flap of black wings. But they all collapse when I'm finished. They all get harvested.

I kept seeing Casey and our intimate moments became more experimental. For her it was like rewatching an old, favorite movie, something we also did. One of them was a black and white movie with a famous man and an Indian. Though she said that's not what I ought to call them. But that's what they look like to me. Either way, the both of them, traveling to die already dead.

We were half way through it but I stopped watching. The dying man laid himself down next to the dead fawn. Someone shot it. Right through the eye. I looked at Casey, and her pallid skin looked, almost glowed blue in the TV light. And I started kissing her and kissing her. I moved her clothes out of the way so they caught at the ankles and the wrists. She let me pin her down. I told her I knew what she wanted. I told her a few times. And I heard it again, from the dream, except this time reverberating off the blue flickering walls, that sound. Like a suffering animal.

Dirt Sock (watercolor), Sophia Turturro

KENDALL CRUISE

An Ode to the Not-Me

I imagine she drives with the sunroof
open. That she slams
the pedals of a hippie van. That she
lives in a house that has a blue ground
floor, but a yellow second. That they are
separated by swirling, scalloped trim.
Her office would double
as a plant nursery that
the cats are not allowed
in. Oh yes, she has cats, two of them,
one for each dog, and a snake, who
curls around the arm like one would hug.
In this dreamscape, this would
not cause her to have to
take so much Allegra.
In her journals, she imagines
my roads; wonders at what speed
I am racing towards her. Analyzes
her face in the mirror, tries
to discern her age. Wonders—
how much longer must she wait?

When decorating, she would
believe in maximalism, pattern-mixing,

bright colors, that are complimentary or
otherwise. In this world, she can have
lots of things while only being
messy in a purposeful way that is pleasing to the eye.
That anytime she hears the birds chirp
outside, she chooses to eat on her porch
over poetry. She would spend too much
time mowing the yard, lost in thought. But
tells herself that this time is required
when the delicacy of a garden, the ancientness
of a tree is considered. Pretends
she does not have to catch
her breath at the thought
of a flat tire. I think she
goes to bed before eleven and
falls asleep in the first fifteen minutes.
In her slumber, she always dreams.
Dreams,
that I don't miss—
the turn.

KENDALL CRUISE

Some of the Things that I Do Not Know:

How to make the blinds go down
the first time it is attempted;
the names of all the fifty states, their star-
studded capitals to match; what
kind of chemicals make soda
that crisp, why I should be
worried about it; all the ways
one can say hello,
all the avoidant ways to say
goodbye; the difference
between tan &
beige &
khaki; how
one wears white pants
successfully, ever;

the marvel of fingers, how they move
precise & punctuated;
when, exactly, pasta is cooked
the right amount, whether
Italians of the past cry
as I chuck spaghetti at the wall;
how to dress for the weather
without somehow being too hot or

too cold or
both, at the same time;

the witchcraft that allows someone
to look comfortable in any picture, ever,
even the ones you don't know
are being taken;
the art of texting
without sounding like your grandma,
but also not boring,
but also not like I am maybe
mad at you (which I'm not!
I'm just in desperate need
to figure out the right tonal qualities
of a text & when punctuation
is appropriate, or
if it's ever appropriate).

Some of the things I do know
for sure,
probably; depending
on who you ask
& whether or not they are in a forgiving mood:

that every morning
the birds outside my window sing;
there is no other way that I would choose
to be woken;
that I practically have to chase
my teenage brother out
of my room,
that he refuses to bug
anyone else in this way; people
in my life
come to me for advice,
for support,
even when I have no
prior personal experience because they know
it will still be given
with
great
care;

that thoughtful notes in cards
make me cry, even the seventeenth time;
that I didn't tell
my colorblind grandfather
my birthday cake was
neon orange & blue, not
brown
(and that it could have been
highlighter green
& I wouldn't have loved it
any less);
that there is love, here, right now, always;
if only you were to just reach your hands out
& grab it.

KENDALL CRUISE

To The Weeds that Might be in…My Garden

I have not felt your fertilizer flesh
in months. It contrasts against the coldness
of the world when I open my window.
I know the sun sheds and the rain seeps in

to your veins and I will no longer have
to miss you. They think that you are trouble,
sucking life out of my once prized lilies.
Your roots are planted in my garden, and
moments of weakness have caused me to pull.

The lilies still come up every year, they
do still thrive in their own way. I now know
what the real prize is: to nurture. To nurture you
like you will one day be prized as lilies.

You, you, you, you, it's you, it's you, it's you.
Me, me, in me, in me, in me, it's me, it's me.

HEATHER O'LEARY

Can't Sleep

Waking up to someone staring at you is never fun. Waking up to someone staring at you at four in the morning while you are trying to sleep on a couch, having only passed out an hour and a half prior, is somehow even less fun. It took every bone in my body not to immediately start swinging at whoever was staring at me at first, but even though I was slightly dazed from lack of sleep, I recognized that it was probably not a threat. Slowly, once my eyes adjusted to the dark, I turned my head over to see who was looking at me. I saw my youngest sister, Beth, only eight at the time, going back and forth between staring at me and staring at all of the presents underneath the tree, which had thankfully been placed there before she woke up.

I was very grateful that I wasn't in danger and hoped that if I stayed very, very still, she wouldn't realize that I was awake, and then I could go back to sleep. I was nineteen, and still kept my sleep schedule from high school, which meant a minimum of ten hours of sleep was needed to function. I knew I wouldn't be getting that, but I wanted as much as possible. After about a minute of silently wishing that my younger sister would just go back to bed, I realized two things. First, Beth, who already had problems sleeping, would not be going back to sleep anytime soon. Second, I'm the older sibling and therefore the adult of this situation, so I had to be the one to do something about this. I considered waking my mom, but I knew she needed the sleep even more than I did considering how chaotic the house, which she kept functioning, was.

"Are you alright?" I whispered. Again, I prayed that she would say yes and go to bed. Christmas Eve is as big as Christmas at my dad's house, so I was up late on the twenty-third prepping food, then up at seven the next morning, cooking and cleaning while also entertaining guests the whole night. Then I drove from my dad's house to my mom's house at two in the morning, and

crashed on this scratchy, shriveled couch. Even when I was laying on my side, I was falling off it. Unfortunately for both of us, she said no. After cursing internally for a moment at the fact that sleep would be delayed, I asked her what was wrong.

"Can't sleep," she muttered. *No shit*, I wanted to say, but she was eight, and I always try to be a role model, so I didn't. I had her take me back to her bedroom, hoping that distracting her from the gifts might calm her down enough to sleep for a few more hours. It did not.

After turning on her white noise machine to make ocean noises, turning on her weird color projector that painted the ceiling in waves of blue, and telling her a story, she wasn't any closer to falling asleep. I wanted to give up and go to sleep on her bed, a large futon that was way more comfortable than the couch, but I kept telling myself that this was probably an important moment for her development or something.

When I was growing up, my older sister who is older than me by seven years and had moved out of the house with her father before Beth was born, had helped me out. She was my role model. She didn't curse, she played with me even when I was annoying her, and she stayed with me when she was exhausted if I woke her up late at night or early in the morning. It let me know that no matter what I always had someone who had my back. I'm about ten years older than Beth, but I wanted to have a similar relationship and to act as someone she could always come to without getting pushed away.

I ended up giving up hope that she would go to bed. We talked about it for a little bit, in whispers so we didn't wake anyone. My family was, and still is, notorious for being confused and angry when they get woken up, so neither of us wanted to wake anyone.

"I had a nightmare," Beth said, looking down at the stuffed raccoon she was holding.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked, desperately trying to keep my drooping eyes open.

"I don't remember. Just that it was scary. And now I want to open presents. And eat candy. But mostly open presents. And I want to talk to you."

An unfortunate part of divorce is the separation of half-siblings. Beth never met my father, as our mother had divorced him years before she was born. She grew up with me in and out of the house, staying with my mother during the weekdays and every other weekend, but living with my dad for the rest of the time. It wasn't a messy divorce; it was our normal, as our step-siblings would also be in and out of their mother's house on weekends. Eventually, the most financially sound decision for everyone was for me to move in with my dad, who had no other children, rather than stay with my mom, who was supporting my four younger siblings. I hadn't realized how hard my move hit my youngest sibling until that night.

"I miss you," she told me, surrounded by dozens of stuffed animals, the waving blue light reflecting onto her face. She told me that she missed how we used to read together, how much I used to play with her, and how I helped her with her homework. Our other siblings were at the age where they didn't want to talk with anyone in the family anymore, so she was getting used to playing by herself, but it wasn't going well. She was lonely. Our mom was also not known for explaining things well, so school wasn't going much better for Beth either. She also struggled with making friends, which made her lonely wherever she was.

I did the proper older sibling thing and started explaining ways that she could play alone without getting lonely and ways to get others to play with her. We briefly went over how to ask better questions so the answers might be clearer. I made a tired promise to come around more, and told her to practice telling herself a story to help her fall asleep by telling me a story. It was one hundred percent a ploy to get her to stop asking me questions because it was five in the morning at this point, and I could look like I was listening to her while actually getting a bit of sleep. Five minutes into her story, the thundering steps of three kids poorly trying to sneak downstairs let me know that an hour and a half of sleep was all that I would be getting.

When the rest of my younger siblings broke into Beth's room, we turned off the noisemaker and the projector, turned the normal lights on, and started talking about anything and everything and played games. God, I was so tired. My eyes were burning, trying to stay open. I'd find my head snapping up when I almost fell asleep and got whacked in the face with a pillow, courtesy of one of my siblings who couldn't imagine how I could be tired on Christmas.

At six, my mom, stepdad, and grandmother woke up. My mom took one look at me and handed me my stocking, filled with Reese's Pieces, and made me a hot chocolate. I was very grateful for sugar.

Here's the thing: I didn't realize how much my half-assed attempt to get my younger sister to go to sleep would actually affect her. She held me to actually visit more through her expert use of tears and guilt, and even with working over forty hours a week and living in a different house with other familial obligations, I still kept my promise by seeing her at least once a week. She demanded that I let her read to me and let her tell me stories, even after the holidays. She was able to make more friends and get her siblings to play with her more. The most shocking effect was that even months afterward, my mother told me that Beth would still tell herself stories, often out loud but eventually just to herself, until she fell asleep.

"I don't know what you said to her," my mother told me months later, as we watched Beth chase our brothers with a plastic baseball bat, "but it got her to rest."

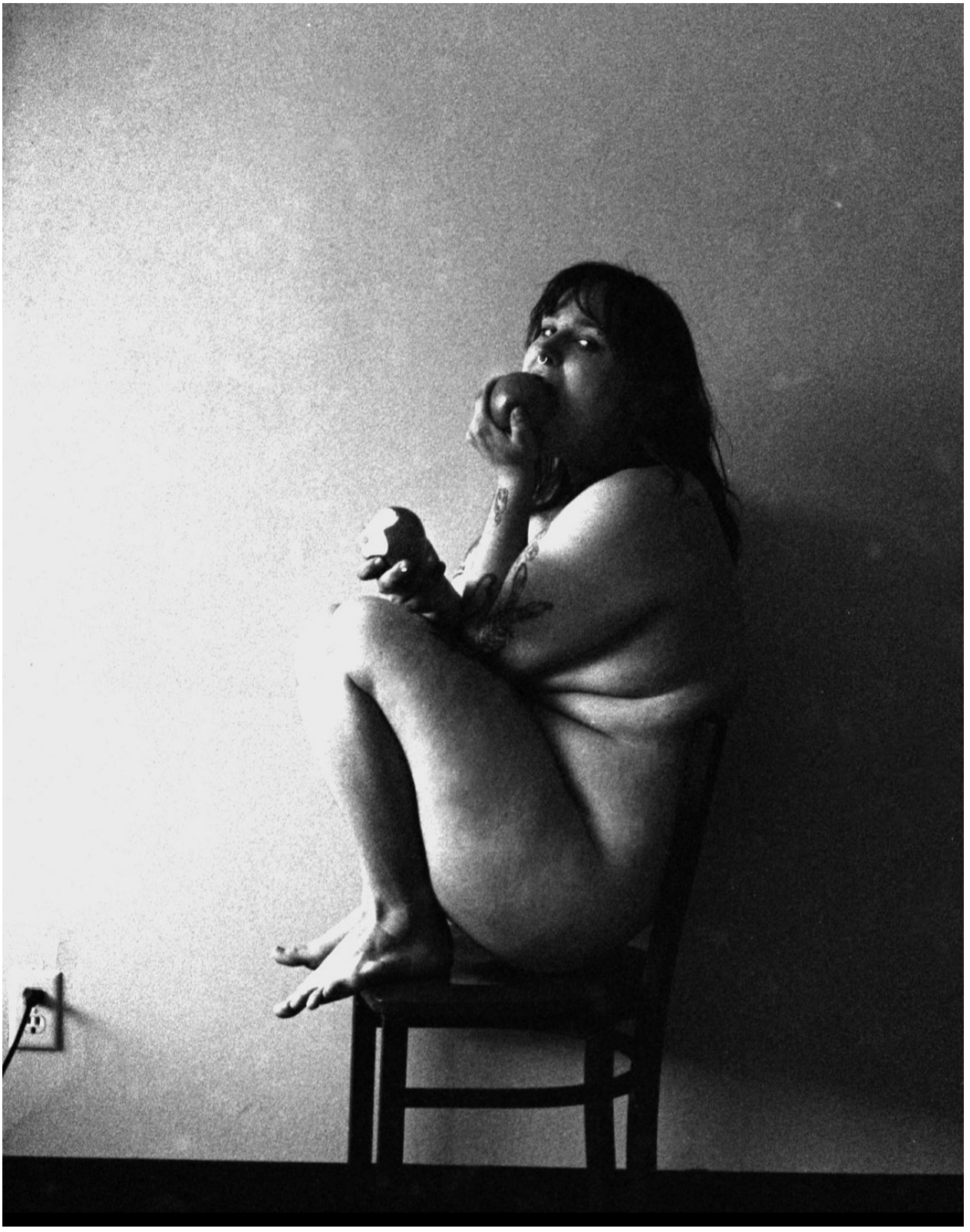
It's no secret that children take what parents say to them very seriously, but I never realized until that night how seriously they take what their siblings say to them as well. I got lucky. Very, very lucky. My sleep-deprived mind was able to come up with good advice and enough sense not to brush her off. It made me think about how often I had told her or my other siblings to go away or leave me alone or something worse. It wasn't just that I had to make sure I didn't accidentally tell them something stupid like to do drugs, but I needed to be present and active in their lives. This was equally as important.

I couldn't help but wonder what might have happened if I had given in to sleep, told Beth to go to sleep, and pushed her to the side. She might not have continued to come to me for help later on in the year. She might not have gotten those friends or learned to fall asleep on her own. She might have become aloof and angry.

I've seen it happen in some of my other younger siblings. We've mostly grown up together. I was growing up while they were. I didn't have any words of wisdom for them because I was still searching through Life's dictionary to find them for myself. By the time I mostly got through high school, I knew enough to help a bit, but the damage was done. At that point, they had already either turned inward and pushed others away or made meaningful relationships with friends and were on their way to being fully matured people. Our older sister had moved out during one of the divorces. Though she was able to help me when I was younger, the siblings closer to my age are step-siblings who didn't arrive until after she had left, so they didn't have her help. They just had to deal with moving and divorces without an older sibling's guidance.

My mom telling me about the progress Beth made had led me to an "oh shit" moment. It's like pausing for an extra second after the light has turned green, narrowly avoiding getting hit by someone who decided to run the light, or it's like nearly dropping the phone that you can't afford to replace, but fumbling and catching it afterall. I could've very easily messed up an important moment with my sister.

I'm grateful that I was able to help my youngest sister, and every time I groan about having to go hang out with my younger siblings after eight and a half hours of dealing with horrible customers, I try to remember how much an older sibling's support can mean. I force a smile onto my face and watch them play Roblox for the hundredth time with no complaint. I know I wouldn't do anything differently given a second chance, and I say that knowing that I might have to do it again this year.



Untitled (self-portrait) (35 mm film), Faith Mikolajczyk

Dish Pit

The dish pit is the bottom of the barrel. However, "from here, you can only go up!"

This last light-hearted phrase is the type of thing that Carlos's Gramma Lewis likes to say. Her favorite is: "Money ain't everything, but it sure helps." He notices people like little sayings. His favorite teacher in school was his second-grade teacher, Miss Anderson. "Friends listen first, talk second," she would sing out at least nine times a day whenever the twenty-three children inside room number forty-eight at Frederick Douglass Elementary School would clamor to tell her something wildly interesting about themselves or their pet. In Carlos's memories, Miss Anderson is always in a polka-dot green dress, her blonde hair gathered in a floppy bun on the top of her head. When she smiles her teeth are gleaming white and luminous.

Here in the brightly fluorescent-lit kitchen of Lakeview Restaurant, catchy little phrases are not how the line guys talk. Unless you count "what the fuck!" which is spat often in the kitchen since everyone is always in a bad mood and a hurry. In the kitchen, you need to be fast. Carlos has no problem with that in the dish pit. He is fast with his hands, but clumsy when he has to leave the sink. Also, you don't complain that it's hot. Carlos doesn't complain. Ever. On his first day, the manager, Chloe, told him three things:

First, "Mark, the owner, is a cheap bastard and buys dollar store dish detergent that won't work and will dry your hands out like crazy, so most dish guys just buy Dawn themselves. But you know, whatever."

Second, "Do whatever the line guys tell you."

Third, "If you have any questions don't ask Dave, the head chef."

Then she left. She has never spoken to him again. That was over a year ago when Carlos was still in high school and only had a puny couple hundred dollars saved.

It's a Tuesday afternoon and the back of house staff has just survived Labor Day weekend, the busiest weekend of the season. Carlos, returning from his late lunch break, stumbles a bit navigating his body through the kitchen's employees only back door. The door is permanently open during business hours and has heavy black plastic curtains that act as flapping screens, suspended and sweeping to the ground, to keep air moving and the bugs out. It's always awkward for Carlos to step through the swaths of netting. The open door doesn't help the oppressive heat in the kitchen. It read ninety-two degrees on the big digital clock outside Community Bank that Carlos passed on his bicycle, pedaling quickly on the way to Biggies to get smokes. That means it is over one hundred and ten degrees, easy, in the kitchen. The dish pit, the back-back of the house, is even hotter. Only a few pans await in the gray water. The stainless steel counters on either side of the sink are shiny and clean because Carlos meticulously scrubbed them down before he clocked out for lunch. He always does this, despite how much his leg aches by lunchtime. Dave thinks it's crazy.

"You're not saving yourself any time, come closing," he said the first time he witnessed Carlos wiping long, methodical strokes on the counter with a small scour pad.

With a smirk, Dave had noted the concise falling of sudsy liquid and wet food particles from the counter to the drain where Carlos was working intently. This drain sink was at the end of the counter, bolted against the dingy side wall where they store empty gallon jugs of mayo, ketchup, mustard, ranch, tartar sauce, Italian dressing, odd-sized lids, and wooden spatulas that no one uses since they are unsanitary, but no one will throw away, either.

"I know," Carlos had said. Then, finishing his last wipe so the metal shone wet and beautifully blank, he added, "It will make me feel better when I clock back in."

"Huh," Dave had grunted, taking a drag from his Marlboro even though smoking inside the kitchen wasn't allowed.

Today, Dave isn't around. No one is at the moment. The heat hangs heavy with the smell of grease and onions. Two servers' heads can be seen through the round windows of the kitchen's swinging doors, which connect to the short hallway that spills into the main dining room. Carlos can tell the servers are on their phones and having a conversation at the same time, even though the mounted ceiling fan and the speaker currently playing Metallica make it impossible to hear. The brunette head of the new girl, (Kaley? or Kiley?) and the reddish-blonde head of Gretta, who has worked here as long as Carlos, are both bent down. Their faces will suddenly rise, somewhat reluctant, turn to the other and say something in just a flash, before their chins tuck down into their neck and their eyes narrow in concentration. Like smoking, being on your phone while on the clock isn't allowed. That's why the servers are

huddled like fugitives by the swinging doors. Suddenly, the familiar sound of silverware clanging rings out. A busboy, who is actually a grown man with a receding hairline and a kid of his own, has just dropped the dish tub onto the scraping board a few feet from the girls on their phones. Kaley/Kiley laughs out.

"You scared me!" she shrieks, laughing. She doesn't look down at her phone again. Carlos can't hear the rest of the exchange, but he can guess. The new girl is very pretty and laughs at everything. Even the Dad Joke of the Day calendar that hangs in the break room. Kaley/Kiley always laughs out loud at the puns, then repeats it to whoever is in the break room with her.

"Why are piggy banks so wise? They are filled with common cents!"

"Common cents," Kaley/Kiley muses with an affectionate head shake. It's kind of lame, but it's nice to be around a person who laughs a lot, Carlos thinks. He has yet to admit to himself that he likes Kaley/Kiley. Knowing her actual name will help.

With nicotine in his bloodstream and gleaming stainless steel in front of him, Carlos is feeling good despite the humidity in the kitchen which makes him sweat the second he walks through the plastic screen curtains. Prep for dinner rush will start soon. The servers love the dinner rush. The back of house hates the dinner rush because they don't get any tips; they get yelled at more. Carlos is not really impacted that much; he's marooned with a wet T-shirt in the dish pit. No tips, no getting yelled at. Just gray water, fuzzy bubbles, and smears of food that must go. The dishes stack up faster during the dinner rush, but Carlos knows he can get through them fast. His job is always the same. His pay is always the same. Now that he has finally graduated from high school he can work doubles, meaning he can save even more money. He has become obsessed with his savings balance. Smiling to himself, he recalls the last time he rode his bicycle to Community Bank to deposit his paycheck. (Carlos always bikes, never walks.) The small, gray-colored, typed number on his last bank deposit slip read:

$2,553.17.

Halfway there. Only up from here! This is what he thinks in his head, but it's in his Gramma Lewis's voice.

His mom's ex-boyfriend's cousin promised Carlos to sell him his 1999 Softail Harley Davidson for five grand the summer before he went into eleventh grade. That was two years ago. Carlos Blue-Booked the value: ten grand. Its black metal and shiny chrome body is as sleek and perfect as glass. Its two burnt-orange fins curve in a luminous gleam, large in the back, hovering over the back wheel, smaller in the front, protecting the gas tank. It's downright sexy.

"Classic old school," is how Bear described it.

Bear named it Marilyn, after some old-timey movie star, apparently. Carlos can't remember her full name, but he does remember Bear's surprise that he'd never heard of her.

"Oh man, I *am* getting old," Bear laughed. Bear only laughs at himself, never at others. That is what Carlos noticed right away.

Regardless of the name, the Softail is fast. So fast. Carlos was a freshman in high school when he met Bear. Unbelievably, it is thanks to his mom's then boyfriend, Kyle, that Carlos stumbled on what would be his ticket out of his depressing, stunted life. Like all her boyfriends, Carlos had hated Kyle, but was grudgingly grateful that Kyle slid into their lives for a few years, or he would've never met Bear. He wouldn't be halfway to freedom, finally a man. Kyle and his mom had been together for about a year then, and he was living with them, not Gramma Lewis, during this stint of time. The warning signs of their impending break up were flaring up like a bad `rash. It was a nervous time for Carlos. He hated all the boyfriends, but "without a man, the bottle is her boyfriend." This is the only cheerless phrase Gramma Lewis ever uses. While Carlos couldn't stand his mother's boyfriends, at least when she had one she stayed sober. Held down a job. When the boyfriend left, she fell apart. Stopped going to work. The fridge dwindled to condiments and Mike's hard lemonade. Then Gramma Lewis would show up. "You're just gonna stay a week or so until your mom finds a new job," turned into Carlos living with her for a year, or more.

Bear was about forty, skinny, always smoking, and had a longish, thin ponytail. He looked nothing like a bear, which surprised Carlos the first time he met him. He looked remarkably like lots of other white guys around that age who lived in the trailer park side of Ontario County. The nickname was unique, but having one was not. No, the reason why Bear is one in a million is because of his garage. Twice as long and wide as his single-wide trailer. His garage is permanently crammed full of motorcycles and motorcycle parts. The walls are covered with old motorcycle license plates and a few yellowing Harley Davidson posters. Like the kitchen restaurant, it has a permanent smell: motor oil and cigarettes. Unlike the restaurant, no one ever yells, unless something catches on fire. But that's to be expected. The "Meeting Bear Day" as Carlos has come to think of it, was when he was fifteen years old, and he had no idea why Kyle dragged him and his mom there. Turns out, they were not even there to see Bear. Some other guy was there, and the two men started to use tough guy talk, saying "dough" instead of "money." Whatever. Bear was just standing there, smoking and looking bored, like the teachers' aides who had to watch the students in the cafeteria. Except for the cigarette, of course, the teachers usually scrolled on their phone, observing nothing, especially not any middle-school cruelness. Carlos was genuinely startled when Bear asked him if he wanted to check out the bikes. The bikes? Carlos's

initial thought was that this guy was way too old to be riding bicycles. He remembered mumbling, "No thanks," while looking around the front yard, at the fence, at the plastic chairs, at the folded gold and tan umbrella sticking up crookedly from the round plastic table. Everything was covered in grass clippings; someone had weed whacked the brick patio edges recently. Carlos looked at anything except the guy who wanted to show him the bikes. Kyle started to yell at his mom,

"Why the hell didn't you grab the damn check book, Tam!"

Kyle apparently owed some money to the other guy and, of course, this was now his mom's problem.

"Why don't you go with Bear, Carlos."

It was not really a question. It was his mom's tight voice; half annoyed and half nervous. It was a request to leave the scene. Carlos decided it'd be less hassle dealing with some old guy making awkward small talk. Some adults did this. Carlos just wanted to be left alone most of the time. He shrugged and shuffled through freshly mowed grass, not looking at anyone.

The rest, as they say, is history. A door opened in Carlos's world. One of greasy metal parts, bruised and bleeding knuckles, and shiny tools of mysterious function that were no longer mysterious, but more like faithful friends. Within the first two minutes, the feeling that Bear pitied him drained away like greasy water down a sink. It was replaced with a light, airy wonder that such a place existed and let him, Carlos, in. He knew that it was no exaggeration that the past four years had changed his life. He can't even fathom what he'd be doing with his pathetic existence if not for meeting Bear and spending his evenings in his motorcycle garage. There were a few evenings where they never got around to picking up a single tool; instead they just talked about what he hated about school and what confused him about his mom. Bear always listened, and gave only a little advice.

He usually ended with, "Have patience and try to forgive Tam."

Carlos never made a reply.

So many changes in four years. Hot water running, steam rising, lunch pans soaking, Carlos is shaking his head thinking about how ninth-grade Carlos had yet to go through all of puberty. Now, graduated-from-high school Carlos has a full-time job and is an almost-owner of a vintage Harley Davidson Softail. Soon, he would never have to pedal up that stinking, long Sunnyside Hill Road to Gramma Lewis's house again. He would fly up there.

Gramma worries about him on his kid's bicycle. He knew she was not a fan of those loud, dangerous machines, but she didn't forbid him from saving up to buy the Softail. Even if she tried, it wasn't up to her anymore. When he was little, she forbade Carlos from doing almost anything except going to

school and sometimes visiting Mom on the weekends. He couldn't go to the park a block away by himself until the sixth grade; the grade that kids stopped going to the park because "it was for babies." Soon though, no one would be able to stop him from going anywhere he wanted. Wherever he went, people would notice the sleek machine under him first.

Carlos turns the huge Dawn container upside down, squeezing the last of the blue liquid soap into a white, frothy foam of hot clean. The kitchen door slaps open. Craig, the man busboy, walks through. A large gray busser bin, filled to the top with silverware leads the way; Carlos will have to sort through the bin and then run it through the industrial dishwasher. Craig smirks at Carlos.

"What's up, bro?"

Carlos doesn't reply because Craig isn't really inquiring. Carlos knows this. "What's up, bro?" is basically Craig's filler.

"That Kaley is hot," he announces, exaggerating the word *hot.*

"It's Kiley," says Carlos with conviction, even though he has no idea if that's actually her name. He hopes to God he's wrong.

"Oh, yeah, that's right," says Craig with the faith of a child.

He does a weird quirk with his mouth, the top lip going up and to the side, which Carlos assumes to be part conspiratorial, part ironic, all bro. He saunters out, pushes the door open, and says very loudly in mock surprise, "Kiley, you are still on your phone?"

A giggle and, "It's Kaley," is all Carlos can hear before the door swings shut with a bang.

Carlos smiles into the billowy white suds and the perfectly smooth gleaming stainless steel counters, mooring him, to his left and to his right.

It was a slow night and the dishes were done before 9:30 p.m., which makes the night feel like a vacation compared to the holiday weekend. The dishwasher is almost always last to leave. Carlos wipes down every stainless steel surface one more time and walks out of the kitchen towards the breakroom. He's surprised to hear laughter coming from it. It's high and female, so, a server. Usually, the servers are gone by the time he clocks out. The door is half open and Carlos's frame is small so he just slips in. He sees Craig's backside first and Kaley's laughing face, hand covering her mouth, trying to stifle her giggles, shaking her head, and saying through her hand,

"You're *so* bad," to Craig who is doing something strange.

In that first second Carlos, for some reason, thinks of the Dad Joke of the Day calendar, and feels a stupid laugh bubble, despite not even knowing the pun. Then Craig drags his left leg with an exaggerated limp and Carlos goes cold. At the same time, Kaley's eyes go wide, she stops laughing, and stands

up straight. Carlos says nothing and takes a very slow deliberate step to the left, where the punch-out clock is located.

"What's wrong? Oh, shit," Carlos hears Craig say.

Carlos's back is turned. His heart is thudding, erratic, and uncomfortable. He can feel his face burning red. He can't remember his employee number to clock out, even though it's his birthdate.

"Have a good night, bro," Craig sings out before leaving the silent break room, Kaley trailing behind like a puppy, her head down.

Of course, the dishwasher with a limp is an easy target. Carlos graduated from high school that June, thus ending four years of predictable hell. It is easy to simply shrug it off, lie to himself, say, "I'm used to it. It doesn't matter."

The restaurant's back of house men are all gruff, foul mouthed, and show zero sympathy, but they never mock him. Once on a smoke break, Carlos with his menthol lights, Demitrie with his vape had asked him how he got the limp. No sarcasm. No sympathy. Just a question.

"Car accident," is all Carlos replied.

A normal story.

"Fucking sucks," was Demetirie's reply.

A thing he said about everything.

"Yeah, sure does."

After finally punching his employee numbers in correctly Carlos walks as fast as he can to reach his bicycle in the narrow alley behind the restaurant. It's dark here and smells of rotting garbage. He hitches his leather backpack with its Harley Davidson patch a bit and gets on the grungy bicycle he's had since ninth grade. It takes a moment to kick the rusty kickstand up for some reason. His leg hurts. He finally manages to get a good push-off and pedals slowly down the alley that cuts to the north end of Main Street, which will eventually lead him to Sunnyside Hill Road, then home. Gramma will likely still be up and watching recorded episodes from the History Channel or cooking shows. Emerging from the dank alley and into the pretty, warmly lit up Main Street, Carlos can clearly see his hands gripping the bar handles. Dry from all the dishes, but sweaty from the humidity. He can count on what his hands can do, in a way he can't ever count on his feet.

An image flashes, unprovoked, as he pedals north—fuzzy mittens. Specifically, the fluffy red mittens his second grade teacher, Miss Anderson had bought him for Christmas. He never wore mittens to school and after a while, his teacher stopped asking where they were. All the students got a book and some candy but Carlos had a little extra present; those mittens. Bright red and definitely not from Walmart. He can still see the neat, green stitching at the bottom cuff that spelled out L.L. Bean. He had never heard of it and

thought it was weird it was named after food. Thick red mittens, white fuzzy lining, green stitching. Perfect Christmas colors. It was the last day before the long Christmas break. Students and teachers alike were relaxed and in a good mood. His mom was the opposite: uptight and sad. She'd had a bad break up the week of Thanksgiving. It was the first time he heard Gramma use the phrase "without a man, the bottle is her boyfriend." That same Friday night his mother pulled into the parking lot of some local dumpy bar just as the evening was turning purple. Seven-year-old Carlos, who was still so short and weighed next to nothing, was forced to be strapped into a booster seat.

Twisting around from the front driver's seat she had told him, "I'm just gonna pop in to say Merry Christmas to Rachel." Rachel was her best friend. She came over a lot and they got very happy and turned the music up loud and danced. Carlos doesn't remember much after he watched his mom walk towards a windowless building. He remembers reading "L.L. Bean" over and over. He remembers trying to unlatch himself out of the booster seat, but for some reason, he didn't want to take off those mittens. With them on he couldn't get the seat belt buckle unlatched, and gave up. He was tired and fell asleep. Then it was black outside. He remembers being cold. So cold. Then, a lot of pain. Lots of lights. Red and blue with snow shooting between them. Not really Christmas colors, but close. He was in the hospital for a long time. He didn't see his mom again until he was ten. He didn't return to school again until Saint Patrick's Day. The festive day he finally returned back to school, unbeknownst to him, was also known as "naughty leprechaun day" in Miss Anderson's second grade classroom. The students had been preparing and looking forward to it. Carlos knew none of this, of course. Upon arriving that morning, he was greeted by his fellow classmates whom he hadn't seen in three months, jumping, pointing, and laughing, at something just inside the room. Very confused, Carlos was finally able to peer inside the classroom and saw that all the tables had moved to the center of the room and a few chairs were even upside down. Green crepe was paper drunkenly strewn all over it. Carlos burst out crying, thinking something horrible and unexplainable was now happening at school too.

Miss Anderson had taken him to the hall, and kept saying over and over, "Honey, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

His Grandma Lewis had made the comment, just once, that it was too bad that Carlos had those fuzzy mittens on the day her daughter forgot about him and left him locked in the car for six and a half hours. His grandmother insisted he would have been able to unbuckle himself and figure out the locked back door with bare freezing hands. Then Carlos would not have lost three toes on his left foot and the pinky on his right from frostbite. Carlos used to wonder about this too. But now he knows the truth: it was a miracle of Saint-like proportions that he had those mittens. He probably wouldn't

have figured out the buckle or how to unlock the door, and even if he did, he would've been too scared to walk into the bar at night looking for his mom. He would've still fallen asleep and lost some fingers, too. Without fingers, he really would be completely worthless. Bear would've never been able to teach him to drop a tranny, to make a bike ride and sound new. He would be mocked by some because he was the kid with a limp, but those mittens, saving his fingers, meant soon, he would be the guy with a Harley, who was fast. Carlos, lost in his fantasy, has forgotten about the man busboy, about Kaley laughing at him. He's forgotten how much he hates pedaling up stinking Sunnyside Hill Road. All he sees is himself hugging the curvy, paved State Route 21 that runs the entire length of Canandaigua Lake, leaving it all behind in a cloud of dust.

MOLLIE MCMULLAN

Lethal

Carol Jean melts into the bed,
a symphony of flesh and bone.
Shadow falters at the sight of her
but advances nevertheless.

In the valley between pillow and sheet, my mother reaches
into the hollow of Carol Jean and remembers

the way she loved her husband.
How she scooped up the moon in soap-cracked palms and
served it for dinner.
How she scrawled her will on watercolor paper and played
Fur Elise on Beethoven's birthday.
The way she knit hats through the knobs of her fingers
for her grandchildren.

Her memory is interrupted by others,
the edge of a screwdriver down an esophagus.
An ambulance,
morphine's embrace,
the blink of an eye: a camera.
She suffocates under linen:
respiration betrayal.

In an orthopedic bed, Carol Jean is dressed in her favorite shirt and given
back her glasses.
She will have no watch.

MOLLIE MCMULLAN

Boiling Over

On my father's birthday, my mother
and I buy a lobster for dinner at the grocery store.
During the drive home, we name her Sheila,
coo at the way she wriggles in the plastic.

My mother tells me how awful it is every year,
boiling something while it's still moving;
("you don't realize you're boiling until it's too late").

We free Sheila from her bands,
saw at them with my mother's car keys,
and toss her into the Sound.

I console my mother when Sheila is released,
telling her he's gonna have to suck it up,
be the grown man he pretends to be.

We hold hands in the driveway,
giggle through the side door,
silence when my father appears in the kitchen.

He has the stove on, and when he looks at my mother,
I am reminded of the way a lion knows of the
tenderness of a gazelle's flesh.

Carmen Caska (Kallitype print), Faith Mikolajczyk

EVAN YOUNGS

Requiem in Dee Miner

"I liked how it took place in 1981."

"What did you like about it taking place in 1981?"

"Because I was 16 then. And it brought back memories."

"Are you crying?"

"No." She wipes a tear. "I'm not crying. It's just…it brought back so many memories."

For someone who frequently says to me that she is driving on phone calls, Marilyn has not removed her eyes from the road. When I sit in the passenger seat I feel as dependent as before I got my license. Before we left for the movie theater, I had the choice of seeing either *Empire of Light* or some movie about father-daughter bonding. I did not want to endure her post-viewing interrogation on the ride home about whether I really love her as a mother: "Who do you love better, me or your father?" "Remember, you'll always be my baby," or why I am such an asshole. So I chose *Empire of Light*, which I knew nothing about. It does in fact take place in 1981, England.

"And the clothes and the music, it was very accurate. And I thought about being sixteen and young." Her voice still sounds nasal and it trembles. "I didn't think you were gonna like it because it was too sappy."

"I liked it. I don't really like sad movies, but this one was okay."

"It wasn't really a sad movie, just…I thought the saddest part was when he was beat up."

Empire of Light is about a middle–aged bipolar manager of a cinema who begins a secret romantic relationship with her new coworker, a college-bound black man. Her coworker introduced her to two–tone, a then–burgeoning

genre that fused British punk and new wave with Jamaican ska and reggae. A flock of skinheads invade the cinema and viciously beat up her coworker.

"I didn't realize they had racism back then. I thought it was just an American thing." It surprises me that Marilyn even considers racism an American thing.

"The racism in Europe is way worse than the racism in America."

"Well in America we had the Civil Rights Movement and the…riots. I think it was worse in America."

The seclusion of Marilyn's car gives her the liberty to force me into any conversation she wants. I try to combat this by wearing my big over–ear headphones. On the way to the Rome Capitol, I listened to the debut of Mr. Bungle's album as protection. It is too late now to suction the headphones onto my ears without it being a rude statement. I want to change the subject to something that would spark neither *emotional bonding* nor an angry political debate. The first thing that always comes to my mind is music.

"You want to know what's funny?" I remember that we just finished talking about a race riot. "Well, not funny, but, you know the soundtrack to the movie?"

"I didn't know there was a soundtrack."

"I mean all the songs in the movie. Not the songs like the records. I mean the ambient stuff."

"The background music."

"Yeah. You know who produced it?"

"No."

I assume Marilyn, a leftover of the nineties, would recognize a name that is certainly not within the mild vibe of *Empire of Light*. "It was in the credits at the beginning if you caught it."

"Who?"

"Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross."

"Well, I don't know who those people are."

"They're Nine Inch Nails."

Her face brightens with confusion. Her mouth becomes an oval. "*Really?*"

Former edgy industrial rockstar sex symbol Trent Reznor is now mostly making ambient stuff. The Brian Eno type. The guy who screamed "I want to fuck you like an animal," and "I'd rather die than give you control," won an Oscar and a Golden Globe for scoring a Disney film. For him, the nineties are over.

"Did I ever tell you that my ex–husband Bob's brother played with Nine Inch Nails when they were starting out? Look it up. Dee Miner. His real name was Larry Meinhold but his artist name was Dee Miner."

She tells me this story every time I mention Nine Inch Nails. It is probably not true. Nine Inch Nails effectively began as a Trent Reznor solo project and

existed as a true band only in touring. There were a few bands that did open for the band's first 1990 headlining tour that have faded into unresearchability: Monkey Fear, This Is Our Daughter, Dharma Head. Still, because Bob Meinhold told Marilyn the quintessential Boomer claim of attending Woodstock, I find Larry's claim of playing with Nine Inch Nails questionable.

"Well, Larry played with them when they were starting out. Look up Dee Miner. D-E-E Miner, M-I-N-E-R."

"Was he on any of their albums?"

"No…he's still playing in Los Angeles. He tried to make it big as a rock star." Her voice turns cynical. "Never really got anywhere I guess."

I search on my phone for as much information as I can get about Dee Miner. The only band the Internet lists him with is Black Tongued Bells, a Los Angeles blues rock band with one album from 2013 called *Every Tongue Has A Tale To Tell.* They have a Facebook page and the most recent post is from last year, advertising "a celebration of the life and music of the late great Dee Miner."

> *Diane Martin: He was one of the BEST!!*
>
> *Donna Norman: Dang, I'm on the wrong coast, but I'll definitely be there in spirit!! One of the best!! RIP LM*
>
> *Paul Balbirnie: hopefully you will post some video of this event. he would be really delighted I'm sure*

Another post further down announces his death another year prior. Donna Norman shares a very blurry photo of another very blurry photo of Dee Miner in shaggy hair, a cherry red guitar, and a black chest-baring shirt straight from Lindsay Buckingham's seventies wardrobe.

I break the news to Marilyn that it seems like Larry "Dee Miner" Douglas Meinhold died in July, 2021. She gasps louder than I expect her to. She tells me more about Larry/Dee than the factoid she usually dispels. When she and Bob lived in the rentals across the canal, Larry would stay in their house between tours.

"He was the only one that was nice to me at Bob's funeral. He was the only one in that family I actually cared about." She sniffles.

Bob died twenty-six years ago in Toledo, Ohio while visiting family. It was liver cancer; Marilyn says he was an alcoholic. According to Marilyn, the Meinholds hated her so much that they did not inform her of her husband's death until much after the fact. This was probably because their marriage was not functional. It does not surprise me when Marilyn says they argued a lot and would estrange themselves for days. They never had kids, only intermittently foster children. Marilyn thought she could not conceive until she

tested positive for my sister. In reality, Bob's time in Vietnam exposed him to enough Agent Orange to castrate him.

I feel a tension of curiosity and unease whenever Marilyn talks about life before she met my father. When she does, it is like I am looking into a past that can yield a much different future in which I am somebody completely different. What if Bob became my father? What if I lived pre-Internet? What if Bob died later letting my mom know her fertility status even later, and she raised me on Peppa Pig instead of PBS? What if I never had a sister? Or I had a brother? What if I never existed at all?

Where would I be, but also, where would Marilyn be? Would she even be my mother?

The car ride home is silent. Marilyn's tears dry. I keep my headphones around my neck instead of covering my ears. I keep the Mr. Bungle album I am listening to on pause. The flailing randomness of the music would feel like I am hiding the duration of her reaction behind the music, something that can exist at any time. I return to it the day after when I walk my dog alongside Oneida Lake, the water I call home. I write about home miles away from here near another, larger lake. I am far from marrying, but I constantly decide to never raise kids. I do not think I could bear to explain my life prior to them and burden them with questions and hypotheticals. I keep walking my oblivious dog, who knows nothing about my personal life other than how much time I spend in the forbidden upstairs, and that "walk" is a keyword for going outside and seeing the world he can not explore alone. I wish I was more like him.

ELIANIZ TORRES

as mother's flowers rot

Mother was born from a garden of greens. Just as the woman who came before her.
Her mother's delicate fingers danced over every flower petal, breathing life into them with each despairing sigh.
Day in and day out she'd watch her watch them.
Wondering why she was the only one that ever held them.

Your father is allergic. She lied.

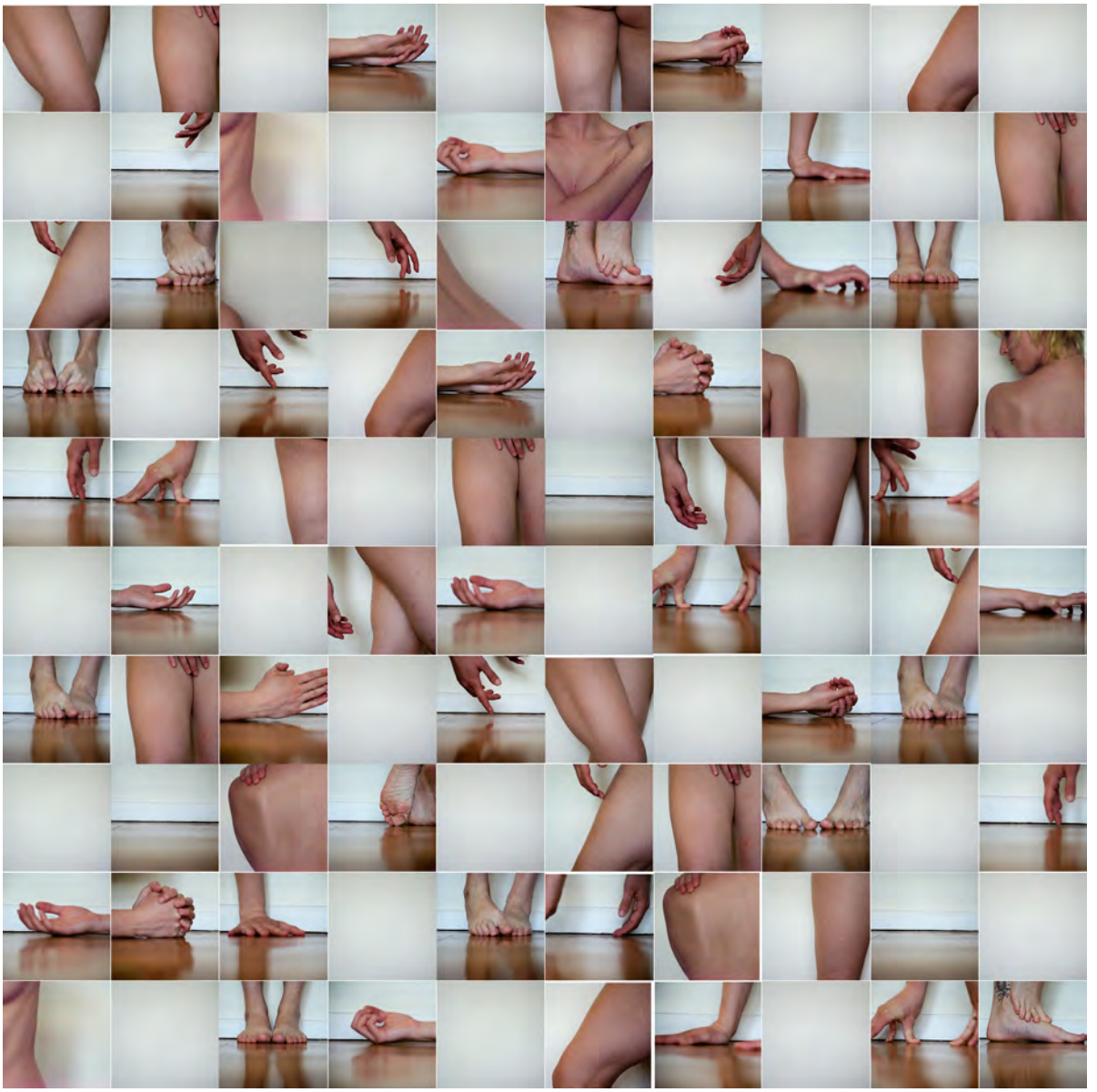
He simply hated the smell of them.

She took it upon herself to continue the garden.
She learned how to tend to them,
day in and day out she went with her mother.
She learned to dance her fingertips along their edges delicately.
When she was done, she learned to wash the dirt from her knees.
She learned to be careful—to keep their scent off her
like the scent of a forbidden lover.

She watched the way his hatred for the garden grew.
Watched the way he beat her sister when she was reckless
when she forgot to wash off the dirt
when she let their scent intoxicate her,
blindly strengthen her.

He reminded them who was strongest
with scars that matched his
day in and day out.
Until they all stopped tending,
until one turned to two,
two to three
years in the same
flowerless
weed ridden home.

After he died they put flowers over his casket.
Mom didn't touch them, she didn't even look.
When the condolences hit her doorstep,
wedged between dozens of flowery buds
she let every petal fall.
Let them wither in their own solitude.
The way she learned to,
the way he taught her to.
Just as the woman before her did
day in and day out.
My sister didn't understand,
Mother's allergic too. I lied.
Just like grandpa.



parts (digital photography), Kaelin Martin

MEGAN MORAN

Duo

¡Bienvenido!
Welcome to senior year
and welcome to
something else to stress you out.
Welcome to Duolingo.

¿Cómo estás?
How are you doing?
In your classes and in your
Spanish lessons?
Duo is disappointed.
Your parents are disappointed.
You aren't getting into college.
But anyways,
how are applications going?

¿Cuántos años tiene?
How old are you again?
Last time you checked,
you were sixteen. How are you
an adult already?
Where did the time go?
124 day streak. How
have you been learning
Spanish for half a year?
How old will you be when you
get your acceptance letter?

¿Quién es tu amigo?
Who's your friend?
And who hates you?
It's really hard to tell lately.
High school is stupid.
Duolingo is stupid.
You can't wait until college
when you don't have to ask
who your friends are.

¿Cómo está el clima?
What's the weather like?
Hot. Pretty normal
for summer.
Lots of rain.
You're told it's going to snow
a lot when you're Upstate.
You've never been Upstate.
You also hear there are lots
of owls. You don't
want to think about
Duolingo.
You wonder some more
about the weather.

¿Cuál es tu color favorito?
What's your favorite color?
It's an easy question.
So, why can't you answer?
It's just an ice breaker for the first day.
Just pick a color,
any color.
Say green. Like
that stupid owl.
It haunts you.
Green is not your favorite color.

Eres un estudiante de primer año.
You are a freshman.
Everybody knows it
and they all
hate you for it. Except

the other freshmen.
They are just like you.
But they don't have a
348 day streak.
Because, after all,
they're only freshmen.

No hablas con nadie.
You don't speak to anyone.
No one but
that stupid owl,
the collection of
stupid pixels
that harasses you
to learn Spanish.
Maybe if you do
your lessons, you will
know another language
that you won't
speak to anyone in.

¿Cuándo estarás bien?
When will you be okay?
Day 365?
Day 416?
Day 573?
You don't know
a lot of things.
You still feel
like you don't
know Spanish.
All you know is
that now,
on day 639,
you're doing
better. So
maybe two years
is when you will,
finally,
feel okay.

Dar gracias.
Give thanks
to Duolingo
for giving you
consistency
and your friend group
a common enemy.
Thank it for
the virtual
high-fives and
the stupid quests.
Thank it for
your sanity.

Chicken Nugget (watercolor), Sophia Turturro

ANTONIO CUEVA

Streetpreacher

I'll be a street preacher for the new era,
pretty please,
holding up signs saying
'You Are Loved'
and 'You Will Be Saved'
with no fine print.
Come as you are
and come with whoever you'd like
and come however you like—
as long as it's consenting.

I'll be a street preacher for the new era
come to hear the good news?
We'll fight for you
and love with you
and spend our time
learning what it's like to live
in a new age
where fear doesn't govern
and neither does God
nor does a fear of Godlessness,
the word heathen rendered defunct.

We chat, we jive
and swap our spit under summer moons
that glow our skin like fireflies
but they never flicker out,
not to you and not to me.

There was a time when we seemed doomed
the woes of seething street preachers and signs
within the clutch of wind-chapped fingers
blocking you and me from the corner store
reminding me of a past I longed to forget
and proclaiming we had to be saved
—your green eyes
and your body like an angel—
we realized we already were.

Overdose

Close your eyes,
beautiful boy.

Mine weep
while mind's eye
imagines you.

When chartreuse
was the color
I used to describe your iris,

now,

it makes the doses go down

easier.

White oval
scored into halves
not quite deep enough
to break—

Vicodin.

Take the pain away.

Nine of the ten milligram pills
is lethal—

I leave only seven in the translucent,
caution orange,
child-proof container.

You're welcome.

I love you.
I love

you?

Should I call you by your first name or do I say:

Hi,
Vicodin.
I don't believe
we've met,
but

my lover is in love with

you.

The Exurbian Dream (35 mm film), Faith Mikolajczyk

ZOE LAVALLEE

Serenading Flesh

The first time I cut myself was with a mint-green plastic floss pick. The type that the dentist gives you in a small bag after they tell you to floss more. The ones with the sharp pick at the end designed to dig the plaque from the crevices of your teeth. Meant to expel bacteria from your mouth and ensure good oral hygiene.

The second time I cut myself was with a piece of sea glass in the glass bowl that sat on top of the upstairs toilet. I dragged the rough edge over the flesh of my thigh, but didn't manage to leave much but a small, stinging scratch. I reveled in the sting and for that moment, it was enough.

I tried an old pocket knife my dad had given me. The blade was basically rounded. It didn't do much. He didn't know that his gift had been used as a vessel for my own self-hatred.

I soon upgraded to a butter knife. I felt like a thief in the night, sneaking into the kitchen drawer to slip the knife up my sleeve. It only felt like a mission to me; no one would have batted an eye if they saw me grabbing something as insignificant as a butter knife.

I sat in my bedroom and took the butter knife out of my nightstand drawer. I ran my finger over the dull, jagged edge of the blade. I pressed it to my wrist and pushed down, dragging the knife's small teeth over the tender skin. I pressed down over and over, eventually forming an angry red line. Staring at the knife meant to be dripping with syrup, I instead saw traces of my pain.

Eventually, a mini Exacto knife came into my possession. I have no memory of where it came from, but it was the most effective tool I had used thus far. It danced into my hand and seduced my fingers. The blade was the Sirens and my skin the sailors. The sweet serenade of bare flesh begging to be painted on. *Please mark me,* it whispered, *show me your agony, breathe me your sins.*

I let the cool metal glide over my skin like my mother skimming the top layer of cream off our milk.

I gathered up my internal pain and forced it to the outside. Please look at me. I wore short sleeves in gym class and nobody looked at me. They didn't see, or they didn't want to. Besides, all I had managed to do was make my arm look like I swung it through a bramble patch. There were no deep gouges or trickling wounds. There were only half-committed attempts at pleading with the world to see me.

When I was a child, I often felt a well of guilt bubbling in my stomach. There were times in which I was sad, too sad, and I had no valid reason as to why. Unlike many of my friends, my parents were not divorced. In fact, they loved each other very much and still showed their love to each other in a way that often dissipates in long marriages. They were incredibly supportive of me and my younger sister, telling us they were proud when we brought home good grades or won an award at school. I was extremely close with my little sister, feeling that she was more of my twin rather than two years younger. We would spend hours in imaginary worlds, needing nothing but each other's company to fill our time.

My family was steadily middle class, sometimes dipping lower, but seldom revealing that fact to me or my sister. We went on vacation to Florida, we got new clothes for the first day of school, and our Christmases were plentiful. We lived in a small, safe town. We were liked by others in our community. On the surface, I had absolutely nothing to complain about.

My friends talked about fathers who left them on the side of the road in a fit of anger, fathers who cheated on mothers and put their children in the middle, mothers who got pulled over for DWIs while their child was in the car. My parents had never yelled at me. They read to me when I was little and stayed in my room until I was ready to go to sleep. They played with me. They parented.

I wanted something to be wrong in my life, so I could have a reason for feeling the way I did. I didn't yet know about chemical imbalances. I was unaware of the mental illness essentially spilling out of both sides of my family. I was unaware that while I was growing up and feeling lost, my grandmother and uncle were squatting in our old house. That my parents filed a restraining order because my uncle threatened to kidnap my sister and me. That my loving grandparents had made my mother's adolescent life miserable. That my father's adopted side of the family saved him. That there was deep-rooted generational trauma overflowing in my veins. That I was the way I was for a reason, though those reasons hadn't yet revealed themselves to me. I had a

sixth sense when I was young that I was on edge for a reason. I knew there was something wrong, I was just too young to be exposed to it all.

Trauma is genetic, and my parents had enough for all of us. They wanted better for my sister and me, and because of this, they tried to be the most exceptional parents there ever were. Trauma can sneak up on you. I think that maybe it snuck up on all of us.

As I got older, the bubbles of guilt turned acidic and ate through my insides. Why was I always so on edge? Why could I never breathe? Every time my parents were late to a soccer game, I was convinced that they were dead on the side of the road with our car burning beside them. Fear came along with the deep sadness emanating from my core. I did not understand myself. Why did I want something to be wrong with me so badly?

This past summer, my mother and sister traveled to Switzerland on a school trip, and brought me back a Swiss army knife with my name engraved on the front; a classic tourist souvenir. I said nothing. I smiled at my sister and thanked her. *Why are you giving me this?* I wanted to scream, *why are you handing me all that taunts me?* I had never directly told her about my relationship with knives, but my mother knew. She knew, and she thought it was fine to put it in my hand. The smile on my face felt plastic. I felt sick. Yes, I was doing so much better. Yes, I had been in therapy for three years and was almost one year clean. It felt like a test that my mother was unaware she was giving: *Are you better yet?*

I told my boyfriend about it. He told me to get rid of it. I said I would. I didn't.

A month or so later, he asked me if there were any knives in my apartment, and I pulled out a small blade. I kept it hidden like a security blanket. A just-in-case. A last resort. He told me to get rid of it and reminded me that I had promised before that I wouldn't have knives around me. He told me that if it happened again, we were done. I didn't let the tears fall. Would he say the same thing to a heroin addict? I watched him inhale sickly sweet-flavored nicotine and blow a cloud around us. We all have our addictions, don't we?

When I traveled home for a funeral, my mother had laid out the Switzerland souvenirs that I hadn't taken with me to school. "You forgot these." *No, Mom, I really didn't.* There was a keychain, a small bag with the country's flower, and the knife. I hadn't even remembered where I had put it, how had she found it?

I picked up the knife and flipped it open. The current state of my life was dismal. My great-grandmother had died, and while that in and of itself was sad, it was not unexpected. However, the familial chaos that ensued was exhausting, and I was old enough now to hear the conversations and nod along.

I edited her eulogy. I stood at the front of the church and read words from the Bible that meant nothing to me. Hardly anyone in the family stepped up, so I did.

I ran my finger over the sharp blade. It was clean, it wasn't dull, it was perfect. The skin on the back of my wrist was screaming at me, begging me. *Caress me*, it screeched, *let me take your pain*.

The blade kissed my flesh but did not bite it. I put it down, shuddering. I wanted someone to tell me they were proud of me. I had to settle for myself, for my unmarked skin.

There are so many stories I could tell. Stories with pages of backstory and context. There are reasons upon reasons that I have dissected in therapy. Observing myself and my actions like a specimen, *why am I the way I am?* There are times that I am so grateful for the life I have that it is hard to believe I could ever hate it or myself. I see my privilege spell itself out to me, and the guilt from my childhood sneaks back in.

We all hurt. We probably always will. And sometimes it will pull us under and we will fight not to drown. I have days where I remember the darkness, the all-consuming blanket it threw over me. I remember why I serenaded my flesh with violence, and I consider doing it again. I crave the release.

Then I am reminded of how circumstances change, and how quickly. I think about days when I smile so hard it hurts, in the most beautiful of ways, and my side cramps up from laughing too hard. Pain can be lovely. I think about the people who care for me, genuinely, and it shocks me a bit how many faces flash through my mind; the same mind that told me I was worthless, that everyone hated me, that they were better off without the constant drag that bore my name.

I hurt to feel and I feel to survive. I hope you do not understand.
But if you do, try to let the sun sing you a lullaby. Find other ways to scream.

KAY MANCINO

I drop baby teeth

the same way I lose friends
and lovers and children,
shut surface opens when
bitterness stretches out
my gums. Gross pieces replaced,
shifted, loosened, twisted,
yanked by a skinny string. Bodies
regrow when I sleep. Mothers
sink down to babies. Clauses
die, commas give birth
to things final.
It feels
final—
the holding, the drifting, the dying.
The feeling
of a ghost resting
beneath my tongue.

The day I learned to walk

He held out his palms
for me, waiting;
my tiny insect
fingers squirmed
inside a hot jar of honey
and pulled
at the saccharine.

> He picked me up, dangled me by
> my feet, shook all the sweetness
> out of me. Knocked on hollow
> baby bone with his knuckles.
> Carved me open with the claws
> of God's First Man starved of
> fruit, shy & forbidden. Spat out
> my seeds. Told me I was bitter.
> I crawled all over. I crawled

to church and climbed
on the pews. I crawled
to my bed, bled out
on my mattress.
I crawled into the arms
of a woman who told me

I looked pretty
on the ground.

She slipped me new skin,
watched me crawl into it.
Spread herself open. Let
me creep inside. Wiped between
my legs with a warm towel.
Held my hips with the desperate
grip of Saint Jude. Gathered me
in. Swallowed my shame.

I take a step forward, like
newborn calf,
like wilted woman,
like shriveled fruit untouched
by the sun. She
weeps for my skinny
legs and my insect fingers.
She weeps for me with
her palms out. She opens
them wide. She shrinks
me to honey.

Plaything

We were once six, and then seven, and
then nineteen. We blink and
it's Christmas. Already, it's
snowing. Already, it's too frigid
to prance outside naked. We feel
the wind bite down
on the parts of ourselves we despise
but want so badly to love
that we bear them to each other
anyway. We stare into the reflections
of us that wear a different face
but weep all the same.
        One year ago, I did not know him.
        Ten years ago, I knew her so well.
I ask him what song he listens to
after he argues with his father and
she tells me she likes the private sound
of her own heartbeat best,
the rain piercing her skin,
the pricking of a sewing needle,
the harvesting of a home in her ribcage.
        It calls to me, then, in a quiet voice,
                it happened to me, too.
        I hold my ear to his chest
        and take in all the worship.

The Headless Skater Girl (mixed media: acrylic and a transfer process), Makayla French

MOLLIE MCMULLAN

Curse of the Ninth

Virginia is born in 1947 in the middle of a blizzard when the storm of snowflakes are so dense that the hospital room is coated in a film of blue shadows. Her mother curses the entire night, red-faced, and sweaty. Even after Virginia appears from between shaking legs, her mother refuses to let her husband into the room. Virginia hears this story later, how her mother was too afraid to tell her husband that the child they prayed for was a girl. Virginia wonders why her mother didn't just leave her father then.

Virginia's father is absent for the majority of her childhood. After a series of miscarriages her mother suffers through, he moves into the bedroom at the other end of the house, only appearing at six o'clock for dinner before turning the radio back on and drafting up blueprints for his current project. He never says what he's working on and she never asks, nor does her mother.

When Virginia is seven, her mother hires a piano teacher and retires to the main bedroom, where she smokes Chesterfields and watches the walls yellow while her daughter learns to elongate her fingers, to make mistakes without crying, to smile without teeth. Virginia knows the ins and outs of every music sheet before she knows her mother's favorite color. It's purple, but exists nowhere in the home. For Mother's Day, she makes a card with pressed and dried purple anemones and presents it to her mother with a proud grin. Her mother places it on the windowsill, allowing the light to leech seemingly impenetrable color from the construction paper, which exposes the numerous passes of the glue paste that had dried to the card.

Virginia has fourteen summers before her father dies from a sudden heart attack. In a rare moment of honesty, her mother says that they're better off. They spend her fifteenth summer up in Maine, where the two rent a bungalow for the week and lick identical ice cream cones before they can melt down their chins. For a week, Virginia wakes smiling and immediately shucks on

her bathing suit before breakfast. She swims in circles in the ocean, waiting for her mother to dip a toe into the foam that gathers on the shoreline. Her mother never swims, though she bathes in sunlight in an area where she can keep an eye on Virginia despite her daughter being old enough to swim on her own.

Her junior year of high school, Virginia falls in love with a tall boy named George. He's a year older, and by their first anniversary is already in college pursuing an engineering degree. She makes scrapbooks for him, borrows lace and glitter from her best friend, Ruthie, and stains blank pages with kisses using her mother's Avon lipstick in the shade "Wild Honey." She finally understands the other girls who squeal over the half-baked boys in the hallways. She wants George's eyes on her all at times. She wants to search the planes of his hands until she can read them like braille. Virginia graduates from high school as valedictorian and credits George in her speech for being her guiding light. Her mother scowls in the audience, arms crossed over her chest.

Virginia moves into Willimantic State College when the viridescent leaves burn to orange. She decides to study education, figuring she can make a living being a music teacher. One day, while navigating through the hallways in the arts building to avoid her roommate, she hears a melody of clarinets and trumpets, a sound so bright she can see their conjoined resonances gleam. She gains the courage to make herself known to the artists before her nerves tell her to turn and run, and finds a group of five people who all look at her like they've been caught red handed. Virginia fumbles through an apology, telling them she heard them and they sounded simply magnificent and she'd love to play the piano with them sometime but if they say no that's okay too. The leader, a pretty red-haired girl, laughs and says being discovered was inevitable and she'd love for Virginia to join them on a trial basis. Virginia leaves with a smile on her face, and comes back that Friday with a book of sheet music. She plays with that same group every week—with the exception of the week she was sick with the flu—until she graduates.

George proposes to Virginia when she graduates from a college twenty miles from her childhood home–though he promises she'll never use her degree in education. She finds a lacy cream gown with long, ballooned sleeves and wearing it, understands what it's like to feel supremely beautiful. In a short veil, Virginia marries George in the courthouse on Main Street in front of a small audience and together they move into their first home in Windham Center, a nice county in which to raise their future children. They buy a beautiful sage green house on a corner lot that welcomes the couple inside and promises to never let them go. Virginia spends a lot of time outside in the garden, stroking the wilted stems of her daffodils. George never mentions the flowers, though the neighbors have a lot of positive things to say. The women coo at the hyacinths and offer advice about the best type of soil to plant

hydrangeas in. Virginia likes what they have to say, though sometimes she wishes the women would talk about something other than their married lives.

Virginia gets pregnant within the first year of their marriage when she's twenty-four. She gives birth to a daughter on the cusp of spring, and when her daughter takes her first real breath, Virginia vows to teach her how to play the piano, or perhaps pay for string lessons. She wants her to be soul-beautiful, not just pretty. Her daughter is destined to be better than her. Virginia sees the entire world in her daughter's wrinkled palms. She finds a grand piano at a music shop downtown and tells George she'll never ask for anything else in the world. Just this one thing, just this one time. Monday through Saturday, while George is at work, she sets up her daughter in a bassinet behind her and interrogates the piano keys until she is certain her daughter knows every note, every chord.

Virginia has two more children with George before telling him she's done having his children. Her marriage starts to crumble after her youngest is born, though it doesn't collapse completely. The baby wails all night and disturbs the older kids, and George most of all. More often than not, George sleeps at his office, slumped across the coffee-blotched sofa he found on the side of the road. Virginia picks at the stains on her shirt, smoothing over her hair as she shuffles through the darkness of early dawn in the bedroom. When she walks into the bathroom, she finds a towel and covers the mirror. She longs for George to come home, to wrap his arms around her the way he used to at night. Virginia has shriveled underneath the lens through which George looks at her. She gets back into bed and stares into the dark walk-in closet until the sun scorches her dry eyes through the window.

When her children are all old enough to be unsupervised, Virginia plays Beethoven on summer weekends, fingers feverishly probing the piano keys, never fumbling, while her children play in the pond out back. Her husband comes home from work, but she pays him no mind just as he does her, navigating the first movement of "Moonlight Sonata," bent over the piano in prayer. When night falls and the children are back from their adventures, she wrestles them into their beds, smells the cherry-scented detangler on their scalps, and tells them to dream of birds. As she brushes back her son's hair, she tells him to imagine a hummingbird nestled in the shell of a giant honeysuckle, its belly full. Imagine the absence of hunger. Imagine being able to fly. Her son giggles, bookended between a dream and consciousness.

"People can't be hummingbirds, Mama. You know that!" he exclaims. Virginia smiles.

After George leaves her in '89, she finds a job working at an art supply store where she is paid five dollars an hour. She unloads the truck with her coworker, Irene, breaking pink nails on boxes and boxes of oil paints and brushes and colored pencils. One day, while sorting the display of art portfo-

lios, she accidentally scratches one. Her manager does not fire her, but takes from her pay until he's reimbursed. It takes two weeks of shifts to pay off the damage. She can't find it within herself to apologize to her son about the lack of birthday presents, but bakes a cake using leftover ingredients from the thinning pantry. As she watches her son blow out the birthday candles, waxy smoke in her face, she imagines her home going up in flames. She feels guilty later for the way the image of her charred body brings relief.

Virginia reconnects with Ruthie—who goes by Ruth now. The two share vodka tonics at the dive bar in Storrs, leaning together in a two-man huddle to drown out the college students stumbling through the fifth karaoke rendition of "Friday I'm in Love." They laugh until they cry, gossiping about their old choir teacher and their children, falling out of their chairs when the alcohol turns coherent thought into giggles. Ruth closes out their tab before they spill into a shared cab and wind up at Ruth's place. When Virginia wakes up the next morning, she eats breakfast with Ruth in silence. The cornflakes stick on her too-dry tongue, which the tang of orange juice does nothing to solve. Their friendship has been dulled by sobriety. Virginia wonders when it became so hard to have friends, or perhaps when she became so unlikeable.

Most of Virginia's children have families now. Her daughter has two children who seem to never leave their mother's orbit, circling her as though she were the sun. Her son adopts a beautiful little boy with his wife, and Virginia can tell from Facebook that they're happy. Her youngest son comes back home to live with her after a series of what he calls "uninformed" financial decisions. For three years, she watches him leave for work, though he never manages to leave the bedroom in her basement. The selfish part of her is happy. She feels her tether slip from her fingers every day. Virginia figures that if her son's here, if he always has a room here, then, at least someone needs her in some way. Every night, the two share a bottle of the cheapest vodka, sitting across from each other among the hum of the T.V. static.

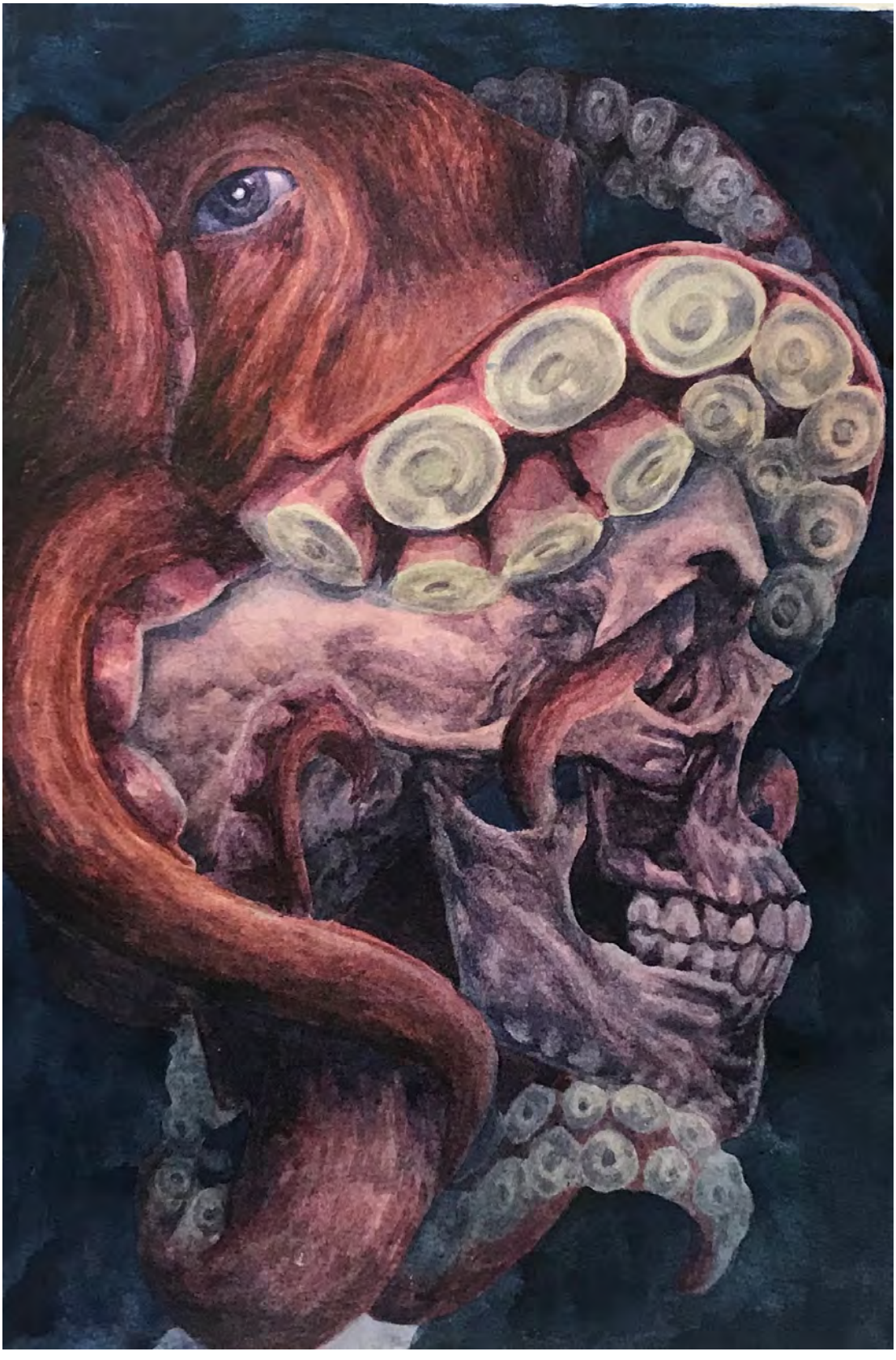
Years bleed into one another and Virginia begins to forget the notes of the piano. She spends an afternoon fumbling over flat keys and slamming on the pedals of the piano. She knits until her fingers atrophy into a stiff mess and the scarves unravel. She stops visiting her grandchildren, having nothing to offer except herself. Virginia can't stand her daughter's husband anyway, so she decides that it's for the best. She watches cooking shows and shouts into a sour glass of chardonnay when the chef adds too much spice. It's the most she talks all day. At night, Virginia stumbles into bed and pulls a pillow to her chest, trying to soothe an ache that doesn't seem to have a remedy. She listens to the crickets haunt the night outside her bedroom window, how they scream until the birds wake.

Virginia can't leave her recliner anymore without help, and dispatches her son at 7:30am every day to make a screwdriver and microwavable Jimmy

Dean breakfast sandwich. She eats half every morning and requests that her son leave the other half outside for the black cat that slinks around behind the trees in the front yard. Virginia won't eat again until the next morning. The process repeats itself until she falls three times in one day, and the paramedics tell her she has to come to the hospital. When she says no, they refuse to listen.

All of her children come to the hospital at varying times. Her daughter is the second to arrive, though she comes all the way from the West Coast. Virginia can't look at her from where she lays in the bed, fluorescents surrounding her daughter's head like a halo. Virginia wants to scream. She wants to get violent, wants to spit on the nurse's face and demand to be transported back to the safety of her worn recliner. But she does nothing. Virginia closes her eyes, ignoring the ways her children gasp after hearing about her liver, how it's a miracle she's lasted this long despite the drinking. Somehow, however, she finds her way home.

When she's seventy-six, the hospice nurse turns on Mozart. Virginia yells at her daughter to be quiet, silencing her oldest's farewell. She turns her head, good ear pressed away from the flat pillow. She raises a limp, yellow arm and slowly wiggles her fingers to the tempo. Violins whine and dip in the bedroom air, coming to an impressive and devastating crescendo before ceasing completely.



The Tickler (watercolor), Sophia Turturro

JESS MARINARO

Sarah Freligh's *A Brief Natural History of Women*: A Review

Sarah Freligh's collection of flash fiction *A Brief Natural History of Women* is a kaleidoscope of snapshots from women's lives set in and around Detroit, Michigan. This collection exists as "a post-Roe book that recalls the bad old days pre-Roe" Freligh said in an interview with novelist Leslie Pietrzyk. Each flash fiction piece leaves readers with an acute sensation of longing to know these women, but for most we only get a glimpse into a few moments from their lives. The collection meditates on grief in many forms; from the death of a brother in "Other Tongues" to dealing with televised trauma in "A Brief Natural History of Law and Order." Despite this, there are many ways in which this novel challenges the notion that to be a woman is to perpetually suffer. It argues for women to be loud and unapologetic in their pain. It argues that community and resilience are true markers of womanhood. It argues that grief is not isolated, and that the most human thing we can do is share our grief with each other.

The collection begins with one woman's individual grief over her brother's death in "You Come Here Often." The specificity in the details and the use of second person brings us close to this woman, adopting her grief as our own. From there we are given a guide through which to navigate a more collective notion of girlhood and womanhood in stories like "A Brief Natural History of How it is to be a Girl" and "A Brief Natural History of Lipstick." Here we

see many revelations related to female bodies, sexuality, and what it means to become a woman. The stories slip in and out of specificity, but they always stay open enough to allow the reader to feel they are a part of each life we see careening by us. The collection does not follow a single narrative but rather provides many short explorations of narrative that build on top of eachother with both associative and direct connections. For example, the bar in "You Come Here Often" is, "always tuned in to a *Law and Order* episode" linking it to the normalized violence towards women that is explored in the later story "A Brief Natural History of Law and Order."As the collection progresses, all these small threads weave themselves together into an incredibly intricate fabric.

I find it striking and poignant that even in a collection dedicated to women, a story titled "A Brief Natural History of Our Fathers" should show up. This story, along with many others, first presents an idealized image of traditional gender roles and then with strong, poetic language, Freligh quickly strips away the veneer to reveal the belly of the beast: "Our fathers are *men*. What our mothers say when we ask why our fathers never cook or change diapers…Some of our fathers die drunk in head-ons or face down on the factory floor, their rotted hearts knotted as pine trees. Some of our fathers carry their coffins and try not to cry." Freligh's observations of masculinity are like a hot spotlight directed at these issues. Dedicating a story in this collection to a discussion of the way patriarchy has shaped male suffering feels both surprising and completely necessary at the same time. I was not expecting to see it here, and yet without it, the collection would feel incomplete. "A Brief Natural History of Our Fathers" utilizes the unique collective "we" and "us," the first-person plural, to tell the story. Freligh does this in other places too, such as "Girl Talk," "All We Wanted," and many of the "A Brief Natural History of…" stories. The result of this choice is a feeling of collective understanding. The reader is being roped in with these women, and in a way we become them as we read. This can be said for Freligh's use of the second-person perspective as well, which is used in stories like "A Brief Natural History of Law and Order" to bring readers more directly into the lives of these women. Suddenly we are being stuffed in a body bag and our dead body is being autopsied. In a moment we become the overworked mother in "Oh, the Water" and the burden of her decision to leave is now ours to bear too. In this way Freligh constantly reminds us that other peoples' grief is not separate from ours, as much as we may like it to be.

Along with a masterful manipulation of perspective, Freligh's use of metaphor creates throughlines that connect stories that may seem otherwise unrelated. A great example of this is the language surrounding cars and automobile machinery that can be found throughout the collection. In some places it's obvious, such as the story "A Brief Natural History of the Automobile," in

which she uses the car to compare and commodify women: "You're no longer a sports car but a utility vehicle whose body is chipped and dinged," or when referring to an affair, "You understand completely. Your husband has always wanted a Mercedes, now he's found himself a good used one." However, cars crop up in many of the other stories in more subtle ways. The woman in "A Brief Natural History of Babies, Because" conceives a child in the back of a car, and the fathers in "A Brief Natural History of Our Fathers" are compared to "headlights on a wall, there and gone." The car imagery that haunts this collection seems to often be associated with the disconnect between what we expect of ourselves and what we actually become. There is a sense of just trying to survive, and doing what you have to to get by. It also has a masculine connotation and reinforces how traditional gender roles often push men and women to their limits.

Freligh's acute precision with language allows much of her prose to feel like poetry. In this way the collection almost seems to inhabit a liminal space between genres–it has a hand in everything. I think this perfectly conveys the personality of the collection. There is a refusal to compromise the women's voices, and through the diversity of stories, a refusal to be boxed into any concrete narrative. This refusal is what sets this collection apart. Stories like "The Thing with Feathers" are candid about the fear that lurks in the ugly shadows of womanhood. The title's reference to Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the Thing with Feathers", sets up the reader to expect an uplifting message of perseverance, but that's not exactly what we get. As the narrator confesses her sadness to a stranger on the street, she shares a story of a woman named Denise in her support group saying what she is grateful for, "*I'm alive,* Denise said." This strikes a chord with the narrator. She says she is grateful she doesn't have cancer, and at times she almost wished her life did have a set expiration date so that she could be done with "the business of living." Essentially, she lands on the thought, "I'm bankrupt. I'm alive." Here Freligh refuses to romanticize suffering and instead cuts to the core of the feeling. Like Dickenson, Freligh embraces hope, but she acknowledges the limits to it as well. Hope does not have to be a mighty bird, and sometimes all it *can* be is a simple affirmation of endurance.

In our interview with her Freligh describes "A Brief Natural History of the Girls in the Office" as the story that inspired the title, and it isn't hard to see why. Coming in at the end of the collection, its focus on female camaraderie shines a light on the way women bond over shared grief. The story follows a group of work friends who check in with each other as they grow older and life attempts to break their spirits. "A Brief Natural History of Girls in the Office" feels like a cornerstone story in this collection. It emphasizes the resilience that can be found even within mourning over painful life experiences, "The few of us who were left started bowling together on Wednesdays, pretending

the pins we scattered were second wives or the exes who were late again with the support." This resilience exists because of community. It is found in break rooms and bowling alleys, and readers are inclined to think about all the other places they've known this camaraderie to exist in; salons, kitchens, bar bathrooms, and college dorms to name a few. This isolated example of female friendship ends up transcending its own individual circumstances and, like every story in the collection, illuminates the power women hold in standing with each other against the relentless pain of life.

The last story of the collection "Mad" seems to bring us full circle, back to the woman we first sympathized with in "You Come Here Often." The narrator's aspirations are crumbling and "her heart is a stone" as she mourns her brother. The story ends with a mandated therapy appointment in which she is asked to draw what she thinks heaven looks like. With crayons she depicts a bar filled with plants and bird cages, comparing the birds' beautiful singing to her late brother's voice. Joe, her therapist, suggests, "*Why don't you open up the cage?*...so she does. And oh, what a wild bird can do when set loose in doors." This bird motif calls back to "The Thing With Feathers" only this time the bird's wildness is big and destructive. This comparison also goes to show us how individual grief is intertwined with a myriad of other womens' experiences, culminating in one final thought: "Such madness. Such carnage." This final story ties together the entire collection and makes clear what Freligh wants to say about grief. Here the bird is still trapped indoors, causing wreckage–but she's a little more free than she was in the cage. She can breathe just slightly easier; she has the space to express her pain as messily as she wants. Here Freligh resists the traditional Western conventions regarding grief. There is no insistence on moving on, only the recognition of all the complex weight that grieving women bear.

In more ways than one, this collection delivers on what the title offers. It is brief, and therefore not all-encompassing, however it is unflinching in its depictions of the lives real women lead. As the cover art suggests, it is an accumulation of small, but powerful, moments that reveal something larger. Sometimes it is beauty or grief, and always there is solidarity. *A Brief Natural History of Women* succeeds at an improbable task by interrogating womens' grief and landing on a hopefulness that feels genuine and honest.

LILI GOURLEY

An Interview With Sarah Freligh

Sarah Freligh is the author of five books, including *Sad Math*, winner of the 2014 Moon City Press Poetry Prize and the 2015 Whirling Prize from the University of Indianapolis, and *A Brief Natural History of Women*, published in 2023 by Harbor Editions. Recent work has appeared in the *Cincinnati Review* miCRo series, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Sun* magazine, the Wigleaf 50, and in the anthologies *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction* (Norton 2018), *Best Microfiction* (2019-22), and Best Small Fiction 2022.
Among her awards are poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Saltonstall Foundation.

Gandy Dancer: *A Brief Natural History of Women* is an urgent and evocative collection of flash fiction that spans fifty pages. Grief, societal expectation, and rebellion against them are just a few of the many complications of womanhood woven throughout this collection. Can you talk about the challenges of writing such harsh truths?

Thank you for those kind words about my book; it's most appreciated. I started many of these stories in the early days of the pandemic, during a very quiet time in the world and in my life, so it was relatively easy to slip under and into the odd kind of reality that fiction requires. That initial silence would be punctured by the very noisy election and the aftermath, an unease that continued into the summer of 2022 when Roe v. Wade was overturned. I'm thinking that's maybe where the undertone of grief comes from: the notion that women are little more than vessels in which to conceive and bear children. So while my stories aren't overtly political, the characters in them

are women of varying ages at various times who are bumping up against this reality in some way of who am I, and what am I worth?

Gandy Dancer: Your title, *A Brief Natural History of Women,* has a very absolute tone about it—an assuredness. What drew you to this title? Was it a long process or did it come to you quickly?

Again, thanks so much for that as titles are very hard for me, especially book titles. In fact, the title of my last book of poetry, *Sad Math*, was gifted to me by a friend, a very good titologist. For this book, it was only after writing one of the later stories, *A Brief Natural History of the Girls in the Office*, that it occurred to me that one of the recurring tropes of the book is women at varying stages of their personal histories, as well as in the larger history of the world, from mid-twentieth century onward. *A Brief Natural History of Women* felt like a large enough container in which to put in all these characters, all their stories.

Gandy Dancer: Several of these stories employ the second person point of view, like the opening piece, "You Come Here Often," and farther in with "A Brief Natural History of the Automobile." This point of view is fairly rare. What makes it a good choice for these stories?

"You Come Here Often" began in second person and stayed that way, which doesn't always happen. I love revision, love trying on different points of view during revision. But the second person felt right for the subject matter—the narrator's reckoning with a brother's violent death—for how it provided a natural and necessary distance between the narrator and the subject matter, but also for how it collapsed the distance between narrator and reader. "You" becomes every reader; her tragedy is ours.

Conversely, nothing about "A Brief Natural History of the Automobile" came easily. I began writing "ABNHOTA" in the late nineties; the reason I know this is because I found an early version of the story in some electronic files that were pulled off a long-ago desktop computer—a GIGANTIC HP that took up my entire studio apartment—and the address on the story was that same studio apartment. So I must have been sending the story out for possible publication and eventual rejection.

Every couple years or so, I'd go back to the story and fool around with it. I started by spatchcocking the narrative into fragments and switching up the point of view from first to second, which felt much more doable, more sustainable, in fragments. In the fall of 2021, I was taking an online workshop with Sara Lippmann and I volunteered, dumbly, to hand out for the first round of critiques. This was a week before class started and I had nada, zip as far as anything prepped and ready and so I dove into some old files and unearthed this story. I'd written poetry for a number of years by that time and was able to see how the metaphor of the car could be expanded to encompass

the entirety of the narrator's life—i.e., she IS the car—and how that, in turn, allowed me to understand the change that's vital to a story: She's driven, but ultimately she gets to drive. I did a quick revision and the version that I handed out to the class was very similar to the story that *Smokelong* eventually published, the version that's in the book.

Gandy Dancer: As mentioned, *A Brief Natural History of Women* is a collection of flash fiction. There are, however, clear signs of your background writing poetry. Pieces like "Saginaw," and "Skinny Dip" read like prose poetry in their brevity and alliteration. How do you know if you're writing a poem or a flash story? How is the process different for you?

I see prose poetry and micro/flash fiction as a Venn diagram of intersections and differences. Those particular micros share lyric qualities with poetry, but ultimately they're stories—very, very short stories, but stories, nevertheless. My favorite definition of a story is that it's "a container for change" and in both those stories, something or someone changes from beginning to end—which doesn't necessarily happen in a prose poem. A prose poem is fueled by language and sound; a story is fueled by causality and change.

Gandy Dancer: This book provides vivid glimpses into women's lives. Of course, fiction is imagined, but more often than not, fiction is rooted in some kind of lived experience. Did you take inspiration exclusively from your own life? Or was this a culmination of shared stories and experiences from women you know?

A little of both, really. Early on, most of my stories were narrated by a character who was a little too much like me to be fictional. What might have been—what very well *could* have been—compelling fiction got mired in the cement boots of THIS REALLY HAPPENED. I didn't know enough yet to bend or abandon reality for the sake of story and because of that, the characters in my early stories never really get shook up and turned inside out emotionally, because who would do that to themselves? Janet Burroway famously wrote that in fiction, "only trouble is interesting," but at the time, the only trouble I wanted to encounter in my daily life was my checkbook being off a penny or two. As long as the character was a thinly veiled version of me, I couldn't let go and go there, go into the land of verisimilitude, the appearance of truth, where all fiction must live. And so, no story.

The more I write, the more I trust the imagination. I may think I have nothing when I sit down to write, but thinking isn't writing. I start typing or writing words in a notebook and find I'm writing about people I know but don't really know yet, and so I keep writing until I do. I'm writing, too, from a vantage point of being pretty settled in my life, so that I welcome any and all fictional mayhem. That's important, the old Flaubert dictum to be

"regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work."

Gandy Dancer: This collection has twenty-three individual flash stories. Was finding an order or sequence for the stories difficult? Did you need to omit some stories that ended up not that fitting with the rest? Or did you find yourself writing more stories to fill in gaps? Along those lines, what does your revision process look like? Did it continue while you shaped *A Brief Natural History of Women?*

Ordering this particular collection of short stories was much like ordering a book of poetry. There's no clear narrative arc, no through question as in a novel, but a collection of short stories—like a poetry collection—has to start someplace for the reader and that's up to the writer to decide. Natasha Sajé in her fantastic article "Dynamic Design: The Structure of Books of Poems," talks about "gesture" from the Latin "to carry" as a trope for organizing a book, that is, "How does the book carry itself, and how does it move the reader?" A great example of how a book's organization affects the reader's journey is Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, specifically the two versions, which—because of the order of the poems and the poems included—offer up two very different experiences for the reader.

The reader enters *A Brief Natural History* with "You Come Here Often," a story in which the narrator is still very much mired in grief about the recent, violent death of her brother, and ends with "Mad," a story in which the narrator, who may or may not be the same character as in the first story, is confronting that grief during a therapy session. There's been movement, then, toward a light, but we get the sense that she's still fumbling for the switch.
While there's not a definitive narrative arc in a collection of short stories, there's definitely a hint of a thematic spine here, much of it related to the age of the narrators: the reflective stories like "A Brief History of Lipstick" versus a story like "A Brief Natural History of the Girls in the Office" in which narrators age together over a lifetime of work. This trope only became clear when I started organizing the stories and I did write a few stories to fill what I saw were gaps in this dotted line of a narrative arc, as well as omitted a whole bunch. Lately, I've been writing speculative fiction based around climate change and what that's doing to the oceans and how we're all going to have to swim or die, but those stories are going to have to wait for the next collection, I guess.

Gandy Dancer: Finally, do you have a favorite story in this book? Are there any that surprised you during the writing or revision? What do you hope your reader gets out of *A Brief Natural History of Women?*

I like reading "Skinny Dip" a lot. I'm fond of "A Brief Natural History of the Girls in the Office," because I admire their spunk and would love to go

bowling with them and hang around for the after-bowl, and mostly because while writing that story, I started to see the collection as a whole, rather than individual stories.

As far as revision surprises, there are always surprises and many of them. Revision is really where the writing takes place, the discovery of the "about-ness" of something and how each detail, each action, how all the elements are rowing together toward that unity. Once those are nailed down, I can mess with the words—for sound, for image, for surprise. I read each story out loud to my cat Stewie, who blinks. I'm not sure whether that's good or bad.

Ultimately, I hope the reader will realize the richness of the short form. I don't want to leave the reader wanting more; I want what I give them in this book to be more than enough.

GRIFFEN LABIANCA

Little Eulogies

The funeral service was for my friend.

It lasted for nearly six grueling hours. Twelve if you counted the second day and the small eulogy given by the pastor of the church his family went to. I vaguely remembered him talking about his Sundays at church, as irregular and infrequent as many other middle class North Shore families on Long Island. In my family, church was a thing to laugh about, it was my brother whispering "Ooo hot," as he dipped his finger in the small bowl of water that sits at the entryway of every Roman Catholic church. It was my father joking about being struck by lightning if any of us walked into a church on Christmas. "Bad Churchgoers," my mother jokingly called us.

The house had been abandoned for as long as any of us could remember. It sat strangely on the corner of a neighborhood and reminded us of a haunted house from a Stephen King movie. Tall cypress tree with an abandoned tire swing and all. It was the summer of our freshmen year of high school, and the heat felt like you were sitting in a car with the windows up. Stagnant and windless. A pool sat in the backyard, pond scum overflowing the tarp that had slowly rotted away with age and changing seasons. Some of us joked about cleaning it up, skimming out the muck and coming here on our days off from whatever countless summer jobs we worked at. Deli counters, vet offices, pool lifeguards.

The boy who had scoped out the house, a friend of a friend, was a gambler driven by equal parts growing up poor around rich kids and growing up angry around poor kids. Six years later, his Instagram page reveals a man rounded out and softened up by time and work as a real estate agent. He's

married to his high school sweetheart who no doubt had a hand in flattening out the rough edges of his younger self.

Our friend group consisted of a hodgepodge of kids like this, athletes who didn't take sports seriously enough to make it to college playing, honor students too stupid to stay in class when they could skip and sit in the cafeteria. Smart kids doing dumb stuff because the dumb kids did worse. Troublemakers who never did enough to get more than a wagging finger from a teacher instead of a suspension or a fine.

The kid had found a way into the house through a back glass door, less lockpicking and more jangling an old, rusted door frame until it snapped open. The first thing about the house was the smell: it was fresh, rather than the mold and rot that most of us expected. It was clean, as if it had been robbed rather than thoroughly scrubbed down. Kitchen cabinets and drawers were pulled out, silverware stripped clean from its holsters, the only things left were plastic plates and wooden spatulas. It felt more like the memory of a house than one that anyone had lived in.

The living room, connected to the kitchen, was open and an old leather couch was torn up and tossed over. Some of us marveled at the ceiling where a chandelier dangled high above, and the stairs snaked around the whole of the interior up into the second floor. It looked like a house from a movie, all glowing in the hot summer daylight. There were six of us, and we walked around the house with a tepid worship as if we were in a church, careful not to disturb the cobwebs and broken glass crowding the corners of the rooms. The only one who wasn't careful was Mike. A broken leg earlier that year left him with a big black boot, so he stomped around the wooden floor of the house. Never mind the fact that he was a giant who had a knack for crowding up open places with all six foot four of himself; a height that is either accurate of how tall he actually was, or one clouded by the reverence of my younger self. It was hard in those days to tell what took up more of the room he was in, his body, or his laugh. Whenever he chose to laugh, it meant shaking the room you were in; it was a call, like those big Viking horns people used to blow through. It ordered everyone else in the room to laugh as well, not in intimidation, but because it felt wrong not to laugh along with him.

The funeral home was the biggest in our hometown, a necessity for the waves of people who came to pay their respects to Mike, and his family. At this time, it seemed to me that it would've been unusual for someone we knew *not* to be there. The line snaked around the halls of the building, people lined up, around tables and chairs, up the winding stairs that some of us joked reminded us of that old house we snuck into.

Anger shadows most of my memories of those two days. Anger at the adults, anger at our school, anger at ourselves, anger at Mike. It was a poison in me—more mist and fog than seething and red as it had been a week earlier. The first day was quiet. Those of us who were close to him had nothing left to say to each other, and those who felt they were close with him had no idea how to talk to us. It was nice in a way; misery was left to itself at the entrance of the big hall doors that lead into the room where his body would be. They were closed for the first hour, things getting set up, appearances getting ready. A part of me wonders now if that hour was more for us than it was for them, to prepare ourselves before we saw him for the first last time.

By the time I realized most of my friends had circled around me, leaving me alone and in the lead of the moshed crowd of people waiting, the doors had already begun to open. The man who opened them, a worker for the funeral home, was dressed in a tight collared penguin suit that looked a few sizes too big for him. At the time, I might've thought he was far older than any of us, but time and memory put him no older than any of us had been.

The few seconds before anyone made their way into the room were agony and lasted for an eternity. Everyone was breathing on top of each other, and despite the wilting summer heat of late August and the long sleeved tight buttoned suits we all wore, it somehow felt cold in the parlor. Eyes seemed to flicker between the door, to me, to the door, to me, to the door. Eventually, thought caught up with motion as I had already begun marching through the large double doors. Thoughts bled from me as panic churned in my guts. What came first? Respects to the family? Isn't there something to sign when you walk in? What about those little cards with the prayer on the back of an old photo of the deceased? It was too late for decision making by the time I realized I was sitting down with the others in a small bisection of the room, in a corner seat, away from his family, their backs turned as they sat on a red and green flowered couch that would've matched the interior design of an eighty-year-old woman's house.

Even as I think back on those grueling hours sitting and staring at the wood casket looming at the center of the room, I can't remember the face of Mike in that wooden bed.

The next hour or so in the abandoned house was equal parts exploration and graverobbing. Or at least, that was how it felt to us the longer we walked around. The family's history in the house became apparent, pieces of the inside were littered with the small memories of people who once lived there. As Mike and I were left to walk through the old turned-out bedrooms upstairs, the others looked through cabinets, closets, and the shed outside. Normally

he was loud, not in an obnoxious way, but his voice used to carry a weight to it that seemed to absorb my attention.

A lot of us were smart, or at least good students, but Mike was on a whole different level. Academic awards were piled high on tables and on walls in the office he shared with his father, a fact that I and the others learned years later when we visited his family after he passed. The office felt small and cozy, and his computer was still set up next to his father's. Posters of World of Warcraft and rap album covers were tacked up behind the monitor. It was the place where he spent hours playing Dota 2 with us online and yet in that moment it felt alien, a side of him that had been invisible between monitors and the static mic quality of TeamSpeak and Skype calls that lasted late into the warm hours past midnight on school nights.

In the old empty bedrooms upstairs in the abandoned house, books, toys, or anything not important enough to be carried away were left scattered across the floor or on top of empty open dressers. Mike had been quiet that day, a fact many of us never noticed until weeks later, he had been joking throughout our trip to the house, talking to Peter, a close friend who introduced me to Mike through our shared interest in Melee, a game we both attempted to play at tournaments. Only Mike's attempt was loose and fast, more a hobby than my own obsession with it. A fact I would learn later about Mike, through Peter, was that if he wanted to master something, it was only if time let him. Whether it was a video game, a sport, or Quantum mechanics; the only thing seemingly inexplicable to Mike was himself.

Mike slowly, and carefully, grazed his fingers over the journals and loose photos that sat on a faded pink nightstand next to a dust covered mattress. Despite his size he was gentle with the memories, a light blue journal or diary, its contents still a mystery now, as Mike refused to let anyone else read it. His jaw clenched tight in the way that said "no" and left no room for rebuttal. He left it to sit alone forever on the windowsill of the room in the sunlight. The photos that were scattered loosely on the floor were of a young girl. I couldn't place her age, possibly early high school, the same as us, but something about the pictures seemed ageless. The way the sunlight stained and discolored the photos, and the shirts and outfits of the girl and her friends in the photos couldn't be put to time, memories left scattered behind on the wooden floorboard of an abandoned home.

Little eulogies were spelled out everywhere in that home. In the master bedroom, old copies of Hemingway rested dusted and lonely in a drawer. Old beaten-up sneakers sat mud stained at the front door, laces chewed through, aglets cracked and frayed from what must've been a particularly busy dog. Small notches were carved alongside dates and names in the doorway of a bathroom, ages of heights lost to the fading of sharpie ink against time. Post-

ers of Justin Timberlake and Coldplay blanketed shoe boxes full of burned cd's with "Cassie's Mix" scribbled across the neon-colored plastic casings.

It was a house both left behind and completely forgotten by time. Only the sun and the rain and the dust left any measure of their age.

It took me nearly an hour to eventually get in line and give my respects to Mike's family. An hour more of standing in nauseating, gut churning anxiety. And then another hour after sitting alone with my friends in what felt like bleacher chairs near the casket. Teachers who knew us, or knew Mike enough to know us, came up and gave their respects to us. We quietly, or silently gave our thanks and they either left, or stayed long enough to talk to other teachers. Either about how horrible it all was, or how horrible they all felt for us, or how horrible they felt for Mike's family, or how horrible the ones closest to Mike must be feeling.

It was unique in a disappointing sort of way how people older than us spoke about death. Grief was never admitted, as if acknowledging your own pain was somehow selfish to the suffering of others. Perhaps that was the case, or perhaps the pain in which we felt lonely together was more than what the teachers or administrators or coaches felt. Or perhaps no one was ever really close enough to Mike to admit how upset they were. I didn't cry at either of the services. Neither did my friends who were close with him. Part of me wonders if it was because we knew how long Mike had been hurting for. Or maybe, it was because none of us felt we had the right to cry for him, as if none of us ever truly knew him.

Eventually we were chased out of the house by a neighbor in a pickup truck. We scattered from the innards of the house like rats from a hole and spread out across the neighborhood, sprinting, the pickup truck spewing black smoke like some beast from hell out to punish us. This was the fervor and panic that could only accompany the thoughts of kids who weren't really bad but had been bad enough to do something stupid. I ran alongside Mike, his big boot stomping and dragging through the pebbled, potholed street near my house. Eventually we made it to the front stoop of my house, both of our cellphones were dead, so we sat waiting for Mike's sister to pick him up after he used my home phone to call.

I've owed Mike a eulogy for nearly six years now after the pastor asked if anyone had any words they'd like to say, and I stood there silently. Too nervous or too weak to say anything. After a pause that felt too long, and a few words

spoken by the Pastor, they played the song "See You Again" on a speaker that had been wheeled out on an old plastic cart. Like the ones we used to have in grade school if we were about to watch a movie in class. In the awkward quiet of the funeral parlor, I laughed, only a chuckle loud enough for Peter to hear. Then he laughed as he felt it too. The tug of an old memory, both of us remembering Mike ranting and joking about how stupid he thought the song was late one night on a skype call.

The laugh felt easy, a little acknowledgment between us about our shared memory with him. It was a little memory, and as I remembered it, I began to remember the many hundreds we had made with him together. Easy memories that made me chuckle into the collar of my too-big dress shirt. quietly enough for no one else to hear. Memories of his laughing, or old jokes he made, or old arguments we had. Little memories that made me feel like a "bad churchgoer," laughing at my own little eulogies.

My time with Mike was filled with moments like this, moments where we were alone together but not lonely together. Sitting, talking, joking, or even arguing, but rarely ever silent with each other. The sun was going down in the way that late summer makes lovely, all deep orange, pink and lavender. Or maybe it was just going down normally, the sieve of time diluting my memories of Mike into abstractions of beauty that I might've wished for quietly to myself. We sat in the silence of a suburban neighborhood in July, young kids squealing and laughing from somewhere unseen, trees shifting in the wind as the heat began to break for the cool comfort of night. Just together, waiting. A part of me puts my hand against his, or rests my head against his shoulders, or just blathers out all the ways I feel about him but can't tell him.

The real me sits there quietly with him in the twilight before the dark sky rolls in with the night and all its stars scatter out like old memories against the floorboards.

About the Authors

Lauren Basile is a senior English (creative writing) and adolescent education major. Her post-graduation plans include finding a teaching job at the high school level and continuing to seek adventure in new places. Lauren's love for writing didn't surface until her high school years, but she has been writing ever since. When she's not writing, she can be found exploring the great outdoors or finding something crafty to create.

Leah Beecher lives in the beautiful and secluded little corner of New York State known as the Finger Lakes. While the region is famous for its wines and lakes, Leah seldom drinks New York State wine or swims in lakes, preferring Italian red wine and oceans. She is a mother of four daughters and has been married for over twenty years. Ever since she finished reading *The Secret Garden*, the summer she turned ten, she's known she had to write stories.

Madison Butler is a junior studying early childhood education and English at SUNY Geneseo. Her poetry explores womanhood, mental health, and relationships. When she isn't writing, she is spending time with her friends or doing something to express her creative side.

Kendall Cruise is a junior English (creative writing) and adolescence education major at SUNY Geneseo. When not obsessively revising their latest piece of writing, she can be found constructing hyper-specific playlists or on The Sims. They are a section editor for their college's newspaper, *The Lamron*, and have been previously published in *Gandy Dancer* and *Iris Magazine.*

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Makayla French is a current junior biology major at SUNY Geneseo. She uses art as a way to relax and escape from time. She loves to paint natural themes, and portraits. Her love of art began with her high school art teacher who always believed in her and gave her the opportunity to explore, develop, and display her work.

Ailie Kinnier is a senior at SUNY Purchase studying literature. She lives with her mom, her younger sister, her two cats, and dog. She would like to someday visit all fifty states, but until then, she loves Arizona because of the giant cacti.

Griffen LaBianca is an English (creative writing), environmental history alumni from SUNY Geneseo. He spent his time at Geneseo playing rugby, getting injured playing rugby, and writing sappy romance stories that, hopefully, will never see the light of day. He is currently working on publishing his first novel.

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Kay Mancino is a creative writing major pursuing her undergraduate degree at SUNY Purchase. Her short fiction and poetry have been published in several magazines such as *Italics Mine*, *Sandpiper Review*, and *Submissions Magazine*. In her spare time, she crochets and hangs out with her professor's fifteen-year-old dog, Willa.

Kaelin Martin is a queer, femme multimedia artist at SUNY Purchase. She is a senior political science major and visual arts minor. Their primary mediums include photography, poetry, music, movement, and collage. They also enjoy exploring other forms of visual and performance art such as printmaking, installation art, and sculpture. Their latest projects have been explorations of memory, movement, embodiment and the self.

Mollie McMullan is a junior at SUNY Geneseo. In her spare time, she enjoys chasing her dog around in circles and cutting up magazines for collages she'll never complete.

Sophie Mejia is a senior music education student at the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam. They have always had a passion for both the visual and performing arts. Sophie plays trumpet and loves to create art when they are not in the practice room preparing for performances.

Faith Mikolajczyk is a senior at SUNY Purchase studying photography and sculpture in the BFA program. Her photographic work is mainly analog, concentrating in 35mm film and alternate processes. Currently, her work focuses on themes of home and tradition, as well as the interrogation of the suburban landscape. Faith has had work in a few group shows, most recently *A Tale of Two Fatties* in the Forum Art Space at Purchase College.

Megan Moran is a sophomore English major at SUNY Geneseo. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, and doing her Duolingo lessons.

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Elianiz Torres is a junior English (creative writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. She started writing fiction in middle school and has since discov-

ered a love for poetry. Her writing often focuses on themes of family and womanhood.

Sophia Turturro is a junior at SUNY Geneseo. Her preferred medium is watercolor, but that's only because the IRS stole all her crayons. To this day, after several thousand dollars in legal fees, they still claim it was the wind.

Evan Youngs is an undergraduate student at SUNY Oswego, where they are studying journalism and creative writing. They have been published in the *Great Lake Review*, *Rain Taxi*, and *Brevity*. They also edit the entertainment section of the student newspaper, *The Oswegonian*. In their free time they enjoy hiking on gorge trails, watching *Jeopardy*, and shoplifting from supermarkets. They live in Vienna, New York.