

Reader's Companion  
*for*  
Justin Gardiner's  
***Small Altars***

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## ***Critical Praise***

"It's been a long time since I've read a book as raw and honest, as staggeringly, shatteringly sad, and, too, as wise and life-affirming. With *Small Altars*, Justin Gardiner offers his late brother, himself, and all of us that great gift of attention, the hero's favor of grace."

—**Joe Wilkins**, *author of Fall Back Down When I Die and When We Were Birds*

"In Justin Gardiner's deft hand, *Small Altars* explores one of life's most complicated relationships: brothers. In prose that sings and snaps, sentences that explore the small, intimate moments of life, Gardiner sustains an emotional throughline of exquisite beauty. Here we get childhood loves of the movies, of comic books, of superheroes—but perhaps the greatest insight the reader will feel by the end is that ultimate gift: love, in all its complication, between two siblings."

—**Taylor Brorby**, *author of Boys and Oil: Growing Up Gay in a Fractured Land*

"At its tender heart, Justin Gardiner's *Small Altars* considers death, yes, but the life of fraternal bonds, illness, and separation—all placed on the psychic altars kept for loved ones. The figure of the superhero, the notion of the Endgame itself echoes throughout this haunted essay. Told in illustrative fragments and movements, *Small Altars* elevates sound and reverberation from block-written-as-panel to panel. Mixing chronology, research into mental illness and cancer, this essay's blood circulatory system mirrors grief through its multivalent recurrences. In unassailable prose that only could be written by a poet, this tender reflection carves out space for two brothers that will endure well beyond these pages."

—**Rajiv Mohabir**, *author of Whale Aria and Antiman: A Hybrid Memoir*

"This thoughtful portrait of remembrance and grief is like nothing I've read before. I devoured the book in a single sitting, so compelled was I by Justin Gardiner's intelligent blend of research, introspection, pop-culture commentary, and family history. I hope you'll forgive this pun, but *Small Altars* is indeed a marvel."

—**Elena Passarello**, *author of Animals Strike Curious Poses and Let Me Clear My Throat*

## ***Biographical Note***

**Justin Gardiner's** books include *Beneath the Shadow: Legacy and Longing in the Antarctic*, published as part of the Crux Literary Nonfiction Series by the University of Georgia Press, as well as the poetry collection *Naming the Lifeboat* from Main Street Rag. In 2012-13, Justin served as the Margery Davis Boyden Wilderness Writing Fellow, sponsored by PEN Northwest. He is also the recipient of a Faulkner-Wisdom Gold Medal for Nonfiction and the Larry Levis Post-Graduate Award from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Justin's essays and poetry have appeared in journals that include *Blackbird*, *The Missouri Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Catamaran*. He is an Associate Professor at Auburn University, as well as the nonfiction editor of *The Southern Humanities Review*.

For more information, visit the author's website:

<https://justingardiner.net>

## ***An Introduction to Small Altars***

### ***Origin Story/Early Drafting—***

After my brother was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of cancer in 2016, I began working on a sequence of poems addressed to him that I referred to as “Superhero Elegies.” As children, the two of us were dedicated fans of comic books and superheroes—interests that my brother was to keep throughout his life—and I wanted to try and make use of the world of comics as a medium for exploring our evolving relationship, as well as the many mental and physical struggles he faced.

At a reading, I remember the poet Natalie Diaz—who often writes about her own brother’s struggle with mental illness—saying that she felt closest to her brother on the page. I loved the sentiment (as well as her poetry), but it wasn’t something that I could claim for myself. Perhaps because my brother’s life had always felt so far removed from the realm of poetry—as well as my own pursuits as a writer—my attempts to write about him had never seemed to bring him any closer into view. This isn’t to say that writing about my brother had not served other ends. It had helped me to articulate my own sadness and conflicting emotions toward him, for instance, but proximity had never seemed like part of the deal. So, in an attempt to overcome this distance or divide, I thought I’d try to shift the content of my writing more toward his interests. To meet him halfway, so to speak, and to invite him into a conversation that he might like to join, if only in an imaginative sense.

Over the next year I drafted about a half dozen of these poems, as well as outlining several others. Two of the poems—one about Wolverine and the other about Batman—found their way into my poetry collection, *Naming the Lifeboat*. That book had its own course to chart, however, and I worried that including too many of the superhero poems might lead it astray. It also seemed that, increasingly, these poems were veering more toward the sprawling waters of prose, and I wound up relegating the others to a drawer. But in the months after my brother’s death in 2019, I pulled those pages out again, and began to consider shaping them into a larger project. Ultimately, *Small Altars* is what came from this process.

### *Source Collage and Braided Structures—*

My first goal when teaching the lyric essay is to pull students away from writing straightforward personal narratives. To do this, I commonly assign my students two forms, or templates, to serve as prompts for their writing: source collage and braided structures. For the source collage essay, I ask students to incorporate a range of outside sources centered around a theme or subject matter; and for the braided essay, I ask them to weave together three or more distinct strands, requesting that at least one of their strands not be centered on narrative. Of course, these two structures are by no means mutually exclusive, and often in workshop I encourage students to consider ways to inhabit both forms inside a given essay. While not my intention early on, this is what I wound up doing with *Small Altars*.

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Good source collage essays tend to include different registers of sources—blending together “high” and “low” arts, the scientific alongside the poetic, the historical paired with the contemporary. Part of the joy of reading such works is seeing the range of the writer’s mind and perspective—how the connections they have shaped across different mediums engage us with their subject matter. My first book of nonfiction, *Beneath the Shadow: Legacy and Longing in the Antarctic*, was written with this template firmly in mind. I learned a lot through writing that book, but I felt ready to push myself in a different direction. And the bigger part of this—as I’ve already hinted at—was wrapped up with my subject matter. My brother was born with a borderline learning disability, he never finished college, and his interest in books never extended beyond YA fantasy. In my relationship to him, I often felt self-conscious of my bookish nature, my academic bent, as well as, perhaps, the whole endeavor of being a writer. As an early passage in *Small Altars* puts it: “I can imagine this as another essay entirely: quoting philosophers in place of superheroes, pulling in obscure books instead of Hollywood blockbusters. Yet what would that have to do with the person my brother was?”

I went so far, in fact, that in the early stages of drafting I made a rule that the only people I was allowed to quote were superheroes. And, for a while at least, this worked. It kept me from veering and helped to bring my brother closer into view. But in keeping my writing centered on the world of my brother, I was also distancing myself from it. This became especially clear to me when I started to write about Debussy's "Clair de Lune." Now, for as much as my brother liked superheroes, this paled in comparison to his feelings toward classical piano, so Debussy was fair game. And this really was the song that I latched onto in the months after my brother died. Sadly, as I write in the book, it was not until after his death that I learned this song was based on a poem by Paul Verlaine. Not that my brother and I would have had deep conversations about French Symbolist poets if I had known this earlier, but it would have been a point of connection for us, something I could have brought up when—as was often the case—I didn't know what to say to him. So this was a door that I could walk through, if I wanted to, not as a conversation-starter in our parents' living room, but at least on the page. It was a door not just to Verlaine but to Rimbaud and writing and my life as a teacher. All of this would remain secondary, of course, but it was a means for bringing my own voice more fully inside the essay. After I allowed myself to open that door, I found that there was more I had to say about the real focus of the book as well.

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When working with braided structures, an important craft element to consider is each thread's relationship to time. Does a given thread move forward chronologically or associatively? Does a thread operate inside of the structures of time or does it, in some way, step outside of this? And what does each thread's relationship to time contribute to the greater project/purpose of the essay?

Chronology, it seems to me, is often the enemy of creative pursuits. If you default to a linear straightforward narration then the story is no longer yours to control—it belongs to time. Of course, regardless of all our efforts, time really does win out in the end, but one of the joys of writing is to, however briefly, wrestle the controls away from that grim pilot.

At the same time, chronology can supply great forward momentum to a piece of writing, and it can help readers to navigate the associative leaps that come with working inside an ambitiously braided structure.

For my own purposes, I wanted to keep the scenes from the last movie I watched with my brother in chronological order—there was a narrative arc there that seemed preordained. I also decided to largely keep the hospital scenes from my brother’s last days in chronological order, as a sort of surrendering to time perhaps. But the memory sections dealing with my brother would be associative, moving from recent memories to distant childhood and everywhere in between. Finally, with the interstitial glossary-of-terms sections—which came about quite late in the drafting process—I chose to keep these largely timeless, to have the narrative progression come to a standstill before being dropped back abruptly into time as these sections came to a close. When an essay’s relationship to time becomes too consistent, it runs the risk of plodding, and I liked the fluctuations these choices created for the manuscript—how time would speed up then slow down, move in a linear fashion in some moments, then leap about in others. For me, these fluctuations also seemed to get at the heart of something important about the way we move through the world. As the essayist David Shields once wrote: “Our lives aren’t prepackaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, reality-based art splinters and explodes.”

### *On The Importance of Research and Collapsing the Strands—*

With regards to most subjects, I consider myself an eager though ultimately half-assed researcher. I’d rather know a little about a wide range of topics, I guess, than an exhaustive amount about two or three. And while I’m happy to read any number of books on a subject I’m trying to write about, I’m ultimately just searching for those details that I can make use of—or, for that matter, steal. Oftentimes it isn’t even facts that I am searching for in my reading as much as it is fresh imagery or available metaphor.

In the classroom, I often introduce creative nonfiction with two spectrums in mind: personal-public and narrative-lyric. I’ll even get out the dry erase markers and draw a diagram with

personal-public on the  $x$ -axis and narrative-lyric on the  $y$ , to show how these features can interconnect. (Incidentally, geometry is a subject that I generally choose to know *nothing* about, but I read somewhere once that the  $x$ -axis is known as the “axis of argument,” and the  $y$  as the “axis of values.”) Some essays choose to plant their flag firmly in one quadrant, while others opt to shift around or braid together threads that reside in different locations (the point where two axes intersect, by the way, is called the “origin”).

My own preference is for an essay that moves, with clusters of data points sprawled throughout the grid. I stress the importance of movement away and back to the personal in particular, and the hand motion I probably use most while discussing favorite essays involves my right arm riding flat and the left rising up and down above it like a mountain range. “The self must be decentered,” as poet Dean Young once said, “but constantly recentering.” That iteration might be a little too jumpy for me, but its insistence on movement is what I value.

*Small Altars* is the most deeply personal essay I have ever written—perhaps the most deeply personal essay I will ever write—but I also wanted to make sure I stepped back regularly from the intimacy of its narrative. At first, I wasn’t sure how to achieve this beyond jump cutting to scenes from the *Avengers* movie and other superhero segues, but as I delved more into my research, the idea of the interstitial glossary sections began to take shape. I liked the idea of layering together the vocabularies of comic books with the terminologies and diagnoses related to cancer and schizophrenia, the blending of different registers of thought and perspective that I hoped would come across as a sort of search for a universal language. Most of all, I liked the remove this guise or artifice gave me from the material being explored.

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As a proud child of the 1980s, I know that the mantra “never cross the streams” is important as a guiding principle of all parapsychological matters, including catching ghosts and/or writing lyric essays. But I also know that in the climactic moment when it comes time to slay the biggest, baddest marshmallow around that this is a rule that is meant to be broken.



As a reader and an editor, I love when an essay brings into focus seemingly disparate strands, how this raises the stakes of the writing, and makes us question their relevancy to one another. In the end, however, I want to feel that there is some compelling reason the writer has brought all of this together on the page. This isn't to say that I necessarily want everything tied together with ribbon and bow, and messier is oftentimes the richer approach. I'll happily track "an inefficient spider," as Alison Powell declares herself in an essay I have linked at the end of this document, but ultimately I do want to feel myself enmeshed in the tangle of a web.

"The strands always fit together," I like to tell my students as they embark on their braided essays, "you just have to figure out how." Some of these intersections can be finessed by the writer—through metaphor or transposing imagery and diction—but more often than not these intersections come about through discoveries in research.

Over the two years that I spent writing *Small Altars*, I read up on a wide range of topics—comic books, of course, but also the biographies of various composers and writers, the symptoms and treatments related to schizophrenia and cancer. Each of these threads held their own individual significance to the essay, but I still had to figure out how they would fit together to form a greater whole. Some points of connection were more expected than others. I was not surprised, for instance, to find that several of the writers and composers that I was writing about had died of some form of cancer, or that there were comic book plotlines that were centered largely on mental illness. In fact, these were connections that I had sought out. Other intersections, however, caught me fully off-guard. Like when I learned that India Ink—the preferred medium of cartoonists—is also used in pathology laboratories to mark tumor resection margins. To the reader, this may come across as a relatively small moment, an odd and fleeting coincidence inside the larger narrative, but it was a breakthrough moment for me as a writer. It helped me to believe that the strands I was working with really did intersect, and in important and mysterious ways. And it wasn't a rare encounter with the muse that provided me with this epiphany, it was a Wikipedia entry. Such moments can't take the place of the hard work of writing and revision, but they can help instill you with the belief that what you are working on will, eventually, arrive at its true destination.

## *On Composition and Ordering—*

My brother died at the end of August 2019. I was on the job market that year, teaching a 4-4 load. Even if I had felt emotionally ready to write about his death, I didn't have the time. What I had was a drawer with a handful of abandoned poems, along with various notes I had scribbled down over the past two decades. To this, I slowly started to add things, without giving any thought as to how they would all eventually (hopefully) fit together. But a composition strategy that I had begun more or less out of necessity began to seem like the right approach. The small, unnumbered sections could recall the panels of a comic book, with the white space in between—the gutters, as it were—inviting the reader to fill in the gaps, imaging the details and sentiments that were left unsaid. I liked the stop and go nature of it, the way it allowed me to tell my brother's story from different angles and approaches. As a writer, all my formal training is in poetry, so working in small sections with white space is often more natural to me than settling into a continuous block of prose. And form—as the poets are always telling us—is most effective when it works as a metaphor for content, which I also felt taking shape. After all, I did not know my brother in some cohesive and sustained sense. I knew him in fragments, in a way that did not add up to any clear picture or resolution.

That summer, my wife and I moved to the countryside of west Georgia. Each day I'd take my folding camp chair down and sit it in our creek, where I would spend a few hours, writing one or two new sections for the book, and delaying—as much as possible—the impulse to place them in any sort of order. It was a good way to start feeling at home in our new life, and to work through the events of my brother's life and death. After I had written close to forty of these sections, I typed them up and cut them out, spreading them over the enormous desk that I had purchased for my new study—with money I'd recently inherited from my brother, thinking of it as a sort of last gift from him.

Writing the first draft of this book was a sad and difficult process for me, so I was determined to make the ordering of it a little more uplifting. I tried to have fun with it. I started by assigning a symbol for each of the major threads—sections with scenes from the hospital would get a circle,

for instance; while scenes from the *Avengers* movie or memories of my brother would get a triangle or square. Then I moved on to color-coding them in elaborate ways that I can't fully remember now. Sections that referenced superheroes were assigned a given color, as well as sections dealing with music or writing or schizophrenia.

After that, it was a lot of moving things around, rubbing together various sticks in hopes of creating sparks. Though sometimes, in place of a spark, there would only be a gap, and I knew that I would have to write a new section to fill that space. In the end, the book grew to over sixty sections.

In many ways, the process of ordering this book was a lot like putting together a puzzle, which was another activity my brother and I loved to do together back when we were kids. As a general rule of assembling puzzles, you keep the pieces spread out on the table between you, so that each person can grab whatever piece they want. But when we would get close to the end of a puzzle that we had spent untold hours on, when it seemed that any piece I picked up could be fit immediately in its place, my brother would often clutch a handful of the last remaining pieces inside one of his fists. At his own pace, and without help from anyone, he would set them down where they belonged.

## *Discussion Questions—*

- The brother depicted in *Small Altars* was clearly a lifetime fan of comic books and superheroes, but what are the author's own feelings toward the genre? What does the author's tone toward this material contribute to the book as a whole?
- Absolute fidelity to the truth is, perhaps impossibly, a demand that is often made of nonfiction writers. Yet there is one section of this book, on pages 25-26, that walks back some of the details of a restaurant scene from several pages earlier. Why is this section included? How does it make you reconsider the earlier scene? Does this change your relationship to the speaker in any way? How about your sense of the importance of honesty in works of nonfiction?
- Look back at a couple of the 'glossary-of-terms' sections of the book. What do you notice about the way they are structured? What do you think these sections bring to the book as a whole? How would it have read differently without them?
- At times in *Small Altars*, the author wrestles with what details to include about his brother's struggles with mental illness. As he writes in an early passage discussing Aaron's first breakdown, "But I don't want to say much of that time, not here." What is the source of this resistance? Are there other sections of the book where you see this tension or hesitancy resurface? By the end, do you feel like the author has painted a full portrait of his brother's life or do you think there are omissions—that he has left some things intentionally blurred? If so, to what end?
- When discussing the idea of *encapsulation* in comics, the author writes the following: "Panels may be nonsequential or even asynchronous, spanning more than one moment in time." Are there individual sections in the book where you see this taking place? Passages where time moves in interesting or unexpected ways? What is the significance of such moments?

- Early on in the book, the author brings up the idea of dignity in relation to his brother's life and death—"the dignity with which—I would come to see, by the end—he had lived." What are the specific events or insights from the rest of the book that lead him to this realization?
- Over the course of *Small Altars*, we learn a lot of unsavory details on the personal lives of several famous writers and composers. Why are these facts included? How do they relate back to the brother's life?
- Many of the sections of *Small Altars* deal directly with superheroes and comic books, but the book also makes regular use of superhero tropes inside its more personal sections—sometimes this is done in a positive or sincere way, and other times it questions or pushes back against the genre's excesses. Look back and highlight a couple of these tropes—what do they contribute both to the specific moment and to the book as a whole?
- What were your first impressions of the book's title and have these changed since reading the book? Look back at the section on pages 56-57 that includes the title phrase. What is the author saying here about death? about grief? How does this compare with your own experiences?
- Follow the links to a couple of the source collage essays listed below. Choose one essay that is of particular interest to you and study the way it develops this template/form. In what ways is it similar to the structure and style of *Small Altars*? In what ways is it different? Now do the same with the list of braided structure essays that is provided, choosing one to focus on and compare. What do you consider to be the potential strengths in structuring an essay with such a template in mind? What do you see as potential pitfalls within each form?

## *Writing Prompts—*

- Find an old photograph of someone you care about—it is fine if you are also present in this picture. Start by describing the scene in great detail, capturing the still-life moment depicted in the photograph. Next, let the passage of time seep into your description, find a way to gesture at what will eventually change, at what the years between then and now will hold. (Look back at the section on page 23-24 for an example of this.)
- Think of a hobby or interest that someone close to you has that you do not particularly share. Write about this subject matter as a way to explore your relationship to this person. Do some research on the topic, trying to incorporate facts/terminology/imagery associated with this subject in a way that both reveals this person’s character and your relationship with them. Consider the ways your tone toward this subject matter works in tandem with, or in opposition to, your feelings for this person.
- Write a source collage essay. Incorporate a range of outside sources centered on a theme or subject matter. Consider different registers of sources—blending together both “high” and “low” arts, the scientific and the poetic, the historical alongside the contemporary. Look to the source collage essays linked below as potential models for your own essay.
- Write a braided structure essay. Weave together three or more distinct strands, with at least one of them not being centered on narrative. Make conscious decisions about each thread’s relationship to time (chronological, associative, timeless) and how they are ordered inside the essay. Begin by keeping these threads largely separate from one another, then look for ways inside the essay to bleed them together or collapse the strands. Look to the braided structure essays linked below as potential models for your own essay.
- Take a draft of an essay you have already spent significant time on and print it out (double-spaced and one-sided). Next, number each paragraph and use scissors to cut

them out. Now spread them out on a desk or table and rearrange them. Make sure that you do not begin with what was your first paragraph and that you do not conclude with what was your last paragraph. Look to add new paragraphs in the gaps you've created inside your essay. Consider braiding together a whole new thread that was not present in the original draft.

## ***Further Reading—***

### **Links to Select Source Collage Essays:**

Natalie Diaz, [“A Body of Athletics”](#)

Lia Greenwell, [“Your Soul Doesn’t Need You”](#)

Ceridwen Hall, [“Submarine Reconnaissance”](#)

Leslie Jamison, [“Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain”](#)

David Shields, [“44 Tattoos”](#)

Mary Wang, [“Sad White Women”](#)

### **Links to Select Braided Structure Essays:**

Jo Ann Beard, [“The Fourth State of Matter”](#)

Ilya Kaminsky, [“Searching for a Lost Odessa”](#)

Sarah Orah Mark, [“U Break It, We Fix It”](#)

Jericho Parns, [“Practicing”](#)

Alison Powell, [“Nomen Nudum”](#)

Sejal Shah, [“Street Scene”](#)

### **Essay Collections that Include Multiple Examples of Both Forms:**

Hanif Abdurraqib, *A Little Devil in America*

Eula Biss, *Notes from No Man’s Land*

Leslie Jamison, *Empathy Exams*

Jericho Parns, *Lost Wax*

Lia Purpura, *All the Fierce Tethers*

### **Book-Length Essays that Incorporate Both Forms:**



Heather Christle, *The Crying Book*

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (poetry)