

Confronting one's past doesn't always end in a fiery explosion - sometimes, acceptance has the quiet strength of water. Becca Mancari knows this; it's why she chose to name her new EP *Juniata*, after the rural Pennsylvania river where she spent much of her childhood. In this new collection, she returns to her past both literally and figuratively, casting new light with a stripped-down selection of some of her sophomore album's most haunting tracks.

Released in June of last year, the critically-acclaimed *The Greatest Part* is a deceptively upbeat collection of sharp indie pop that explores Mancari's experience growing up gay in a fundamentalist Christian home. Described by the New York Times as "Stereolab gone Nashville," it boasts infectious electric guitar hooks and explosive percussion, cloaking the emotional weight of its subject matter in vibrant technicolor. The celebratory sound was by design - the album was meant as a paean to resilience and joy in the face of pain. Still, Mancari felt there was more to be expressed in these songs - she'd been having a recurring dream about the river, too, which felt like a symbol of unfinished business.

So she and producer Zac Farro reconvened, gathering around the grand piano in his home studio with bandmates Juan Solorzano and Caleb Hickman to retread some of the songs. The resulting arrangements put Mancari's vocals at the forefront, carving a space for her incisive lyrics to resonate among sparse keys and guitars. These elements give devastating lines like "*I remember the first time my Dad didn't hug me back*" more time to sink in. The addition of a string section amplifies this effect - on EP closer "Stay With Me," Mancari's musings on "children raising children" and "using God as a weapon" culminate in a heartbreaking orchestral outro. They also add an old Hollywood flourish to "Annie," the only entirely unreleased song on *Juniata*. It's a nod to Mancari's more recent past - she wrote it in 2017, before *The Greatest Part* - but it feels at home among these tracks, a kind of unintentional response to "Stay With Me". "*When you fall away,*" she assures, "*I'll be there.*"

Though there is no shortage of formidable lyricism on *Juniata's* tracks, listening to the EP recalls another line from *The Greatest Part*: "*Do you know your body anymore?*" she asked on "I'm Sorry." "*Does it haunt you every night?*" Exposing oneself isn't easy, especially with the whole world watching. But as Mancari confidently peels back the layers of her songwriting to reveal their gut-wrenching core, one gets the sense that she isn't feeling so haunted anymore.