



THE OFFERING

UNIVERSITY OF
MASSACHUSETTS
LOWELL

2022

THE OFFERING

A PUBLICATION OF THE UMASS LOWELL LITERARY SOCIETY

2022

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About the Literary Society

The UMass Lowell Literary Society publishes the annual campus literary magazine, *The Offering*, which features poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art submitted by UMass Lowell students, alumni, staff, and faculty. Each fall, undergraduate student members may apply for editorial positions on the magazine, a process coordinated by club advisors in cooperation with active club officers.

Anyone in the UMass Lowell community may submit work for consideration for publication in the magazine, with submissions open generally from early November to mid-February, and the magazine appearing in print and online in April. The club organizes an annual public reading event to launch the magazine each spring.

To stay informed about literary activities on campus, visit *The Offering* website or the UMass Literary Society Facebook or Instagram pages. For more information, or to request submission guidelines, write to **offering@uml.edu**.

See also:

<http://blogs.uml.edu/theoffering/>

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About the Name

This journal's name pays tribute to *The Lowell Offering*, a pamphlet published monthly between 1840 and 1845 whose content—including essays, stories, poems and ballads, letters, editorials and humorous pieces—was written exclusively by female workers in Lowell's textile mills. Founded by Abel Charles Thomas during his three-year pastorate at the Second Universalist Church in Lowell, the magazine was subtitled “A Repository of Original Articles on Various Subjects, Written by Factory Operatives.” In an editorial printed in the first issue, Thomas explains the aims of the publication: “to encourage the cultivation of talent; to preserve such articles as are deemed most worthy of publication; and to correct an erroneous idea which generally prevails in relation to the intelligence of persons employed in the Mills.”

In 1842, Harriet Farley and Harriot Curtis, both mill workers, became co-editors, and produced the magazine until its final publication in 1845. Charles Dickens, who during an 1842 visit to America famously visited and extolled the city of Lowell, also admired the enterprise of the women who wrote and “duly printed, published, and sold” *The Lowell Offering*. He writes, in *American Notes*: “Of the merits of the Lowell Offering as a literary production I will only observe, putting entirely out of sight the fact of the articles having been written by these girls after the arduous labours of the day, that it will compare advantageously with a great many English Annuals.”

The Editors find it fitting that the name of the University of Massachusetts Lowell's literary magazine reflects the city's rich cultural and literary heritage, and hope that work among these pages honors and contributes to that legacy.

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Cover photo: Vathanok Hok/*Heartpond Lake (Chelmsford, MA)*

BRIGID ARCHIBALD

Visions of Lemon Squares

I was supposed to be in bed. Mom had made it clear in no uncertain terms this was an adult party. Mac, my oldest brother, would be spending the night at a friend's house. Paddy and I, four and five years younger, were to stay with Dad in the master bedroom while Mom entertained.

The house had been scrubbed and dusted from top to bottom, and the good sheets were put on beds. Mom would give her guests a tour of the house and point to her favorite pieces, regaling them with each item's story. She found the blue antique church pew at a yard sale in a small town an hour north of Atlanta. Some distant family member, a great aunt or a third cousin, had made the quilts on my brothers' beds. My grandfather's old film camera sat on the shelves in the back of the home theater. The full-size four poster bed in my room was the very same one she and her twin sister had shared as children.

While Mom entertained, Dad had been tasked with getting Paddy and me ready for bed—supervising showers, brushing teeth, and combing out my tangles and down Paddy's cowlicks. Between tasks, he would tell us his own stories. He started, like always, with Bible stories, and then after Paddy and I begged, he would tell us our favorites. One about a haunted house down the street from his childhood home in Massachusetts. Another about how he and his brothers kept a shark in the bathtub one summer. Last was our favorite one about a top-secret trip he took to the moon on behalf of the president. Paddy and I would sit on the queen-size bed, wrapped in our parents' thick sheets and blankets, engrossed in the tales our father wove. Once Mom's guests had settled in the living room and our eyes had grown heavy, Dad urged us up the stairs to our rooms.

Tucked in bed I found I couldn't stay put. The murmuring of conversation and the clinking of glass downstairs called to me. I wanted to know what made an adult party adult.

Sneaking out of my room, I sat on the floor and looked around the corner where the banister of the upstairs mezzanine met the wall. After sunset, our windows had become glossy black mirrors. Gone was the typical view of the woods and the lake out back. The windows now framed warped reflections of my mom's guests below, bathed in the warm orange glow of our living room lights.

Her guests milled around the living space, sipping on wine and beer. Half-empty bottles and wine glasses removed from the rack above were scattered across the built-in bar that separated the kitchen and living room. Some guests sat in the sunroom among my grandmother's china, sipping drinks and admiring the Christmas tree—its dazzling white lights reflecting off the antique crystal ornaments. I wondered if Mom told them drinks weren't allowed in there. More guests were scattered around the living room, standing on the oriental carpet, or sitting on Mom's ornate couches. Their soft chatter and the waxy scent of the Christmas candles—cranberry and citrus—floated up to my hiding spot.

I was spotted almost instantly. First by my Aunt Gina, Mac's godmother. She winked at me as she brought a wine glass to her red lips. The cool aunt's way of saying, "I see you, but I won't tell."

I was getting up to go back to bed—whatever was happening below was not as interesting as I originally thought—when I heard a shocked, "Oh." Looking down again, I found two women looking directly at me.

I didn't recognize them. One was a short round woman with grey curly hair cut in a fashion I associate with grandmothers and tiny white dogs. The other was tall and lean with greying brown hair cut in a straight bob.

They looked like women I would see at church. The type of women who would say, "Oh, God bless your soul." The type of women I'd see

sitting in a local restaurant, sipping sweet tea talking about all the ways God hadn't blessed someone.

Both women began waving at me. They possessed none of Gina's subtlety. As I waved back weakly, I watched my mom enter from the kitchen. She looked up at me, a single eyebrow raised, and her lips pressed in a tight line.

A cold wave washed over me, and I felt my throat tighten. She lifted her hand and waved me down.

“Come say hi to our guests.”

I sat shocked for a moment, and Mom waved her hand at me again, insisting. I headed to the stairs not sure what to expect. Mom wouldn't yell. Not now at least. Not with guests present. People would talk. Any punishment would come tomorrow morning. Descending the stairs, another wave of panic came over me as cold air met my bare legs.

Miserably, I realized I was wearing a pink Barbie nightgown. A worn hand-me-down covered in pills and loose threads. Mom wouldn't have wanted me downstairs in this. If I was going to be talking to her guest, she would have put me in a dress with tights and shiny black shoes. It was Christmas time, so the dress would have been red, and she would have paired it with a white sweater, so it didn't clash with my hair.

Now on the ground floor, the candle smell had grown stronger, mixing with the scent of the tree, and the cinnamon broom hanging in the kitchen. I met my mom and the two women in the living room. Mom placed a heavy hand on my shoulder and introduced me to them. I don't remember what she said.

The short woman cooed over me. I felt my cheeks heat up. I felt I was too old for the attention. They asked the questions adults always ask children: “What grade are you in? Do you like school? What's your favorite subject? Any cute boys?”

I answered how children are supposed to: “I'm in 2nd grade. Yes, ma'am. I like reading. Ew, no!”

The women laughed, and Mom squeezed my shoulder. I corrected my last answer, “I mean no, ma'am.”

The taller woman leaned down as she spoke to me, “You know I brought some of my famous lemon squares. Have you ever had lemon squares?”

I turned to Mom for her to answer. She pretended to think, “You know, I don't believe you have. You would like them. Would you like to try one?”

I didn't know what a lemon square was, but if it was anything like lemon pound cake, I wanted it. I nodded my head quickly, and Mom squeezed again.

“Yes, ma'am.” I corrected quickly.

The older women guided me to the dessert bar set up in the dining room. The tall one handed me a thick decorative red napkin with a yellow square in the center. It was dense. A gooey yellow filling on a crumbly crust powdered in icing sugar, the pastry reminded me of the Turkish delight Jadis the White Witch gave Edmund in the Narnia movie I had watched with my brothers.

The women watched as I bit into the desert. It was sweet and tart. Good, but certainly not famous. The gooey center stuck to my teeth and the powder hung to the sides of my mouth. I decided that if a lemon square was anything like Turkish Delight, then I liked Turkish delight. I told the taller woman it was very good.

The conversation turned back to Mom. It was the typical script. First, she talked about Mac's art and his skills with computers. She and Dad thought he could be an architect. Next, she'd tell them about Paddy's future in entertainment—how he was always humming, doing voices, and was quick with a joke. He'd be an actor for sure. When the conversation turned to me, it always started with my hair. They would comment on how pretty it was or how much I looked like my mom. Mom would say my hair is strawberry blonde. They'd tell me how lucky I was to look like

my beautiful mother and then make jokes about me breaking hearts and Dad chasing off boys. As they spoke, I would lean into my mother, hiding my face in her side. I didn't feel lucky. I preferred how Dad handled these conversations. He would tell them about my imagination and all the stories I would write.

The conversation continued, and Mom told them about the etiquette and ballroom dance classes Paddy and I were taking at the community center. The women asked what I thought. I told them I liked drinking tea in etiquette class, but I disliked having to dance with the boys. They laughed and said that would change when I was older. It never did.

Throughout the entire conversation, the dense pastry sat in my hand, only one bite missing. Though I wanted to finish it, I couldn't bring myself to. I was caught on the image of Edmund and his Turkish delight. The way he had devoured the food and the brief disgust that had flashed across the witch's face. My mother's hand felt heavy on my shoulder.

Eventually, the women got bored and moved on. My mom took the pastry from me and shooed me up the stairs once more.

“Lots to do tomorrow. No more sneaking out of bed.” she said.

The next morning, I woke expecting her to dole out a punishment that never came. Mom never even mentioned me sneaking out of bed or the women we spoke to. I thought maybe I had dreamt the encounter. The memory already felt hazy, but a plate of saran-wrapped lemon squares on the kitchen counter assured me that it had happened.



TOM BOJSEN/*Untitled*

JASON BOURRET

Cherry Saccharin

Having you in my mouth was like swallowing
a bullet, but at least the
bullet would have brought me
peace.

The metallic aftertaste
comforts my tongue as
red weaves between my teeth—

you said that's what love tastes like.

Your fingers down my
throat—like the boy
in the bathroom
hanging over the toilet to ensure he
stays beautiful.

A watercolor palette of blues and
dried purples stain my
canvassed neck from your
delicate brushstrokes.
Your artistic signature.

Do you really think I'm beautiful?

JASON BOURRET

Liberation: Untying

He tried to hold on—
like the little boy desperately trying to
catch his birthday balloon that has

already slipped through
his fingers.
He watches the balloon as it

drifts farther away.
And for just a moment,
the balloon eclipses the sun

leaving nothing but darkness
below its silhouette.

CAITLYN COLEMAN

Accident

The room was bright with lightning when I woke up.
The call lasted only a minute, my muddled brain
Only hearing the words car accident and I'm fine.
I stumbled out of bed, blearily pulling clothes on
And thinking about the cost of a new truck. Staggering
In the rain, I made it to my car. Awake now and fighting
Nerves, I whipped down roads I've driven hundreds of times,
Though never this fast. I sped toward the red and
Blue lights flickering in the darkness, illuminating
A tree, thick with age and lying across the road.
Feeling my heart clench, I ran towards the ambulance,
My rain-soaked feet slipping in my flip flops. They
Told me he should be dead, that he should've been
Crushed by the tree. Instead, he had bloody knuckles
And glass in his teeth from screaming. When I saw
The truck, I understood. It was a crumpled mass of
Metal, like a can crushed by someone's foot. And
I was worried about money.

JESSICA DANILIUK

The Perfect Stranger

I've come to the realization that I've never been in love before. Not only that, but I'm not sure I understand what love feels like. Growing up my father never hugged me, never mind say those three little words. When he was paying attention to me it was typically to point out something I was doing wrong. My mom passed away when I was really young. I don't remember much about her, but I do remember she smelled like lavender. She would read *Clifford the Big Red Dog* to me when I was younger and when she snuggled up real close, my nose would be filled with this luscious lavender scent. That scent is burned into my brain, a reminder of the house I once lived in. It was either that or Marlboro smoke. Having had less than ideal role models, it's understandable why I never did very well in the love department. Not from a lack of trying, though.

I remember when I first had a crush on a girl. Her name was Jennifer Parker. I first noticed her because she had the same last name as my favorite web-slinging crime fighter. She had beautiful golden hair that would glimmer in the sun. Her hair had a shine to it that you couldn't get from regular drug store shampoo and conditioner. So I knew she was well-off, or her parents were. One day during recess I decided to talk to her. I had this whole plan of how it was going to go. I was going to show her my comic book, the one that included a character that shared her surname. We would laugh, she would smile, then we would sit in the tube slide, and read the comic together. Maybe up close she would smell like lavender. I went up to her prepared to begin our love story. I walked up and said, "I like your hair... spider..."

I completely froze. But not before stringing together an unfortunate

combination of words that made Jennifer believe she had a spider in her hair. So, she ran around the playground, screaming and crying, and eventually tripped and fell headfirst into the seesaw. Jennifer lost one of her front teeth that day, but I lost what could have been the love of my life, so I think I had it worse.

Jennifer was the first of many women to reject me. There was Anastasia Barrett in grade school. Meghan Gregory and Grace Jackson in middle school. Faith Clark throughout high school. And there was a very short segment of veterinary school where I was interested in this girl named Evelyn. Never got her last name, but I didn't really need to know that since I assumed she would be taking mine. For many years of my adult life, I was convinced I would never find love. I thought stuff like that was only for select people. Those alpha men of the world. Men that you look at and just know they can have their pick of anyone they'd like. As someone who is five-foot-six, looks like a Tim Burton character, and is 120 pounds soaking wet, I do not fall under this category. I always thought love just wasn't in the cards for me. That was until I met her.

I remember the first day I saw her. I had just taken over my family's veterinary practice after my father passed and didn't know where to begin. I've performed hundreds of surgeries and given thousands of diagnoses, but without my mentor I was second guessing every move I made. That particular day was a bad one. Mrs. Sanderson came in with her pet rabbit who had a foot infection. The toenails were a mix of purple, blue, and green if that's even possible. I knew the second they walked in that the foot would have to be amputated. The rabbit would be fine and would make a full recovery, but it always makes owners nervous to know that their pet needs to go under the knife. I am usually very considerate towards others' feelings and have certain scripts that I follow in these situations. But sometimes, especially after you question every other decision you made that day including what color tie to wear, you slip up. When Mrs. Sanderson asked about the puzzled expression

on my face I said, “Bad news, but very lucky news, I’m cutting off your rabbit’s foot.” So, as you can see, I was having a shitty day.

Ever since I was a kid I’ve been obsessed with movies. Growing up, I had a hard time talking to people, so I studied film to try and mimic the actions of heroic men that get the girl. But the one aspect of film I could never wrap my head around was this idea of love at first sight. People knowing they met their soulmate the second they lock eyes. I always thought that was a work of fiction, but I finally understood when I met her. My heart skipped a beat, and as a medical professional I can back up that statement. Her hair glistened just like Jennifer Parker’s, but in a different way. It caught the light coming from the window in the right corner of the room. Every other strand was highlighted, to create a balance of different hues of brown. The ends curled just slightly, away from her face. Her nails were perfectly manicured. A light pink like the color of Hubba Bubba Bubble Gum. She was wearing a red one piece with a gold belt around her waist. She had on these adorable heels made of some sort of woven basket material. She wore little makeup, just some mascara and blush. But the redness in her cheeks could have also been from her overheating while running. She had an appointment at 3:00 but with her cute lack of time management skills, she ran in at 3:20.

The bus had stalled, her apartment complex had a flood in the laundry room, and her cat refused to get into the kitty carrying case. She would explain all of this to me in a high pitched, breathy voice—a product of running five blocks while holding a cat that weighs over ten pounds. “I am so sorry Dr. Rutherford I tried to get here on time but the bus and my apartment and my stubborn cat all seemed to want to keep me from doing so.”

“You can call me August. Dr. Rutherford was my father. Sounds so official.” I looked at her, trying not to stare.

She put the carrying case down and smiled back at me. The type of smile someone does where you can see all of their teeth. And hers

were white. Not just from a lack of coffee stains, but the kind of upkeep maintained by people shown on screen. That was the moment I knew she was an actress, or at least trying to be, just like half the population here in L.A.

“Okay, August.” She looked me up and down, flirting with her eyes.

“Now what seems to be the problem today?” I asked, trying to get back to the task at hand.

“My cat hasn’t been eating.” Her fourteen-pound cat slowly sauntered out of the carrying case and onto the table, purring and trying to find the warmest place to lie down and rest.

“And as you can see from his size, he has never had this problem before.” She laughs through her nose.

“Has...” I paused trying to look for the name of the fat cat.

“Mickey.”

“Has Mickey been acting strange? For example, maybe he was never very affectionate before but now he always snuggles up with you on the couch when you are watching TV.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, yes. He has been rubbing his head against my leg and purring way more than he normally does.” Then she looked concerned.

The type of concern you see from a mother for her human child. But that’s just the type of person she is. A lot of people see their pets as another member of their family but for her it was different. This cat was the love of her life. He was her life. But she loves everyone. Even that man she told me about on 72nd Street who spit on her shoes after she said she wasn’t interested. Instead of kicking him where the sun doesn’t shine, which would have been a valid response, she apologized, complimented him, and said he’d find somebody someday. She always knows exactly what to say. She sees everyone for who they truly are and not what society believes them to be. Like how she saw a fat cat with attitude problems just as a creature unable to communicate its feelings.

She was practically already mourning the cat, when I knew his problem was that he was angry he wasn't getting enough food and decided to try a new tactic— flattery. But I didn't want to tell her that. I didn't want her to think that she raised a jerk because I knew she would believe it was her fault. Like I said before, she saw this pet as her son, and even though his animalistic nature trumps pleasantries, she would still take his antics to heart. So instead, I said "I would like to hold him here overnight and run some more tests, maybe give him some medication that will help."

"Oh no is he... is he dying?" I could see her holding back tears.

"No, definitely not. I just cannot get an accurate diagnosis right now, so I'll have to do some further investigation."

Relief rushed over her as she'd been hit by an enormous wave. "Okay, well thank you so much... August. I will be back first thing tomorrow, and I promise you I will be on time!" She laughed through her nose once again and kissed the fat cat passionately on the forehead. She whispered something to him, but I couldn't quite make it out. I imagine it was words of encouragement or a declaration of love for a cat she still deep down believed was dying. Just as quickly as she entered my life, she left. She was out the door before I could get a word in. Before I could ask for her number or tell her how pretty she looked in red. But I know I wouldn't have. Even if she waited another five minutes, in complete silence, I couldn't have mustered up the courage to tell the prettiest girl I have ever seen how much I admired her. Her confidence, her compassion, the unadulterated love I had seen in just a short period of time.

My brain began to race as I saw a preview of our life together. We would live in a house in the suburbs. After spending most of our crucial adult years in a city, we'd beg for a change of pace. Our house would have a white picket fence, a tribute to the simple love shared between couples in the 1950s. Except unlike in the '50s we would take turns doing the housework. I would cook dinner and she would clean, and vice versa. Perfectly in sync.

I refused to give up this fantasy. I was once told that you should do anything for the ones you love. For a lot of people that means taking care of your partner when they're sick even if that means you risk infection. Or dealing with their heinous relatives because you know they are a big family person. I believe that there is no shortage of tasks able to be done when it comes to someone you care deeply about. Which is why I had to do it. I'm a medical professional, so I knew the recovery wouldn't be easy. It would be a long, drawn-out process, but in the end, Mickey would be the picture of health. I would go so far as to say that he might have enough strength to walk on two legs, like a human. He might even do pull-ups in his free time. There are actions that must be taken to achieve what you want. And I knew that if I didn't get a chance to talk to her again, to meet her, my life would be meaningless. So Mickey boy would have numb legs for a few months. The paralysis would only be temporary, only long enough for her to fall in love with me. Just so I could see her a few more times. And who knows, maybe it'd be a good thing. Maybe he'd gain upper body strength and lose those last nine pounds. If you really think about it, I was doing him a favor. You're welcome, fat cat.



JESSICA DANILIUK/*New England in the Fall*

No Vacancy

He took a slow drag of a cigarette, letting the burn creep down his throat and into his lungs. Sometimes, the ashes would fall to the faded denim of his jeans, his kneecaps pulling open the frayed holes. The waistband of his pants dug into his hips, pressing into the fatty reminder of the morning's breakfast.

Eggs and bacon served on a cheap plastic plate now toiled like a soupy bile-fest in the pit of his stomach. It churned, then threatened to bubble up, the burning creeping up to the back of his mouth, not unlike the sizzle of cigarette smoke clinging to the sides of his throat.

Morning crept over the hood of his car the way the dew clung to grass blades in the local city park. Pale blue skies reflected in the chipped paint of the hood, orange clouds above matched the splotches of rust on the trim.

The cool leather against the thin fabric of his old jeans did little to protect him from the chill outside. It took a while for the car to stop blowing cold air inside, though it eventually started to warm up enough for him to start to feel his fingertips again.

He cracked the window open a bit, just enough for him to tap off the ash from his cigarette.

"Alan, your mother would murder you if she knew you were still smoking."

Alan jolted a bit, dropping the cigarette under his seat, quickly glancing over at the passenger seat. It had been empty a second ago, and it still was. Obviously. Why wouldn't it be? He glanced up at the mirror, grimacing a bit at the sight of his oily forehead. No one was sitting in the backseat, so he took to staring blankly at himself in the mirror.

His face and hair were unwashed, as was the rest of him. Clumps of dark brown hair stuck to his forehead in odd clumps, and his hair hadn't been brushed well. Purple bags hung under his dull eyes, the pale color matching the worn gray seats of the car. Bags like the leather purses carried in the inner creases of rich old ladies—the ones who spent their days dressing up in flashy clothes and meandering the local park to show off. He wasn't sure which was more pathetic, him or them.

The past few months had been rough on him, and it was starting to show physically. All because his mother had to go ahead and die, and his only friend went missing shortly after.

He let out a soft huff of laughter. *Friend*. If Alan could even call him that, anymore. Maybe when they were both a few years younger.

Alan dug blindly under the seat, grunting a bit as his numb fingers dragged over the car floor, his chipped fingernails picking up bits of old french fry crumbs and ice melt his boots had tracked in. He finally found it, picking it up and inspecting it. There were bits of hair and lint all over it, as well as dirt already clinging to the white paper. He sighed, slipping it out the window.

Leaning over the console, Alan dug through his glove box, pulling out the small box of Newports. He opened it, sighed, then tossed the empty box to the floor. There, it rested with the rest of the garbage Alan knew he eventually had to throw out. Especially the old fast-food bags, since the grease soaked brown paper was starting to stink up the car.

He quietly opened the car door just enough to slip his hand down, picking the cigarette butt off the slushy ground, then shut the door once again. He halfheartedly brushed the dirt and dust off, then put the thing between his teeth. The real shit was going straight to his lungs, anyway. A bit of dirt in his mouth wouldn't be the killer.

He closed his eyes, leaning back against the headrest. He sat there for a bit, waiting for the car to warm up just a bit more. It wasn't like he was in a rush or anything. In fact, Alan didn't particularly care about

what was going on around him. The world could burn, and he would gladly warm his hands on the flames.

“You really oughta clean yourself up.”

Alan’s eyes snapped open as he sat up quickly, looking around. Still, nothing. He even checked the radio, making sure he hadn’t accidentally put on some weird channel. Yet the damn thing had been broken for ages now, so it couldn’t be that. He was just going crazy. Or he was haunted.

He rubbed his eyes, pressing into them to try and wake himself up a bit. He didn’t know where he’d go next, but sitting in a diner parking lot wasn’t going to do much for him. Alan put the car in drive and made his way out of the lot and onto the main road.

At this time of the morning, the weird in-between of sunrise and morning traffic, the roads were pretty quiet. Just him, the road, and the occasional other driver. Still, he didn’t really plan where he was going to go. He drove on fumes, rolling past the gas station he couldn’t afford. If he broke down, he’d just carry on walking.

He drove for a good while, as if on autopilot. He pulled into a run-down motel, the lot riddled with potholes and worn-down speed bumps. The old neon sign was turned off, as it probably had been for years. But the vacancy sign was all the convincing Alan needed to pull over.

It was the typical nearly dead inn with an old once-red musty carpet all over the floor, with decades of stains and shitty cleanup jobs. It crunched under his worn Converse sneakers, drinking up the salty slush caked in the treads. The light in the room was dim, and it took Alan’s eyes a moment to adjust to the change. The warm flicker of the incandescent light bulbs cast a nostalgic yellow glow over the gaudy, mid-century style furniture.

The place smelled of mildew and old cigarette smoke, but there was also the sweeter scent of pine needles coming from the sparse Christmas tree propped up in the corner of the seating area. He rolled his eyes, rubbing the warmth back into his hands.

He leaned against the linoleum countertop, drumming his fingertips as he glanced around. There was a small leather desk chair by the desk, the seat torn up from years of use. There was also a notable lack of a computer. Where it would have been was an old logbook, with chicken scratch writing in blue pen ink. Beside the book was a styrofoam cup of coffee, still steaming. A newspaper was laid unfolded across the other half of the desk.

Alan grimaced as he peeked at one of the small headlines. *Missing Officer: Body Found*. Under the headline, in smaller print, was the rest of the article.

Officer Brian Hewitt's body recovered last Monday, January 27th in the forest near Mendon Peak. Hewitt, of Garland, UT, will be having services this coming Saturday, February 1st. All are welcome to attend.

Alan pulled out his phone, searching up the name. Sure enough, the local news had already reported the discovery. Brian Hewitt, twenty-four years old, survived by his wife and one-year-old daughter, died from a single gunshot. There was even a little picture of him, his round face with his typical dopey grin. His hair thinned at the crown, even at his young age. But his cheeks were rosy, and his brown eyes were bright, scrunched in the corners as he flashed crooked teeth in a wide grin.

Reading it, he felt nothing. Perhaps the numbness was grief, or maybe just fatigue. He hadn't slept in a real bed in days.

What a miserable way to go, Alan mused wordlessly, stuffing his phone back into his pocket. *Thought you'd have it in you to go out with a different sort of bang.*

He waited another minute or two, then glanced at the small bell on the counter. He tapped it a couple times, trying to peek into the office behind the desk. Still, not a peep.

"Hello?" He called out, tapping the bell a bit more aggressively. *Ding! Ding! Ding!* Alan huffed in impatience, looking around.

With a grunt, he hopped over the counter, swinging his legs over and

behind the desk. He poked around, finding the drawer of old room keys, and grabbed the first one he could find. Running his finger down the numbers until he found the one that matched the keychain. 206. Check.

He scrawled in his name, then dropped a small wad of cash next to the coffee cup. It was the last fifty bucks he had, but he didn't really care. What else could he spend it on? He hopped back over the counter with a huff of effort, hesitating for a second before grabbing the newspaper. He tucked it into the inside of his faded leather jacket, quietly slipping out of the lobby.

There was a small heated pool just outside, fenced in near the back of the lot. Without really thinking, Alan made his way over to it, opening the fence gate with a loud creak. He stepped onto the slushy walkway, taking his coat off and tossing it to the ground before grabbing the icy handrail as he stepped into the pool.

Even as he descended into the warm water, he knew that what he was doing was odd, if not totally bizarre. It was mid-December, snow and ice and mud covered the previously green lawns. Still fully clothed, he waded deeper and deeper, until eventually he floated quietly on his back.

He stared up at the sky above, feeling the way his clothes clung to his sides uncomfortably. The water was warm, steam rolling off the surface in small cloudlike puffs. The air was still frigid, nipping sharply at his nose and cheeks. He could barely see the pale sky above, though there wasn't much to see at this time of the day. Still early in the morning. Overcast. Gray.

Droplets of water clung to the tips of his eyelashes and the hairs of his eyebrows, freezing and melting under the occasional gust of cold air followed by hot steam. And so he floated there, eyes closed, waiting. He didn't know what he was waiting for, but he knew it would come. Eventually.

The squelch of his soaking sneakers almost seemed to echo in the complex, bouncing off the crusty brick walls. He sludged over to his

room, hugging himself as the chill sank into his bones, seeping into him the way the water seeped out of his clothes. His jeans after having soaked up so much water felt as though they had been woven with lead thread. The warmth of it had long since dissipated, replaced by the wintry cold.

Alan slipped the key into the lock after a moment or two of struggling, doing his best to still his trembling hand. His teeth chattered as he stepped inside, keeping his head down a bit.

The room was small, with only a single double bed against the left wall. There was an old TV sitting on a wooden dresser with years of scuff marks and wear. The carpeted floorboards creaked underfoot, dipping in odd places. The room smelled even mustier than the lobby, as if the place hadn't been cleaned in years.

And, judging by the thin layer of dust on the dresser, that wouldn't be too outrageous a conclusion.

He shut the door and locked it, satisfied by the loud thunk of the lock setting into place. He drew the curtains in, then flicked the light switch. The lights stuttered for a moment, then flickered on. They buzzed with the faint sound of electricity, like the static sound of an old TV.

He headed straight for the bathroom, sloughing off his layers of clothes as he walked. He kicked his boots off first, then undid the buckle of his belt. Weighed down and stretched out from the water, the jeans slipped off first, while he tossed his shirt to the floor. He cranked the shower to the hottest temperature possible, and hopped in.

The shower, like the rest of the place, hardly looked clean. It looked like the once-white tile had since been stained yellow. The grout had darkened over the years, and there were some blotches of black and gray near the drain. But it worked, and that's all that mattered.

The water droplets hugged his skin, pale flesh flushing deep pink. It settled in the curves of his bony shoulders, in the softness in his belly

and the sharpness of his thin nose. His palm settled just under his left clavicle, pressing against his chest. The beat of his heart was faster than normal, but not as fast as it had been the past few days or so. Maybe he was finally settling down.

Still, he scrubbed his skin raw. There was something disgusting about the sight of himself, the crawling feeling under his skin. Something was wrong with him, and he couldn't place it. He could only hope that the friction of his skin against his rough fingertips and the melting water would be enough to wash the feeling away.

When his head started to feel a bit too fuzzy, Alan turned the shower off. It was too hot to focus, the steam making him dizzy. He stepped out of the shower, fumbling for a towel to press into his skin. It smelled vaguely of mothballs and bleach.

He wrapped the towel around his waist before splashing some cold water from the sink onto his face and wrists. Just to wake himself up a bit.

He kept his head down as he walked back into the living room, shaking his hair out with a spare towel he had grabbed on his way out of the bathroom.

“Oh!”

Alan faltered, glancing up at the sound of a voice. Light, airy. He stared at the bed, bewilderment in his gaze.

The bed dipped under the weight of a young woman, probably in her early twenties, the white comforter almost matching her dress. The fabric of her dress looked thin, like a nightgown trimmed in cheap lace. She blinked up at Alan, her expression reflecting his own surprise, brown eyes wide.

The two were frozen for a moment, each staring at the other, waiting for the other to move or respond.

“I'm sorry,” Alan blurted. “I must've screwed the rooms up.”

“It's alright,” The woman said, clasping her hands together, resting

them in her lap. “It’s not your fault.”

Alan stared at her for a moment. Maybe he had accidentally grabbed the spare keys? But no one had been signed in to 206. Strange.

“Uhm,” She pursed her lips, looking down in such a way that her dusky brown hair fell around her face. Hiding, almost. “I suppose it’s too much of a hassle for you to find a new place.”

Alan stared at her, dumbfounded. “What?”

The woman glanced up at him, reaching up to tie her hair back. “Your clothes, they’re soaking wet. You’ll freeze to death if you go back to the lobby. Or catch a cold.” She frowned, shaking her head. “Just stay.”

Stay.

There was something about the way she said it, less of a suggestion and more of a command. He nodded, his head feeling light as it had while he was in the shower—the sort of head fog that lingered, numbing his sense of what was right, what was normal. Certainly not this, but he wasn’t in the right mind to understand that.

He felt a tug in his chest, guiding him over to the bed. He sat down, the bed dipping under his weight, then kicked a leg over to lie down. He rested his back against the headboard, his skin still hot and wet from the shower.

The girl followed suit, lounging in the bed beside him. It was a tight fit for two adults, but it didn’t seem to bother her. She pressed close, lying on her side to watch him. Her eyes were bright with a faint glow of amusement, like that of a child eyeing a new toy.

She placed a hand on his chest, a dainty sort of touch that almost didn’t feel real. She let it rest just over his heart, humming a small tune under her breath. Her skin was cold, but Alan felt colder. Even as the heat from the shower still lingered deep in his core.

Her soft song started to lull him in a quiet rest, a soothing sort of melody, easing him further down onto the bed. Alan’s eyes started to shut on their own accord, but he willed himself to speak. His voice was raspy,

soft, like he had been asleep for hours already.

“What’s your name?” He murmured, sinking into the softness of the pillow and the comfort of her cooling touch.

She continued to hum for a moment longer, before uttering quietly, “Jillian.”

And then, a few moments later, when Alan had fallen asleep, she continued.

“I hate you.”

When he woke the next morning, he was not in bed. He was in the shower, the once-hot water now raining on him with frigid droplets. His head throbbed, a deliberate pounding just behind his temple. He fumbled, trying to climb out of the shower, but there was weakness in every limb, his pruned fingers slipping on the aged tile.

He was cold now, the hazy humid warmth from before dissipated completely. Nothing but cold water, and the feeling of a freezing hand over his heart.

The woods were cold this time of year. The dirt roads hadn’t been touched for the sake of keeping chemicals out of the protected area, so ice hid under the snowy tire tracks leading up the mountain. Alan’s car wasn’t built for this type of weather, but the old thing took him everywhere. He didn’t have many other options, either.

Alan pulled into a smaller road, branching further into the forest. There was a small parking lot before one of the hiking trails, but at this time of night it was totally empty. He pulled over, shutting the car off, and hopped out.

The snow and slush immediately began to sink into the canvas of his shoes, the rubber soles squeaking as he shuffled carefully towards his trunk. Despite everything, there was a calmness in the air, perhaps due to the lonesome quietness of the forest. The scent of pine lingered over the clearing. A nice, sweet scent. The kind of smell that would easily mask any others.

Handy.

Alan hefted the oversized bag over his shoulder, trudging slowly towards the trail. He followed it upwards, his shoes slipping occasionally in the slush. His shoes offered little grip on the jagged stones that jutted out from the pathway.

Eventually, he started to wander away from the trail, his limbs tired from carrying the weight of the bag. The thing was nearly the size of him, so he ended up dragging it behind him. It started to gently snow, which would eventually cover any sign of his footprints.

He dropped the bag after a while of trekking through the snow. His clothes were hardly fit for the weather. His jeans dragged a bit, hanging around his ankles, caked in snow and ice. He slouched, resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. The cold air burned his lungs, the sting settling deep into his chest.

Alan sighed, glancing down at the bag. One last glance, he supposed. A goodbye, maybe. He unzipped the bag, looking down at the face of Brian with a mild sort of sadness. Maybe it was grief he was feeling, or one of the stages of it. Still, the numbness he felt in his fingers was nothing compared to the numbness he felt looking at the face of his dead friend.

He could still hear the ring in his ears from the shot, the slow motion feeling as he watched Brian's lips mouth his last words. Alan took his hand, pressing it over his heart as his gaze traveled over Brian's body, lingering on the bloody splotch on his chest. There, just under his left clavicle, his shirt tore in a small hole.

He nibbled on his fingernails, grimacing at the taste of copper landing on his tongue. Dried blood stuck under his nails, blood that didn't belong to him.

He should've been the one in the bag, not Brian.

"I never asked," Alan set down his beer on the smooth wood of the

bar. He glanced at Brian, raising a brow. “What did you end up naming that kid of yours, anyway?”

Brian beamed, digging his phone out of his back pocket. “Jillian. She looks so much like her mother. Doesn’t she, Al?”

Alan smiled a bit at the nickname. Only Brian and his mother called him that, but that was likely due to the fact he almost exclusively talked to them and them alone. Brian showed a picture of a small baby, swaddled up in pastel pink fleece. Alan couldn’t really see the resemblance. She was... a baby. Too squishy to look like a person. But Brian seemed plenty proud, so who was he to dampen the mood?

They chatted for a while, like the old times. When the night was over, Brian stood first, slapping Alan’s shoulder firmly. No longer with the gentleness of a young boy, the boy he grew up with all those years ago. The best friend he had trusted with all the secrets of a prepubescent boy. The one he planned to go to school with, to pick up girls with. A partner in crime with the kindest boy in Garland High.

And there he went, going home to his wife and kid, while Alan was stuck alone at the bar. He took a sip of his beer, watching the news on the small TV behind the bar. Brian had a lot to be proud of.

And even more to lose, Alan thought, smugly.

It was late in the afternoon when Alan left the motel, dressed in his damp clothes and still bewildered from his dream. The more he thought about it, it felt like a nightmare. It didn’t make sense. Jillian was barely a year old – it had to be some fucked up dream. Perhaps just the direct result of a guilty conscience.

He stopped by the lobby, and sure enough his fifty dollars was still crumpled up on the counter, untouched. He dropped the key to his room there and pocketed his cash.

Alan hesitated for a moment, glancing at the Christmas tree still sitting undecorated in the corner of the room. The pine scent smelled

stronger than ever.

The car was cold, and it took a while for the heat to catch up. Alan sat there, staring at himself in the rearview mirror. He looked even worse than he had yesterday, despite having cleaned himself up. He let out a dry laugh, the sound of his own voice startling him.

He had a couple hours, at most. Before the cops pulled up to his car. Before they handcuffed him. Before he'd waste away in a jail cell. He was content to just sit back, feeling the car slowly start to warm up.

For a moment, as he looked into the mirror, he swore he saw a familiar gaze looking back. Brown, but no longer carrying the warmth it usually had. Alan felt his heart stop for a moment, refusing to blink as he stared into the mirror, holding the eye contact as long as he could.

"You're a real piece of work, Al."

JORDAN HARRINGTON

American Dreamt

I have awoken.

A digital alarm on my phone that replaced
a table-side mechanical alarm.
The smell of yesterday's breakfast
and tomorrow's lunch.
Soon driving along a paved road
made by forgotten hands
that were mountains of calloused skin.

The Clock hands stretch to the sky in
alignment
only for a moment.
Noon strikes as the beginning.

The fabric of unworn caps and gowns
become thousands of hairnets
only to end up in the trash regardless.
Plastic pens lacking lifeblood are melted
down to the pre-requisites:
glasses and goggles atop safety helmets.
The foam of peeling chairs now fills my
own plugged ears.

Soaring rates of singed skin serve silence
amidst a trade deal of someone else's
protection
in the form of thick fabric gloves.

Meanwhile,
the collapsing metallic replacements for men
tower over me.
The silver haired gentlemen breathe in sighs
and coughing fits.
Their faces have become amalgamations,
and unrecognizable
beside a select few.

The Clock's hands once again point toward
the sky.
Noon's brother Midnight has arrived.

I have awoken.

JOE KEANE

Billy Joel Isn't Dead I Just Thought He Might Be

In the one-person handicapped bathroom of a bar with too few lights and a smell like sulfur and cinnamon, Samuel Sampson, the 39-year-old DJ and retired physical trainer, is looking at his soft, very nippy naked reflection in the mirror. It's New Year's Eve and he's wearing New Year's glasses. The vinyl record nipple piercings he's just gotten are very infected. His set starts in nine minutes.

His last gig hasn't paid him, isn't going to pay him. If this one doesn't either, he'll have to sell the nipple jewelry. If the show goes well, the promoter might thank him. If he meets with the promoter, he might get paid.

There's one problem, it's the anniversary of Billy Joel's death. The same Billy Joel whose face is tattooed on Sam's solar plexus. The dead singer's hopeful eyes and receding hairline are perfectly framed by Sam's load-bearing, red-in-an-irritated-way, getting-sort-of-green-in-a-bad-way, areolas. If Sam is going to have a killer set tonight, it's going to have to be through Joel's catalog. Sam owes the long dead multi-platinum recording artist that debt, for without Billy Joel, Sam Sampson wouldn't have his stage name—

The Piano Man.

Sam takes a deep breath in and scratches his butt before heading backstage. It's a full house. Drinks are in hands, friends are shouting over other groups of friends, the room is perspiring, around 88 degrees, and Sam steps onstage from behind the curtain. One person cheers. Sam's massive flag, which is just a big black piece of cloth that says "The Piano Man" in Times New Roman font, unfurls from the rafters. Nobody

cares. Then the music starts.

“New York State of Mind,” “Uptown Girl,” “The Longest Time.” All these songs play to almost complete silence. No dancing, singing, crying, or acknowledgement. Everyone is standing and talking over the music as they had been while they'd waited for Sam's set to begin. Only now they were waiting for the next. Sam thanks god he was already dripping sweat when he first came onstage, because now the beads and streaks of sweat mask a few of his tears.

After twenty-five minutes of this, Sam practically whispers into the mic, “This is my last one. R.I.P. to the legend.” He doesn't look up from his monitor, afraid no one will be looking back. They don't know the legend.

He's supposed to play “Movin Out.” That's how Sam always closes a Billy Joel set. But in a moment of quiet rebellion, he queues up something else.

The organs come in. “Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnny Ray...” This song, “We Didn't Start the Fire”—whose lyrics are just a musical word soup of assorted keywords and nouns from headlines written between 1945 and 19-when-ever-We-Didn't-Start-the-Fire came out—is personal to Sam. It's the only Billy Joel song he doesn't like.

Sam heard the song for the first time in a crowded bathroom at his high school prom, where he'd pulled up his underwear too fast at the urinal and peed down the front of his pants for seventeen seconds. He heard it again through the window of someone's car in the parking lot of Jordan's Furniture his sophomore year of college. He'd taken Lisa Jennings on a date there, and that morning had told his roommate that he might want to get married someday because of her. Sam waved his keys above his head, pressing the panic button for over forty-five minutes in the summer heat up and down the aisles of that parking lot. Walking behind him with her arms crossed the whole time, Lisa had said “I think we parked in the other one” about fifteen minutes in. Sam didn't listen. Lisa Jennings was right, they'd parked in the other lot and at this

point in his life Sam hadn't had sex in seven and a half years. The last time he heard "We Didn't Start the Fire" was in aisle six of a convenience store the night before a job interview. He took it as a sign and slept through it.

The song has always been a little bit of bad luck to Sam. And he's hoping to pass that onto this room of strangers. Because to him, their lack of interest is why he's not going to get paid. And why he's going to have to remove his fresh and swollen piercings in the parking lot of a pawn shop, by hand, with a bottle of Purell and a whole lot of determination.

Sam is slumped behind his stage table. The same table he uses for sides and utensils at family cookouts. Facing away from the crowd. Waiting for the noise to stop.

Then, he hears from the crowd: "Fire! Fire!"

Sam smells the smoke. He stands up from behind his station and stares into the black and grey ripples billowing in from the next room over. People in the crowd, now hearing the chorus of the song in a new light, look at Sam in a strange mix of horror and confusion.

*WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE
IT WAS ALWAYS BURNING
SINCE THE WORLD'S BEEN TURNING
WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE
NO WE DIDN'T LIGHT IT
BUT WE TRIED TO FIGHT IT*

These ominous words from the long dead NYC icon seem almost identical to their real-life situation. Two of the drunkest people in the bar think the smoke and coughing might be part of the show and they actually start dancing. And before Sam can even think of finding a way out, he sees the crowd pooling by the emergency exit, no one being able

to get the door to open.

For the middle part of the song, Sam just stands at the edge of the stairs staring at the crowd trying to escape. Hoping the door will open, or that maybe he'll hear a cheer from somewhere else, that another way out has been found. Some others step cautiously towards the smoke, trying to stem the growing blaze with half full beer cans and tablecloths.

WHEEL OF FORTUNE, SALLY RIDE, HEAVY METAL, SUICIDE
FOREIGN DEBTS, HOMELESS VETS, AIDS, CRACK, BERNIE GOETZ

These words, which haven't meant much to Sam, and probably didn't mean that much to Joel either, start to give him a strange comfort.

HYPODERMICS ON THE SHORES, CHINA'S UNDER MARTIAL LAW
ROCK AND ROLLER COLA WARS, I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE

He steps off the stage. One of the two people who was originally dancing is on the phone. The other is slumped in a chair, lightly nodding their head back and forth. Sam takes them by the hand and rocks from side to side. They stand up and together both rock from side to side.

Then the chorus comes back. "WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE..."

Sam sings along. "It was always burning since the world's been turning. We didn't start the fire!" And his dance partner looks at his face for the first time and says to him "Do we know who did?"

And though his eyes are burning and he's coughing hard, that makes Sam laugh.

JULIA LAWLISS

Growth

I used to be afraid
of getting
caught in the rain,
until I remembered that
flowers do not fear
being a bit wet,
for it helps them grow—

Why then
should I run
as I have so many
times before,
knowing by standing still,
I will heal,
and eventually,
be closer
to the sun.

HARRISON LEE

Overlanding

Among smoky charcoal gravel,
Pebbling wonders watered down in
Unconscious streams of serpents,
Intertwine aimlessly. The open
Tundra of a frozen mindscape greys an
Overcast, to cloak nimbus dreams as
Curiosity lingers through the ice. I keep
Looking at the vacancy for depth but where is it?
So calmly rapid and dauntingly empty,
Where this delta rushes into the Arctic,
An iceberg calmly floats by. Its reflection
I can see with utter transparency—
A crystal mirror expressing clarity,
Though only on the surface.

KIMBERLY MAI

Black Pen

A small spring creaks—a door ajar—
overpowered by a grayed fingertip,
resting on the pen's clattering head.
An invitation permits a hand
to grip fingers around the pen's waist.

Partners waltz as a silver toe trails
black ink across the paper dance floor
in leaps and skips and twirls and—

Soon the pen stumbles,
marked by tripping drops and dashing streaks.
Its plastic attire now nicked, smudged, tired.

The hand goes for the final lift
into the desk-side trash can
then searches for a new partner
before the next song begins.

MEGAN MCILVENNY

Scented Soy Candle

You have the shape of a dodecagon, 12 sides.
On the top, you're open and wider.
To cover yourself up
your neck is thicker,
forming six slightly angled glassy threats
which are seeking for the grooves
of a complement
shining black like fresh asphalt.

You wear a light grey winter coat
that says "Mrs. Meyers"
in dark brown letters and white shadows.
You're filled with rough cream-colored wax
layering like fragments of an
amphitheater, seashell-colored ocean waves.

There is a black wick
placed in your center
which splits
into old crooked fingers,
branches of a rotten tree.

JAY MONTEIRO

E.E.K

Me, you, and the moon.
Your eyes of olive, caramel, and late June—
furrowed brow, strawberry plush mouth,
here you are in the aubergine autumn, the flushing fall.
Cradled in the catch of my calloused fingertips.

My heart and the harp-strings stretch marks across your back,
my sights and your soul tangled together in the sheets of infamy—
this intimacy,

it is innocent, romantically aromatic in its infancy,
suffocating under the smell of simmering sugar,
sipping the sweet sounds of your serene satisfaction.
Is this drowning, melting?

Is this what it truly feels like to breathe,
to feel the ache of absence and know what that means?
Forgetting the fear of loneliness, even when you leave.
Beneath the damsel of the drowsy midnight blue, I am weak.
For you these are the words I cannot speak.

JAY MONTEIRO

Fish Market

This city
with its worn cobblestone
and chipped concrete,
it lies in ruins and ruins me.

I lie in bed and contemplate
its wishy-washy smoggy sky,
I cradle my brain and listen to it lie.
I poison my love and lie with my hate.
In the darkness of dawn, alert and awake—

Sleep will not come in the absence of faith.
Sleep cannot come from the chasing of fate.
Sleep and I, growing fond to soon separate.

In the darkness of dawn, alert and awake,
I poison my love and lie with my hate,
I cradle my brain and listen to it lie,
I wonder the weight of my worth
to the heart and to the eye.

JAY MONTEIRO

Pistachio

I passively ponder
how peach sunsets would reflect
off of the golden flecks in your eyes.

Luminous, attractive,
a pale moon swimming among the specks.
We drift through nothingness and are addressed
without title.

Tidal,
you pull me back and forth.
Eventually I'm found, drowned
in your drought of passion,
or action.
Counterparts.

Falling together,
rising again, awkward as strangers.
Forever I will wonder— no, *picture*
meeting in the middle,
standing on stone slabs made of splintered hearts
repurposed into chipped cobblestone and concrete steps.
Remembering and reminiscing about when
I first recall thinking about you as I dreamt.

Eternally stunning smiles imprinted in my head,
creating our memories alone in my bed.

JAY MONTEIRO

A Reoccurring Disturbance

“There’s a protest in Boston tomorrow night. It’s from Nubian Square to The State House.” My cousin Ollie dropped an attachment into our group chat that linked to a virtual flyer. I sat up slowly in my bed and stared at the black screen with anxiety.

“There was one yesterday that went okay. I guess some people got pepper sprayed but I don’t think anything near the level of what’s happened at other ones.” Ollie’s fraternal twin, Madressilva, was still living at home with my aunt at the time. Madressilva worked long days as a florist but was always quick to respond when we needed her. I hoped her level-headed insights would put us at ease. I didn’t want to sound cynical, but I was already afraid and overly cautious.

“Things have been getting crazy at pretty much all of the protests so far.”

“I know. You know Boston is a racist city too, so I don’t even wanna see who’s there to counter-protest, plus the whole pandemic on top of everything else,” replied Ollie.

Ollie and I had been living with my grandmother in a hopeless attempt to lower her exposure during the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak. She hardly paid our concerns any mind, but the housing situation at least made communication between Ollie and me easier. The night my mother passed away, Ollie was sleeping over and had done their best to comfort me, even in their own grief, when she was found the next morning. Ollie, Madressilva, and I spent the rest of our youth attempting to heal together and from then on, we were inseparable. In a way, Ollie and Madressilva became both parental figures and siblings to me. We became a unit, a support network. With the two of them with me

I couldn't be intimidated by anything and, in coming to my aid, they found new outspoken voices within themselves. We help each other with almost everything and if a problematic situation arises we face it together.

“Yeah, there's a lot of people and a lot of different factors. I've honestly been thinking a ton about going to protests but I always get nervous and back out. I want to go but I know I probably shouldn't.”

“Definitely not,” Madressilva responded before I could even send a follow-up message. “Especially not alone. It's going to get dark and to be honest I'd be afraid to see what happens if it gets violent.”

After everyone's points were brought up and addressed in the group chat, Ollie came up to my bedroom. We sat on my blue and beige bedspread for hours discussing the risks and benefits of actually attending a protest. With a canyon's length of space between my family and me, it was only a matter of time before my primary source of influence shifted to come from within me. I leaned toward a more carefree spirit, and slowly morphed into the most authentic version of myself I've ever been. The haircut, the tattoos, the piercings, the attitude, every little part of myself I was discouraged from embracing was now rising to the surface of my being. My family, and those who saw me as the image of obedience, were appalled by the new personality that had latched onto me in the wake of shocking awareness. To them, it was ugly and sinister of me to become something reminiscent of my mother before their eyes. Now I parade my rage upon my sleeve, satiate its thirst for blood with my frustrated tears, and let its deafening cry ring out through my vocal cords as they vibrate and snap feebly against my abuse.

I march on.

“Do you wanna go?” Ollie asked quietly from my doorway. I motioned for them to step inside the room so we could discuss privately.

“Yeah, but I’m really scared about it. I don’t care about getting hurt, I just know Grammy isn’t going to let me.”

“I mean, yeah you live here but you’re also an adult. She can’t stop you.” Yes, I was an adult now. If I decided something for myself it may have repercussions, but it was still my choice to make. No longer could anyone take that from me.

“I think we’re gonna go,” Ollie typed into the group chat.

“Well, if y’all go tomorrow make sure you stay safe. Keep your face, hair, and tattoos covered, and bring cash instead of a card. Trump called for a MAGA gathering at the White House tonight to purposefully try to start a counter-protest. We all know it’s gonna end up in violence.” Madressilva would not be able to attend the protest with us because of her tight work schedule but she seemed to always be the first to receive an update on anything. She was our researcher and informant.

“I honestly don’t know if it’s a good idea for you guys to even go. There’s barely any information on the event page and a lot of people have been setting up fake rallies to antagonize and trap protesters, there’s an official one being held on June 2nd that we could go to.”

“I saw that stuff, but I was still gonna give it a chance. If it’s wack when we get there we’re just gonna leave. BLM Boston connected with them and confirmed it is legit, they just aren’t the organizers.” Then and there we committed; we were going to the protest.

The rest of the night we stayed up in my room smoking weed and planning. We were up until almost one in the morning, but it was necessary. With the march coming at such short notice, we needed to make a list of the supplies we’d need as well as a general plan for what we would do that evening. We decided we would arrive early and leave before the majority of the crowd began to clear so we could avoid any rowdy bystanders. We went to the store and purchased all-black attire for each of us as well as first aid kits, poster board, and water. By the next morning, we were more than prepared. Though multiple family members

yelled and pleaded with us not to go, we left that afternoon.

He, like many of us, had so much more to live for. His name was George Floyd and I saw him murdered on camera, the entire country did. Millions watched a strong man's eyes bulge and gloss over with dread. A global audience witnessed a grown man begging for his mother while being wrestled to the ground like a beast. We all heard an *innocent man* cry and plead for his life with an officer's weight slowly crushing his neck. I saw it, listened to it, succumbed to the stomach-churning stench of evil. I felt an ache in my heart because I knew he was not the only one. So horrific and yet so casually familiar.

Daniel Prude - 41

Rayshard Brooks - 27

Breonna Taylor - 26

Elijah McClain - 23

Just a few of those we lost in 2020.

Eric Garner- 43

Atatiana Jefferson - 28

Freddie Gray - 25

Stephon Clark - 22

Michael Brown - 18

Trayvon Martin - 17

Tamir Rice - 12

Aiyana Jones - 7

I'd fail the citizenship test before I'd forget these names. Then again, most Americans would also fail the citizenship test. Rigging the elections? What about the rigging of laws and systems that are supposed to protect the people, those so-called fundamentals that are over half a century old if not older? What about the blatant and openly gleeful acts

of violence that rob over half of the country of their right to a life worth living? What about us?

These were siblings and children, parents and spouses, lovers and friends. These were individual people that had been reduced to tally lines, to empty prayers and hashtags. Another black life taken, another face sinking into the sea of ink, bleeding into the smoky cloud of souls who had to say goodbye too soon. I had seen it happen before and I knew it would happen again.

*This time it was thousands of miles away
But it was bound to happen closer.
When would it happen closer?
When do I make the poster?
When is it going to be me?*

The only way I can describe the protest before sundown is menacingly magical. Hundreds or maybe thousands of people had come out in support of the black community in Boston, and with the rest of them, I wanted so badly to tear the country apart. Maybe if we disassembled everything and put it back together things would work. Maybe if we tried a new system other humans would recognize that my pale palm looks almost identical to theirs. Waves of anger and tension rolled off of the collection of protesters yet none of it was aimed at one another—there you could only find compassion.

*Police stare at us
And we stare at them,
Each side waits for a reason to condemn.
Sun falls,
No curfew call.
Blue then red, a siren's scream.*

A voice calls out

“They almost hit him, he’s only seventeen!”

Never had I seen such a mass of bodies move as if it were a collective form. Far in the distance, there was something hovering between the classifications of a panicked flash mob and a single living monstrosity. In fear and curiosity I stood frozen just taking in the sight. The air of that June night was thick and humid, weighing us down under its navy blanket. The orange streetlights of Boston reminded me of polluted sunsets against the dark sky. Everything could be connected back to pollution these days. I almost felt as if I had gone deaf watching all the people barrel toward me. I could see the bubbling lump of black dispersing, shattering into fragments like broken bone as the police fought to dissolve the crowd. I could see brothers and sisters tumbling to the ground. Some got up, some were helped up, others had only begun to be introduced to the rest of the pain and fear they would experience that night.

The rest of my senses followed suit. Here in the streets of Boston, I knew there was no earthquake, no buildings to fall, no natural disaster to be had. This was man-made chaos and my heart rate skyrocketed as I became aware of how quickly everything had spiraled out of control. Just moments before the night turned violent, I rolled my ankle on the sidewalk. I knew the injury wasn’t serious but that didn’t stop the throbbing pain from creeping up my already sore and compromised leg. Less than five minutes before, I had tripped and laughed. Now I was running from police cruisers while they purposely barreled through the once peaceful crowd. A massive group of people was charging towards me, screaming at the top of their lungs and I was unsure how I was even going to walk back to the car.

I was then reintroduced to my hearing. At first, it came quietly, as if we were all drowning together and I could hear muffled cries

saying “They’re coming.” By this time, I’d started heading away from the commotion near City Hall and toward Boston Common. I knew why we were there the same as I knew why the police were, yet I still found myself pausing for a moment to look back. I’m not sure if I regret doing this, but not a moment after I peered behind me a hysterical shout broke through the wall of sound.

“Fucking run! Tear gas, live ammunition!”

Immediately the rest of my bodily function was beyond my control. My cousin Ollie and I had attended the protest together, so naturally, we had to make it our top priority to stay safe and stay close. We sprinted across the sidewalk and down into the middle of Boston Common. With the sun long gone the trees loomed over us like heavy netting and cast devilish shadows onto the murky green grass. It was strange being somewhere so familiar while feeling so unsafe. This was the very first protest I would attend out of many others and yet it was the most traumatic and violent by far. My mask had hardly been an issue for our entire march but with the labor of the day and the panic I was now in, the fabric had become so saturated with sweat that it almost suffocated me. I did my best to breathe in deeply but each time I did so it felt as if my chest was splitting in two, right down the middle of my sternum. My brittle bones were already aching, each step in my sprint becoming slower and more painful. Ollie and I attempted to flee and cross the street with another small group that ran in front of us, but they screamed and dispersed when law enforcement set them to a halt. Those of us that could escape fled in the opposite direction.

It became clear to me that I could not outrun the police. If they wanted to beat me, arrest me, kill me, they would. Growing up I had stood by law enforcement, appreciated them, and never quite understood why others seemed to have such a deeply rooted hostility toward them. At that moment clarity came upon me in a way that hurt me more than fists or guns ever could. I valued myself and the people around me did the

same, but I was now aware that society at large—or rather the system at large—saw me as an object. An object of true terror though I was rarely, if ever, the cause of it. Again we tried other directions and each way we were met with an equally frightened group of protesters, everyone's voices high and tight.

*“They’re shooting over here,
No bounce with them rubber bullets!”
Free beatings with batons.
Forced face down for arrest,
A prime-time show on the common lawn.
We’re all the gazelle
Looking to get out when we can.
Everybody’s yellin’
“Better get gone, better go
National Guard is comin’!”*

Ollie and I yelled escape routes to each other back and forth, but it seemed as though we were going to be trapped, and more than likely beaten and arrested, in the Common. The protesters were slowly being corralled inwards and in our animalistic fear, most of us frantically swarmed together for safety, like sardines. Just then the universe had granted us a small favor, a clearing between two restaurant buildings at the front of the Common. The police stood just beyond, maybe a few feet down the sidewalk, but they had thrown over a canister of tear gas, which had cleared out anyone occupying the area. It was risky but Ollie instinctually ran for it and I followed with absolutely no resistance. I didn't care what the hell we did— I just wanted to get out of there and go home. One canister was on the street to our right and its smoke crept over just enough to leave the smell lingering in the air. A second canister came streaking through the air with a trail of smoke but a fellow

protester grabbed the scalding container and tossed it into a trash can a few feet away. It was fairly well contained but the gas still spread out in strongly-odored plumes that clouded the area. I don't remember the particular smell but I do remember the way the smoke traveled into my nose. The fine peppery particles slipped beneath my bandana and got trapped within the fibers of my mask, to the point where I had to take it off and further expose myself during a global pandemic to breathe enough to make it across the street. We did make it, but barely. By now it was probably around 10:30 p.m. The curfew was supposedly set for 9:00 p.m., though no one was ever alerted about it. Cruisers had first driven through the crowd around 9:30 p.m., which means we were trapped in the Common for roughly an hour.

It felt that it had been much longer than that but also a short blip of time. How could it have gotten so violent so quickly? Did we start the riot? Did the police start it? Would every peaceful call for change be met with senseless pain, a reminder of why we were here in the first place? I had these thoughts piling up in the back of my head but they were easily drowned out by my instincts—run, hide, stay alive. Looking back, there were moments where I felt like a coward for my responses. For days Ollie and I had thought up hypothetical escape plans. We bought outfits that would conceal our identity, we made list after checked list of essentials to keep in our bags—we even said we would stay to help if things went wrong or maybe drop our backpacks for others to use.

We did nothing but run.

The echoing screams continued stalking us as we fled from the Common. Even after we had crossed the street, safety was still far beyond our reach. For the next three hours, we would wander around the darkened streets of Roxbury aimlessly. We passed the same side streets and the same signs over and over, or were they the same, or were we even still in Roxbury? I was frightened at this point but it wasn't the sort of all-consuming fear that had come over me in the Common. What I was

feeling now was a disgusting concoction made up of terror, frustration, and absolute bitterness. I could tell Ollie was getting restless and panicked trying to find the car. I knew they were doing the best they could as the older of the two of us to keep me safe and I was grateful for that. Still, I couldn't control the anger that bubbled up within me. At the moment it was all directed toward our carelessness and current misadventures, but I knew that this ugly emotion taking hold of me had its roots planted much deeper than that.

“Yo, this is some bullshit. Fuck the cops, why would they do this? What the hell did we do?!” Ollie's eyes were glued to the GPS app on their phone, but they turned their head in my direction and sighed .

“I don't know.”

“We were leaving! We were peaceful all day and all night! How the hell does us simply standing there give them the go-ahead to mow us down and make arrests?”

“I don't know, I don't know what to say or think anymore.”

“Well...let's keep walking I guess.”

Eventually we gave up and realized we would not find the car, or at least be able to do so safely in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Boston while blood-thirsty officers stalked around every corner like predators. I would not find out until later that the Boston Police Department not only failed to warn the crowd about curfew but also blocked access to the train stations in the city and completely cut anyone's ability to call an Uber, a taxi, or any other mode of transportation they could think of. Several officers were caught on camera celebrating and admitting to running over and striking protesters with their cruisers. It felt like they rehearsed this, maybe made a loose plan between Floyd's killing and the time of the protests. They were waiting and eager for this chaos, it was like open season. After we sat and sulked for a while Ollie called their mother, my Aunt

Angie. The two had a brief spat and then Ollie hung up and turned to me.

“They’ll be here soon.”

“They?”

My grandmother has always insisted on being directly involved in any affair regarding the twenty or so people that make up the family we see often. The situation never tends to be something she was originally a part of, but she will find her way in there and then shame you for never doing things on your own. Knowing that she was coming along for the ride made it an even more unbearable wait on the chilly concrete curb.

After another hour or so my aunt’s silver Saab pulled up. Ollie and I got up as quickly as we could and hobbled into the back seat, straining in pain to fit in behind the pulled-up driver’s seat. Neither my aunt nor my grandmother said a word as we traveled to a dimly lit intersection. I looked out the window to watch the flickering Dunkin’ Donuts sign that we sat across from all night. I remember how mad I was that they would be dropping the word “Donuts” from the name. My cousins and I all ranted about it in my grandmother’s basement though we only ever referred to the fast-food establishment as “Dunk’s” anyway. I was thinking about that moment now because I realized how stupid it was. How could people ever get mad about such trivial things when bigger issues were occurring daily right in front of their faces? The bloodbaths and stripping of dignity are not just horrors found in faraway countries. These atrocities are committed right here in the United States.

*The crystalline clang and crash
Of chips of crackling, shimmering glass
It rings relentlessly in my head.
Replay and remember these words:
Riot gear protects those who riot.
Fearsome confetti flying into the streets
Beneath our feet, it crunches*

*Like the last bowl of sweetened cereal
'Fore that lil black boy's final walk downtown.
Momma picks up his forgotten spoon from the table,
She dries her tears, then she scoops out her heart.*



MARLEY O'NEIL/*Dingy*

ASHLEY ROSE RIVERA

Tabula Rasa

I did not come into this world a blank canvas.
An empty portrait
waiting to be filled with
a cacophony of lines,
colors and shapes.
I was marked before
I took my first breath.

I carry within myself
the pain of my mothers screams,
when she lost her first son to
the waters of a shallow pool,
more than 10 years before me.

I carry within myself
the concussion my father suffered
during the prison riot,
where he was knocked in the head
and forgot who he was—
trying to re-piece it together
ever since.

These experiences flow within me,
rushing through me when I'm debating whether I
forgot to lock my car today
or turned the stove off before I left.

These experiences might be small,
but when they're predisposed with
the looming fear of danger,
I carry them into everything I do.

I once read that the things I carry aren't always mine to hold.
But I don't quite know—
how to let it all go.



ASHLEY ROSE RIVERA/*Y Este Frío*



Hemingway's Typewriter

This is a photo taken of Ernest Hemingway's typewriter at his former home near Cuba, which is now a museum. An employee of the museum took the photograph for a few American dollars using Jonathan Silverman's phone.

EVAN SISLER

Stagnation

It's gonna be the
same as every other day.
Someone will take
their last breath,
someone will meet
the love of their life,
someone will have
their first kiss.
Someone will taste
the beet-red bile of heartbreak.

The sun will crest
over mountains and
flood into valleys and
skip among the rocks and
warm the bellies of lizards, but
not for you.

For you it'll be
plain cheerios with 2% milk,
and microwaved lasagna for lunch.
You'll show up to work and
your boss will complain
about how you didn't get
your edits in on time,
just like he did yesterday.

You'll clock out
and turn on the TV and live
so vicariously even
your dreams won't be
your own.

EVAN SISLER

Thunder Over Louisville

We sit behind and under the Big Four Bridge
which stretches from Louisville over
the Ohio River into Jefferson, on a concrete bench
that's cold like sheet metal, and rough like well water.
Day returns as the sky is filled
with flashes of man-made lightning.
Mom covers my ears and the ringing quiets.
Barium makes them green, strontium red,
copper blue, sodium yellow.
When the fireworks stop, the sparks fall and
blend in with crowds of lightning bugs,
and truck lights, and glow sticks. The
smell of metal and sulfur dances with
funnel cake and smoked ribs.



EVAN SISLER/*Think Anyone's Used That as a Ramp—Iceland Wreckage*

LYNN SULLIVAN

Love's Lie

I was taught that love would always win,
and I believed it.
Every fight settled with a hug,
every tear wiped after an "I love you",
every new scar healed with a kiss.
I believed that every battle could be won through love,
even in a war fueled through hate,
I believed that love could win it all.

I was taught that love would always win,
but I began to doubt it.
Every fight echoed down the hall,
every tear that flowed as he screamed "I'll kill you!"
Every new scar faded over untreated.
I wanted to believe that we would win this war,
but what is there to be won
if there was no love there to begin with?



LYNN SULLIVAN/*Flower*

JEFFREY THERRIAULT

Ode to a First Grade Self-Portrait

I should say some kind words about
Ms. Jameson, but I can only remember
Her big smile, the biggest I'd seen, and
Her "no blurting" sign on the back wall, a ban
Enforced but rarely noticed among the congenial
Old art projects spanning the small room's
White cinder blocks. My mind goes instead
To when I made you, to those white cinder blocks,
To your kin on colored construction paper that
Welcomed you at birth.

My mind goes instead to when you made me, you, the holy little
Graded assignment. You, my first real reflection. It's because of
You that my head is round, that my earlobes are attached, that
My shoulders come away from my neck on either side.
It's because your dish of markers was only so deep that
My skin is a bright key lime color, and the sky around me
(Coming all the way down to meet the horizon line)
Is more purple than some say it should be.

You have a smile, so I have one too. You gaze straight
Forward, so I follow your example. It's why you still hang
In my cerebral reading room, so I can see you, and
Measure myself against you, and become you. And I
Don't think you're ever coming off that mantel.

JEFFREY THERRIAULT

If You See a Man in Shining Armor, Call This Number

So many times I bent down
To marvel at a piece of broken glass
On the ragged tarmac outside my house.
And was too new to know
About everything that had put it there,

About the Budweiser it came from,
About the young man who commemorated
That finished drink by tossing its bottle at
The telephone pole with the “children at play” sign,
As he rode by in his buddy’s sedan
On his only night to enjoy himself before
The sun rose in about as many hours as there were
Feet from the car to the pole,

Inconsiderate of the damage,
Of the shards it would splash
Into the road and at the edges of lawns
That grew into the cracks of the sidewalk,
Inconsiderate because everyone
Needs to be messy sometimes,
And all he commanded was a bottle and some
Newly dulled inhibitions to be messy with.

And the next week I would find a small fortune of gems,
Beautifully cut crystals plucked from a dragon’s tomb
By a great hero, that had tumbled from

His chest of spoils as he paraded up the hill past the
Telephone pole in front of the paper mill.
And I wished I could find that hero to give
His lost treasure back.

DREW THIBEAULT

New England Accent

My big Jew nose,
perfectly connected to the center of my face,
right beneath my unibrow and right above my poorly trimmed 'stache.
I am oddly proud of it,
reminds me of home.
I am not Jewish,
the concept of religion goes right over my head.
I have never seen the inside of a synagogue,
nor have I ever had a proper Passover dinner.

I came directly from the loins of a nonpracticing, heavily tattooed,
all-pork-consuming, dope-smoking, insurance-fraud-committing,
no-f***s-giving individual of Jewish descent,
who happened to celebrate a bar mitzvah as a child.

He's the one who gave me my big Jew nose.
The town-folk know him as Art.
"Arty the one-man party."
They know him as the coach, the trusty cook,
the man to turn to for old-school guidance.

It's crazy how the oldest of souls often need guidance the most.
A sick twist of fate,
an unforgiving slippery slope of descent,
gradual in nature yet accentuated given certain circumstances.
Life is incredibly too short.
There's no time for grudges, no room for resentment.

You wear your Jew nose, you wear it proud,
stick it right into people's unsuspecting eyes,
uncomfortably in the face of those who dare make fun of it.

ANDREW WILCOX

Lightyears from Home

Maria Galven pressed her hand on the digital pad next to her home's front door, waiting for the soft *ding* before she walked inside. The house was empty, no sounds of her father pouring water to hydrate food or her brother messing around with the holo-pads. Immediately ahead of her were the living quarters, with the couches surrounding the holographic table in the center. Behind it was the kitchen and at the other end of the house was a glass doorway that led out onto her backyard. To her right was the staircase up to the second floor, a dull orange glowing down the stairs from the ceiling light.

She walked upstairs to her room, went inside, placed her bag down next to her bed, and lay flat on her sheets. She could feel how heavy her eyes had become by the end of the day. She was still a late elementary student, only fourteen years old, but she started to understand why her father always came back from work and slumped on the couch, playing the first thing he could find on the holo-table before snoring into the night. She thought about class at the end of the day, history with Mr. Perkins. He was reading texts from his holo-pad, and they were all following along with him on theirs. They were reading about Earth's colonization of Seulia, and why the Earth Enforcers were present on the planet. Rumor around the school was that years ago, when he read the same texts, he had a sudden fit of rage and smashed his holo-pad on the floor before storming out. Many of the kids watched now, either waiting to cry or laugh hysterically, when Mr. Perkins lost his composure again.

Maria looked on her holo-pad, watching the text and 3-D images emerge out of the screen. They read about the discovery of Seulian fuel in the sulfur caves of the planet. They read about Earth's initiative to

get people to move out here, offering acres of land to be freely tended by those who agreed to settle and work in the mines. They read about the progression of the colony over the decades, the shift from small colony homes to the cities. She looked at the images next to the paragraphs. She saw men and women in suits and ties, bustling through city streets to their hover cars. She saw Enforcers in their familiar outfits, the white dome helmets that covered their faces and the broad, chalk uniforms over their body. And she saw images of miners, people in dull, somewhat ripped gray clothes, yellow sulfur dusted on their cheeks. She realized she had never seen a Miner before. She had lived in her little suburban home her whole life, and she knew from what her father told her that the Mining District was only just a few kilometers away. But it was blocked off heavily by Enforcer checkpoints, allowing only special access in. She looked carefully at them. She saw cuts and gashes all over their hands and faces.

Mr. Perkins continued and reached the end of the section they were reading. It stated that the Enforcers and the checkpoints, along with the regular Enforcer background checks and surveys, were a necessary part for ensuring stability on Seulia. Everyone in the class seemed to go silent. The class alarm rang as Mr. Perkins looked back at them, took in a deep breath, and placed the holo-pad down on his desk.

“Class dismissed.” he said.

Everyone got up out of their seats, either rushing to get out of the classroom, or muttering to their friends in disappointment that Mr. Perkins didn’t go crazy after all. But Maria figured if he was really an anti-Earther, then he had to keep quiet. Maybe some of the kids in the class had family who were Enforcers. But then again, no one ever seemed to talk about that.

And then as she lay in her bed at home, she remembered the reading Mr. Perkins assigned earlier in the week, the one they were going to be quizzed on in a few days. It wasn’t too big of a deal, she was a

quick reader all things considered. Her brother and father hardly read, choosing to watch the games on the holo-table or in her brother's case playing strictly with his virtual reality console. But reading always had a soft spot for her. Whenever they read books in literature class, she imagined all the people in her head like the holographic people her father watched at night. She felt a part of them, seeing their faces vividly in her mind with each word. Where her brother would groan at reading assignments, Maria would think reading wasn't so bad. But she didn't want to think about homework right now, not when her eyes were this heavy, and so she finally let them close shut. She felt herself ease into the soft mattress beneath her. Then she felt herself being taken out of her room. Taken to a moment in her past.

Her dream took her back to a time she had somewhat forgotten about, a time where she was in the backyard with her father, laying on the grass. Her father, who always seemed to tower over her small body, now seemed down to her size, and she nuzzled into his arms. She could see thousands of stars in the sky, and she was awestruck at the galactic cloud spanning its way across her vision. Her father tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned to look at him. The memory became more fragmented, yet she could clearly remember the seconds that followed. She remembered how mesmerizing it was seeing the sky in her father's irises, the way it danced as his eyes moved.

"You see that, Maria," he told her, pointing to the sky. She followed his finger up into the night, navigating to a little white dot in the sea of many more. "That's Sol."

"What's Sol?"

"It's where Earth is, where every single person comes from."

She let out a little excited gasp. She looked at it intently, watching it twinkle and blink, and she wondered if people on Earth ever looked up at their sky at night and saw her little star. Then, she looked at her father.

“Dad, why doesn’t anyone talk about Earth here?”

He looked at her as he stuttered a little on his words before her mother opened the backdoor and called them both in for chocolate smoothies.

Maria didn’t really remember her mother, she died sometime when Maria was four. Her most vivid memory of her may have even been that night. Most of what she heard about her mother went through her father, as did most other things. If Maria asked him about her, he deflected to Maria’s studies or chores. When Maria was seven, she curiously looked through her father’s personal holo-pad one night while he snored on the couch behind her. She found an old file about a hospital fire in Lancaster, buried in his work apps. She remembered looking through the texts, seeing names, and then images of people, faces with a word she didn’t know underneath, Deceased. She swore for a second that she saw what she remembered, vaguely, to be the thin face of her mother. But then her father let out a little grunt and Maria swiped the holo-pad closed and rushed upstairs before he could catch her. And Maria’s memory of her remained just that, a time long forgotten, and an old file on a forgotten holo-pad.

Then, a noise downstairs yanked her awake. She opened her eyes and sat up in bed. It was a muffled conversation, but she could hear the rasp in the voice and the familiarity of its pitch. It was her father, talking with her brother outside. She walked up to her compartment door and pressed her ear against it. Her father was yelling, but as he got closer to the home, she heard him hiss “Shush!” before he pressed his hand and unlocked the door.

“Maria!” he called up. She said nothing back. “Go see if your sister is home.”

“Dad,” she heard her brother say lowly, “I’m so sorry.”

“Upstairs, David.”

Then she heard steps on the stairs. She flicked her light off fast

and dove into her bed, throwing the blankets over her, pretending to be asleep. She shut her eyes tight and remained as still as possible.

Her door opened and she heard her brother whisper her name but she didn't move or say a word. Something told her she didn't want to be involved, not if her brother was being yelled at. She was too tired and if they were both in trouble, she wanted to at least wait to hear it at dinner. He whispered one more time, before he shut her door and walked out.

"She's asleep," he mumbled.

"I'll wake her up. Pack your bags and get ready to leave."

Maria's eyes shot open. She sat up in bed quickly because for a second, she didn't really care about the act. All she cared about were those four words. *Get ready to leave*. The door opened again, and she clumsily scratched her eyes, partially acting but also partially removing the crust from her eyes.

"Dad?" she asked. "Hey, honey. How was school?"

"Dad, what's wrong?"

He paused. Then, he asked her if he could turn the light on. She nodded and the lighting changed from a dim orange to a bright white. She saw him in his suit, the gray shirt, and pants. She saw the golden insignia on his right shirt pocket, the logo of the three people. There was a woman to the left, a man to the right, and in its middle was a man adorned in robes and sashes. His head stood in the planet's center— it was the Earth, and its edges touched the other two people. A stream swung around the planet, trailing a spacecraft, and underneath everything read the words, *Per Aspera Ad Astra*, a language she had never heard of.

His silver hair was matted and rough, and for the first time she could see the wrinkles on his face, wrinkles she had never paid attention to because every day she saw her father and saw the same man with the night sky spanning across his eyes. He sat down on the other end of the bed, and then looked at her again.

“I really didn’t want to tell you like this.”

“What’s *wrong*?” she asked again, feeling her heart pick up a little.

He took a deep breath, reached into his pocket and pulled out a little piece of parchment. He handed it to her. Inscribed on it were rough letters in black ink, reading, *you’ve got blood on your hands, Warbird. You’re dead!* She looked back up at him. *You’re dead.* It rang in her head, and she could hear the gnashing in its tone. She didn’t know what to say, and she hardly knew what to think as her mind became lighter. She could only feel her heart sink into her nauseating stomach. Who was threatening them? And what was that word before it? *Warbird.*

“Your brother found that in his locker after school. He got drunk last weekend, told a couple friends something he shouldn’t have.”

“Like what?” He paused. Then, he looked her straight in the eyes.

“That we’re from Earth. I told your brother when he was your age, and I was going to tell you, but—” he let out a little cough. “People on Seulia don’t really like Earthlings,” he cleared his throat and looked down, “or Enforcers.” He looked back at her. “But now you should know. About our family, our name—”

“Our name?” she blurted out.

She had been under the impression that they were all Galvens, not *Warbirds*. She became lighter, not just because someone threatened her brother. She didn’t want to pack and leave the neon trees, the crimson grass, or the amber sunsets. All she knew was this little home, this little house where her father used to read them bedtime stories, where her brother helped teach her Gravity Ball in the backyard, where she fed the blue-chested Robins breadcrumbs because she liked their music in the morning and wanted them to stay. Couldn’t they go to the Enforcers about this maniac? Couldn’t they *lie* again?

“Why do we have to pack?” He took in a slow breath. “It’s time I told you the truth about our family.” Their grandfather wasn’t just

someone from Earth looking to start anew in one of the colonies. He was in the Enforcer Corps, and for years he served in the cities of New London and Old Moscow on Earth. The Collective Earth Council noticed a concerning amount of open resistance and protests to the working conditions of Miners and Refiners on Seulia. The more the Enforcers pushed back, the larger the resistance became. Earth sent reinforcements, and then weeks later, the news was filled with the story of Seulian Miners storming an Enforcer barracks and armory, stealing weapons, and fleeing. That was when Earth started to rally their platoons.

Their grandfather, assigned to one of the regimes charged with returning order, was briefed on his mission alongside thousands more in the hangar of an Enforcer Spaceport. The Head Councilman personally oversaw them all in a speech before their mission. He bore on him the same black robes and rose-gold sashes he wore on the insignia of all Earth workers and Enforcers, the insignia of the Collective Earth. “Unity,” he spoke through a massive hologram erupting into the air. He stood tall over the masses of Enforcers, his digital head just barely brushing the top of the metal hangar. “Unity is all we have sought. The miners on Seulia now want to bring that unity down. They storm our young cities, terrorizing the citizens who left our Earth to brave the unknown. No more! You will restore that unity!”

They all raised their fists into the air and chanted. Cheers erupted, and through all this noise their grandfather felt his nerves fire through his chest, and elation that nearly sent him jumping into the air. He had chanted along with them, getting louder. All he could imagine were history books talking about what they were about to do, the same history books that told him about the discovery of the Hyper Engine, the first Earth colonists, the big names of scientists and explorers whose mission into the unknown were forever immortalized into school curriculums and statues. He grabbed his laser rifle, not thinking about the fact that

they were being armed like a military to handle some miners that were lightyears from Earth. All he could think about was the speech. *Unity, unity, unity.*

The Uprising was handled quickly once his platoon and the other reinforcements landed. Mandatory checkpoints and citizen bar-codes were required to access divided sectors of the planet. Miners and Refiners were sent back to their respective sectors, surrounded heavily by Enforcer checkpoints. The rebels, who still openly fought as the Enforcers established the new Earth laws, were dealt with fast. And so, as their grandfather drank Seulian Beer on a cliffside three weeks after his deployment with a few of his squad-mates, they raised their mugs into the air and drank the night away to unity.

His deployment on Seulia went on for another few months. Most Enforcer higher-ups were certain that rebel cells still existed in hiding, and so their grandfather wouldn't be able to go back home anytime soon. But action was soon limited to monitoring the checkpoints and occasionally visiting the city a few kilometers away for some breakfast with his squad mates whenever they could spare a little time. One morning, they ran off to Lancaster to get some food. Then he met their grandmother on his way to breakfast. She was running through people, wearing a white lab-coat, a clear phone in her right ear as she nodded at whatever was being told to her. A satchel slouched over her shoulders, and she bumped into their grandfather, papers falling onto the ground. He went to help her pick it all up.

“Still use physical copies?” he asked. She smiled.

“Not everything is digital around here.” “Clearly.” He chuckled, and then put his hand out. “Martin Warbird.” She put hers out and shook it saying, “Emily Galven.”

And off they went in their separate directions, before a week later, when he came to the city again. He saw her, walking in her lab coat to work on the same road and at the same time as their last meeting. He

took in a deep breath and went to say hi. She remembered him, and so they talked, about what he couldn't remember, but they just kept talking before eventually, they agreed to get dinner together sometime. And then they started meeting each other whenever they could spare time, and then those meet-ups became a regular occurrence, and before he knew it, they were together, two strangers who loved each other's company and would sneak off to meet up whenever they could manage.

Then he was assigned to the mines to monitor the workers. He hadn't been in the mines before, only around them, only around the checkpoints and in the towns where miners had stormed during their rebellion. He figured that it couldn't be as boring as sitting outside and checking identification. So, he grabbed his taser baton like the other Enforcers on duty and lined up to go into the mines. He stood around all day, his knees aching as he took short labored breaths through the rotten smell of sulfur permeating in the air, wishing he was checking identification. As he watched the miners charge their drills and dig them into the yellow rocks, pulling out red and green stones, he noticed something going on to his right. There was a man and a woman arguing with a guard. He went to go help with the situation, but then he saw a little girl between them, and he stopped. There was sulfur smeared across her face, the tears cleaning it off in streaks. The Enforcer grabbed the little girl, yanking her off the ground and taking her deeper into the mines. The mother went after her, before being shoved to the ground by another Enforcer who came with two others. And then they pulled out their taser batons, activating it and shocking her into the ground. The father watched, handcuffed away as the little girl screamed. *Mommy!*

Their grandfather left the mines as the sun set across the Crimson Plains on the other side of the quarry. He walked past the shacks of miners, looking around at them. All he could see were people slouched by the sides of their metal homes, homes they must've built themselves. Some of them drained water out of their towels and into

their mouths. Some of them ate what looked like bread from rusted pieces of scrap. It hit him as he looked around that these people looked nothing like the images of Seulian terrorists back home, back on the holograms that depicted them with grinding teeth and blood dripping from their hands. He hadn't even considered the fact that these people were mining the same rocks that would be refined into the fuel he used to pump into his hovercar back on Earth. Or that he passed holographic advertisements of companies making new hovercar models, the same companies who helped fund these mines.

He couldn't find that little girl anywhere as he looked, couldn't find her mother or father. He cried under his helmet, wondering if she was okay, wondering if her mother ever got up and went looking for her, and if she told her everything was fine while Enforcers pointed guns at them. He went to bed that night, feeling his stomach churning, forgetting what it was like to feel elated at the word unity and not feverish and sick.

His platoon left Seulia a month later. He kissed their grandmother goodbye and promised her he would be back. When he returned to Earth, he submitted his resignation, went through all the tedious bureaucratic validations and signings, and when he was finally free from the corps weeks later, he bought a ticket on a flight to Seulia. He contacted their grandmother and moved in with her immediately after he landed. He changed his last name to Galven, hiding his real identity and name from the local Seulians. Stories were talking about Seulian rebels who ambushed Enforcer hover cars, killing the riders, then scurrying back into the dark. Stories of retired Enforcers being found beaten in the alleyways of Lancaster. The days and years grew on, and to Seulia he remained as Martin Galven. Then they had their first son.

He stayed home to help raise Maria's father while their grandmother worked in her lab a few blocks away. When their father Freddie was old enough to go to school, their grandfather took up a small job as a janitor. He told their father he had to stay busy, because when he wasn't, he was

reminded that a few kilometers away was the first checkpoint bordering off the entrance into the Mining District. A checkpoint he used to work. And all he could think about was that little girl, her cries echoing across the sulfur caves. *Mommy, mommy, mommy.*

Maria froze in her bed. She had never learned about the Uprising, about Seulian rebellion. But then she realized why she had never known if anyone in her class had family who were Enforcers, why it had always been speculation for her.

“What does this mean, Dad?” Her father wiped his face. “Pack your bags, honey” he said, “we’ve got family back on Earth, we’ll need a place to stay for a while.” “Will we come back?” He got up off the bed and walked to the door. “We’ll see.” He left and closed the door. And then she was alone. They left fast later that night and were headed for the Spaceport. She had her tickets for Earth downloaded onto a little holopad in her hands, to be scanned in the terminal. They all kept silent in the car until they saw the Spaceport come into view on their left. Then Maria thought of the Earth, of the golden insignia which was stitched on her father’s uniform.

“Dad,” she began, “what does ‘Per Aspera Ad Astra’ mean?” Her father paused, and then dryly sighed. “It’s Latin, it means, ‘Through hardships to the stars.’”

It was the first thing anyone said since they packed, other than her father’s “Get in the car” or “Do you have everything?” He probably didn’t even think about what was glued onto his uniform every day. And then she thought about how her neighborhood was filled with educated workers like her father. She thought that just outside of the city were the shacks of the miners, blocked off by Enforcer checkpoints. She thought how those miners dug up some rocks all day, guns pointed at them. The same rocks that powered the hovercar they were driving in now. Then they arrived at the terminal. She boarded the ship and sat down in her seat next to the window. They took off, and as the ship hummed through

the clouds and out of the atmosphere, Maria's eyes began to droop. She couldn't stay awake to watch her world fade into the stars. She couldn't stay awake to hear the Hyper Engine power up. Instead, she slept, and dreamed of the backyard, her little body jumping as her mother poured her a chocolate smoothie.

LANNIE WRIGHTINGTON

The Ghost of You

At night I close my eyes and hope to dream of you long enough to hear your voice again. It's almost like I can still feel the heat from your side of the bed, and I can never seem to pull myself away from it. Your shadow lingers within the walls and burrows your memories into the simplest things. They're in the coffee cup you used every morning. Its handle is chipped and the paint's worn away in the spot you would rub as you watched the morning news. They're in the horrifying clown painting you put up in the living room because I let you pick one thing by yourself. They're in the torn up Nascar shirt that you wore at least once a week, and the frog soap dish you insisted we buy because he looked lonely.

I aimlessly roam around as the thin layer of dust collecting on your cup seems to get thicker by the second. I occupy myself because I can't handle the reminder of the love I had and lost. Sharp pains of grief chisel away at my chest as though it's trying to make a sculpture of something far more beautiful than I alone could ever be. As if to make up for the loss, it's creating something extravagant within me. Though not even God himself could create something as miraculous as you. You were an enamoring enigma who gifted me their forever wrapped up in a worn down Nascar t-shirt. And an endless ache echoes throughout my soul because despite it all, I can never give you mine.

Contributors

Brigid Archibald graduated from UMass Lowell in May 2021 with a BA in English. While at UMass Lowell she wrote for UMass Lowell's student newspaper, *The Connector*, and served as editor-in-chief her senior year. Most recently she has worked with L.E.A.D.S. to help create a curriculum on climate change for Lowell's public schools.

Tom Bojsen is a freshman majoring Music Performance on electric bass. He has been taking photos for his Instagram @knunky for three and a half years and is still going strong. His music is inspired by funk bands like Vulfpeck and Steely Dan. He hopes to play gigs around the country.

Jason Bourret is an English/Creative Writing major and is grateful to be featured once again in *The Offering*. He would like to thank everyone who has encouraged his writing, with a special shoutout to his friend, Megan, for helping him title this year's submissions.

Jessie Daniliuk is a sophomore English/Creative Writing major with a minor in Digital Media. She is a reader for *The Offering* and vice president of Sigma Tau Delta. She thanks her friends and family for always reading her pieces and showing endless support.

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Jordan Harrington is a junior English/Creative Writing major with a minor in History. By the time he graduates he hopes to release his first collection of poetry. He thanks his friends, family, and professors/mentors for their support of his writing.

Vathanak Hok is senior Business/Marketing major. He captured the graceful scenery of Heartpond Lake, Chelmsford, at dawn in the fall. He found a little calm and peace in the picture and is thankful for the beautiful vibration nature provided and the opportunity to share it with everybody through *The Offering*.

Joe Keane is a senior English/Creative Writing major with minors in Digital Media and Marketing. He is on the E-Board of the Improv Club and the UML Filmmakers and Multimedia Club. He hopes to finish a few more short stories by the end of this year.

Julia Lawliss is a senior English major who will graduate in May with her second bachelor's degree from UMass Lowell. She has been writing consistently since her high school days, and finds inspiration in little things, such as a smile or a piece of music. It is her goal to publish a book of poetry. She sends her love and thanks to her family and friends for their endless support and encouragement.

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Megan McIlvenny attended UMass Lowell for the Fall 2021 semester as an international exchange student from Germany.

Jay Monteiro is a senior English/Creative Writing major. They currently divide their time between painting, writing poetry, and advocating for human rights and social justice. They hope their art, regardless of its form, will have a positive impact on the community and the world beyond.

Marley O'Neil is a staff member in Electrical and Computer Engineering currently serving as the department administrator. She started her own landscape photography print business in 2017, Marley's Creations Studio. She has been featured in several shows including monthly showings at the Liberty Hotel in Boston, The Salem Flea in Salem, and the markets at Mill No. 5 in Lowell.

Ashley Rose Rivera is managing editor of *The Offering*, editor-in-chief of the *The Connector*, and lead mentor for UMass Lowell's financial literacy program. She is a junior English/Creative Writing major. She thanks her loved ones for always supporting her and is grateful to be a part of her extracurriculars.

Jonathan Silverman is a professor of English and director of the American Studies program at UMass Lowell.

Evan Sisler is a senior English major minoring in Philosophy and working towards a master's degree in education at UMass Lowell. He is managing editor and a copy editor for *The Connector*. He is passionate about tabletop roleplaying games and gamification for education and is developing a tabletop game for his honors capstone.

Lynn Sullivan is a junior English/Literature major with a Theatre Arts minor who loves to spend her free time writing creatively. This year she joined the editorial staff of *The Offering* as a reader. She would like to thank her friends and family for always being so supportive in all her endeavors and for their endless love.

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Drew Thibeault is a senior English/Creative Writing major. He has filmmaking aspirations and will graduate in the December 2022. He writes mostly about his family and the city of Lowell, and is interested in any human story that catches his attention.

Caitlyn Coleman is a senior English/Creative Writing major. She enjoys writing about the realities of life and learning how to be an adult. She thanks her family for their constant and unwavering support of her writing.

Andrew Wilcox is a junior English/Creative Writing major. He is assistant sports editor for the *The Connector*. He hopes to publish his novel, *The Shrouded Killer*, before he graduates. He thanks his friends, family, and teachers for always supporting him in what he loves doing.

Lannie Wrightington is a English/Creative Writing major with a minor in Psychology. She hopes to publish a collection of poems about mental health and grief after she graduates. She thanks her mom for her encouragement and support in doing what makes her heart sing.

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