



*A. Betko*

# THE OFFERING

UNIVERSITY OF  
MASSACHUSETTS  
LOWELL

2024



# THE OFFERING

A PUBLICATION OF THE UMASS LOWELL LITERARY SOCIETY

2024

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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 in 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. Submissions are generally open from early November to mid-February, and the magazine appears 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](mailto:offering@uml.edu) or contact the club advisors, Professors Maggie Dietz [[maggie\\_dietz@uml.edu](mailto:maggie_dietz@uml.edu)] and Maureen Stanton [[maureen\\_stanton@uml.edu](mailto:maureen_stanton@uml.edu)].

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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, mill workers Harriet Farley and Harriot Curtis became co-editors. They produced the magazine until its final publication in 1845. Charles Dickens, during an 1842 visit to America, extolled the city of Lowell, and 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 labors of the day, that it will compare advantageously with a great many English Annuals.”

The Editorial Team finds it fitting that the name of the University of Massachusetts Lowell's literary magazine reflects the city's rich cultural and literary heritage. They hope working on these pages will honor and contribute to that legacy.

## Contents

CAYLEIGH BAILLARGEON		
<i>Poetry</i>	Burned by the melting pot	11
EMELI DIAZ		
<i>Essay</i>	Getting Around	12
LYNN SULLIVAN		
<i>Play</i>	Liv's Reel	21
ALEKSANDER BETKO		
<i>Visual Art</i>	View from a Moving Cab	28
JASON BOURRET		
<i>Poetry</i>	Tied Down	29
KILEY MCNEIL		
<i>Essay</i>	Only Child	31
MILLICENT BASLER		
<i>Short Story</i>	Nelly	33
JESSICA DANILIUK		
<i>Visual Art</i>	Night Pond	37
BARNARD V. KROUCH		
<i>Poetry</i>	Love and Other Lies	38
NAOMI OKEKE		
<i>Essay</i>	A Girl by Any Other Name	39
TYESHA PARSON		
<i>Short Story</i>	Memory's Creek	41
KARINA DIAZ		
<i>Visual Art</i>	La Isla del Encanto	47

JAY MONTEIRO			
<i>Poetry</i>		Blood Vials	48
DOMENICK SPADEA			
<i>Essay</i>		Setlist	49
DAVID GEENIS			
<i>Short Story</i>	She was Buried in an Unmarked Grave		53
MICHAEL MAKIEJ			
<i>Visual Art</i>		Untitled	56
GWEN MORRIS			
<i>Poetry</i>		The Family Tree	57
LONDON VERDEJO TORRES			
<i>Essay</i>	Such is the Life of Prodigal Sons		58
AARON WISWALL			
<i>Short Story</i>		The Basement	67
JACOB MORIN			
<i>Visual Art</i>		Upon Avon	74
SARAH OMAR			
<i>Poetry</i>	One Night in the Sudanese Desert		75
MATTHEW VOGEL			
<i>Essay</i>		American Oak	76
YAIRE ORTEGA			
<i>Visual Art</i>	Lawrence River Front Park		81
TRAVIS PARADISE			
<i>Poetry</i>		Daddy Is	82
<i>Poetry</i>		Pep Talk	83

MARLEY O'NEIL			
<i>Visual Art</i>		Untitled 5	84
GARRETT SILVEIRA			
<i>Visual Art</i>		Automobile	85
LEXI PERRY			
<i>Poetry</i>	Foundations of Troughs and Crests		86
<i>Poetry</i>		Metronome	87
A. DAVID WUNSCH			
<i>Visual Art</i>		Manhattan	88
ZACHARY ZOLUD			
<i>Visual Art</i>		Hazy Horizon in Italy	89
LONDON VERDEJO TORRES			
<i>Poetry</i>		In the Cell	90
CONTRIBUTORS			93

Cover photo: Aleksander Betko / *Mae Preta*



CAYLEIGH BAILLARGEON

## Burned by the melting pot

I once dated a boy whose mother  
had the same maiden name  
as my *mémère*.  
It was a fairly common name  
in Canada, and we shared no known relatives.  
Still, I held my breath at family reunions  
because what the fuck

but it turns out that wasn't really her family name  
her German father just picked  
a French one when he came here  
and settled in the Canadian pocket of Lowell.  
It was better to be French than German then,  
or at least it was in this immigrant city.

His children spoke English  
but attended French speaking schools  
and were forced to figure it out.  
My father swears he spoke French  
as a child but as an adult  
he could not help me with my French homework.

*Ostie de colon*  
the only French phrase left in the house  
and the people of France wouldn't even  
understand it.

At every opportunity to assimilate  
too many relatives  
rejected their own culture  
and erased our history  
at our expense.

EMELI DIAZ

## Getting Around

### • Carro Concho

As an eleven-year-old girl who had to go to the dentist in the Dominican Republic, it was cheaper for Mami to flag down one of the cars that went around with their assigned route than to take a taxi. It cost less than twenty-five pesos for each person, less than fifty cents. Sometimes, we got lucky and rode the Carro Concho with three others. Still, most of the time, the driver ensured he got the most out of the ride and fit up to five people in the back and two in the front passenger seat. As I looked out the window, once we got through the reckless traffic, a man in the streets selling mangoes offered to cut one and put the slices in a small plastic bag for a man standing before him. Mami never wanted to buy fruit from him because she said we didn't know how often he cleaned his knives. I would also see a tall black woman with a giant bowl over her head holding peanut candy to sell in the streets while a little boy had her hand.

As we navigated through the streets, the only thing I could hear was the arguing of the people in the streets complaining about the driver's reckless driving and the passengers as they would loudly say, "Chofer, en la próxima esquina," so that the driver knew to leave them on the next corner. I never really complained about being tucked in the back seat with four or five other people or the front seat with Mami; it felt like part of the monthly adventure of going to the dentist. Still, the smell ... the smell of sweat always made rides unenjoyable. Thankfully, Mami always had a solid and invigorating perfume that could gracefully fill your nostrils with its sweet scent as if protecting them from the body odors from the mixture of people tucked in the back seat.

Personal Rating: 3.5/5

## • Taxi

This was my other option for a ride to get to the dentist as a kid. Three years with braces included a lot of appointments that only sometimes aligned with Papi's work schedule, so he couldn't take me. However, Mami always figured it out, even if she didn't have a car. Mami was always on top of everything, so it was rare for us to be late anywhere. She would always get dressed in tight jeans, a nice blouse, a simple shirt, and sneakers, with the excuse, "Tu nunca sabes si hay que mandarse o algo." As beautiful as the Dominican Republic is, with its beautiful palms that surround many of the streets and clear-water beaches that are to die for, it's still a dangerous country when you get deep into some parts of the cities. So, the idea of being ready to run away from somebody trying to rob you or away from a random fight that would send plastic chairs flying would have my mom worried but ready to take flight.

No matter how hot and humid it was, she made sure to powder her light skin and put a blush on her cheeks to conceal the possible paleness left by her powder. Her hair was left for last because all she had to do was take off her tubi, which took care of her long jet-black hair as she got ready. Even if I thought so, she could have been better, so there were some occasions when we were running late. A carro concho wasn't an option, so calling a taxi was the way to go. This meant a hundred and fifty pesos, which was about three dollars. It meant a ride with a driver who usually had the music taste of any Dominican old man, listening to bachata and merengue from the 80s. The seats were comfortable enough to feel relaxed, and I had a small conversation with Mami about what color I would choose for the rubber bands of my braces. Being so comfortable allowed me to appreciate the man selling mangoes more.

Nonetheless, it made me question whether he had to sell mangoes to feed his family. How about providing a good education for his kids? Was he able to spend quality time with his family? He seemed so happy whenever someone asked for a bag, as he would give it to them with a big

smile. Sadly, my inquiries would be interrupted by the bachata playing from the car's radio and the driver's failed attempt to sing, just like the bachatero. At least there wasn't an aggressive smell of sweat. Instead, it was a mixture of the Little Trees Black Ice air freshener and my mom's strong but sweet perfume. Oh, wait! I could also smell my vanilla body spray. That was nice.

Personal Rating: 4/5

### • Papi's Car

Even if my dentist appointments didn't align with Papi's schedule, he always took me and my younger brother, Angel, to school in the mornings. Angel wasn't a morning person; his big round eyes would look small because of his morning frown, but his long lashes, round small cheeks, and spiky dark brown hair made him look like a cute angry bird. Papi didn't have a sense of smell, but he always had a clean car with a neutral, clean smell. However, if he had woken up in time and taken a shower before taking us, the scent of his Nivea lotion would fill the car.

Even when Papi moved out of the house, he always took us to school. He wasn't as punctual as Mami was, so there were plenty of occasions when we had to wait a few minutes outside the school until the Dominican National Anthem was done playing for the Guachimán (Dominican way of saying Watchman) to let us in, knowing I would be called out by my teacher for being late. On our way there, Papi would ask how things were going at school and home while salsa was played on the radio, mainly songs by Marc Anthony. Sometimes, he would even sing to Angel and me and tap the steering wheel to the rhythm of the music while we cringed in our seats. To avoid the awkwardness of the moment, I would look out the window and see how the empty streets got busier as we approached our school and Papi's tanned hand as he gave me fifty pesos for lunch, which was about a dollar. As he handed me the bill while slowing down to drop us off, I saw his round eyes and thick eyebrows in the rearview mirror. He

winked at me in a comforting way, as if he was telling me, "You got this!" He then looked back to make sure Angel and I didn't fall as we got out of the car, allowing me to perceive our similarities. People would always say that I look like a cute girl version of him. Still, the only similarities I could see were the round eyes and thick eyebrows, and maybe I got the thin upper lip from him too; it's not like we have thin lips; it's just the upper lip that almost seems to vanish as we smile... I guess we do look a lot alike.

Personal rating: 4.5/5

#### • Airplane

My option was to leave the country and move to the United States. Right after Christmas, flights were about a thousand dollars for a round trip. Although we only needed a one-way ticket, Mami said it was better to buy the round trip to avoid suspicion from immigration. We were supposed to stay with a tourist visa for a short time. I overheard Mami saying that once six months had passed, we could no longer come back because we would officially be undocumented. Undocumented? What did that mean? I heard undocumented people can't go to college or legally work ... so why were we doing this if not to have a better life and live the "American Dream."

Once we got onto the airplane, Mami let me take the window seat. I could see how the sky was full of clouds that occasionally didn't cover most of the view, which allowed me to see the land I was leaving behind. I looked at the bag of cookies opened on my lap and couldn't finish. The loud thoughts wouldn't let me sleep. I was going to a new school. I'd been to three different schools, and making it easy was not hard, so that wasn't a challenge. Wait, a new language ... I'm smart enough to learn it eventually, or am I? How cold are winters? I've heard people have to wear many layers but still feel cold. These intrusive thoughts were often interrupted by the occasional questions from Angel, wondering if I was as excited as he was. I wish I was as enthusiastic as he was.

Personal rating: 2/5

### • School Bus

As a thirteen-year-old freshman in high school, I had to wake up at around 5:30 a.m. every day to catch the bus to school. I had to be at the bus stop at 6:34 a.m., and yes, at that exact time; the bus driver had no mercy when it came to time. Couldn't she just wait until 6:35? On snowy days, I had to go to the bus stop. Sometimes, I would leave my house ten to fifteen minutes early, even though it was only a three-minute walk. My grandma once jokingly told me that once you fall on a snowy day, you never leave this country; it must've been some Dominican superstition. I knew she said that, so I would be careful while on the snow since she knew I wanted to go back to the Dominican Republic ... hopefully, that was the purpose of it. It was, right? Well, it took at least three years for me to fall on a snowy day, and I was okay with it, although my ass wasn't.

At this time, the sun would still be down. I was starting my mornings as if they were nights. I could also see my breath steaming in the cold weather until I had the chance to get on the bus, and if I got there early, waiting ten minutes would feel like an eternity because of how cold it would get; I could barely feel my nose. I couldn't believe I didn't get sick as often at the time, but it was probably because of the number of layers Mami would force me to wear. I looked like a penguin as I walked.

Personal Rating: 3/5

### • Public Bus

As a nineteen-year-old who didn't have her license, this was one of my options to go to work at AMC. In Lawrence, public transportation was free. Sometimes, my grandpa would give me a ride, and sometimes I would take an Uber. But usually, this was my preferred method of transportation. Typically, it smelled humid during winter and like sweaty armpits during the summer. However, other scents would fill the air depending on the time and who was close to me. One day, it could have been the perfume of a lady sitting right behind me or the vanilla perfume that rubbed off my scarf, covering my nose.

I usually sat in the back, which allowed me to see how most people riding the bus were older and probably going home from buying groceries. Sometimes, I could see how they showed pictures of their grandkids to the passengers sitting next to them, and at times, when I had to sit at the front, I had a chance to look at those pictures as well; those kids were so cute! I usually listened to music while on the bus. Still, sometimes, my nosy self would just pay attention to some conversations people would have. You can't blame me, though; they were usually pretty loud, so it's not like I could avoid it, like the conversation of two women, one with a Dominican accent and the other with a Guatemalan accent, talking about how depression wasn't a thing back in their days. However, there was also that one time when I had a fascinating conversation about hair with a black lady sitting right behind me who complimented my hair and asked if I did my own braids.

Personal rating: 3.5/5

#### • Train

Taking the commuter rail might have been my favorite one. As a 20-year-old rising senior in college, I began taking the Haverhill Line from Lawrence to Boston twice a week for my summer internship at a research lab at Boston University called Brain and Early Experiences Lab. That summer, I had a lot to figure out, and although I was sure I wanted to be a therapist, there were two other things I was also considering: research and creative writing.

Working as a research assistant at this laboratory was one of my best opportunities. The lab's research focused on how parenting could influence a child's brain development. I genuinely wanted to work with children, as I believe people underestimate the importance of childhood and how having healthy relationships in those years can significantly impact the individuals we end up becoming. After all, the experiences we have during our childhood are core to most mental health issues.

These train rides were about an hour long, giving me time to think about ... life? I mean, technically, yes. That summer, I decided to give writing a try. I had always enjoyed writing to express myself in a way I only needed to understand. When I moved to this country, it became a way of practicing my writing skills in English, so it started with pieces in Spanglish. With time, I would only include words in Spanish when I couldn't translate them. Still, I have yet to think about taking a class or letting my writing be seen by other people.

English is my second language, a language I learned for survival in a country I never thought I would ever consider home. It's a language that my unattachment allowed me to express myself freely because, in Spanish, it was (and still is) too difficult to put emotions into words. Spanish is a beautiful language, though Dominican Spanish is more of a hood version (still beautiful in its own way). The richness of vocabulary and intensity to describe emotions will forever prevent me from using this language to write down a personal story. The point is that I had nothing to lose by giving writing a try. These hour-long rides provided the perfect environment for me to be at ease and write, with the train running in the background. It's similar to white noise but louder and rougher, allowing me to hear it even if I listen to music on my headphones.

Besides the computer that sat on my lap as I wrote, I occasionally looked out the window and saw the small towns we passed by. Once in Boston, I was amazed by the city's tall buildings but grateful for the traffic I could avoid because of taking the train. This is a city I hope to eventually live in. As much as I hated traffic, something about being in a busy and loud place like a city made me feel pleased. Maybe "pleased" isn't the best word for it, but I'm still not sure why I like cities so much.

Personal rating: 4.9/5

#### • Airplane

After seven years, I had the option of going on vacation to the

Dominican Republic. I had been undocumented for six years, so finally, being able to visit felt surreal. Would I feel out of place? Would I feel unattached to the country I once called home? What if I didn't want to leave because I actually felt happy?

I impatiently waited for the airplane until I finally got into my seat, where I took a nap every once in a while because, as excited as I was, I was also tired. I knew that Papi bought me a yaroa, so I couldn't be too exhausted to eat those fries topped with a mixture of beef and chicken with that Swiss cheese partially melted on top and some ketchup and mayo. It was around 5:00 a.m. when the plane was about to land, so the sun wasn't out yet. As I looked out the window, I could see all the green land rather than mostly buildings, and as much as I enjoyed looking at tall buildings, I was thrilled to see so much green.

Once the plane landed, all I could hear was the clapping of the people and the Haitian woman next to me asking me if I was excited about seeing my country and family after so long. I was extremely nervous, even though I was excited. After seven years, I was finally setting foot in my country again. I could smell my sweat mixed with my cocoa lotion and perfume. At this point, I didn't know if I was sweating because of my nervousness or how hot it would be once I went out. Yeah, it was definitely the nervousness cause there's no way the thought of eventually being hot was gonna make me hot. I was just in denial.

As I was about to leave the gate, I saw a welcoming sign, "Bienvenidos a Santiago de Los Caballeros," This settled me down since I realized this was my city; this was my first home, not some foreign place. There was Papi with some of my cousins and my two brothers, Angel and Engels (yeah, my dad is not the most creative man on Earth), waiting for me at the end. I couldn't help but smile, knowing it would be the best summer ever.

Personal rating: 5/5

LYNN SULLIVAN

# Liv's Reel

Place: The Other Side. Time: ??????

Lights up on DEATH sitting in front of closed curtains, sporting his classic Grim-Reaper-chic look, and a sign above reading "Blockbusters." He sits at a large desk. On one end is a blocky TV set playing *Friends*, surrounded by various large stacks of film reels. On the other is an original Apple Macintosh computer and his famous scythe. A bell rings as LIV enters opposite of him. They appear confused.

LIV

...Hello?

DEATH

Oh goodness - you scared the life out of me! Haha ... Can I help you?

LIV

Uh, yeah, actually. I was wondering ... Am I ...

DEATH

Dead? Hmm, that depends. Let's check!

(DEATH shakes the computer's mouse. He shakes the mouse again, more aggressively this time, before groaning and slamming the side of the computer.)

DEATH

Ugh- You know, people were coming here and telling me all about this “Apple” guy. Said that he changed lives, but this is just a pain in my - UGH!

(DEATH bangs the computer again. LIV just laughs uncomfortably.)

DEATH

Hey, maybe some advice: don’t worry too much about death. I hear that *dying* is actually the hard part, and it’s possible you’re past that! After that, everything is “easy peasy lemon squeezy!”

(LIV smiles awkwardly, clearly worrying. They then point at the stack of reels.)

LIV

Are all those reels of *Friends*?

DEATH

Nope! These are the Reels of Life. I was just watching Jennifer Aniston’s reel, and ohhh boy, the drama between her and David Schwimmer offscreen-

LIV

- Did she die?!

DEATH

Oh golly no! I would be so upset; but when she does, I’m gonna get her to sign my scythe when she gets here - I’m a BIG fan. The reels get made whenever a living being is born. I’ve seen them all: great whales, squirrels, fungi, bacteria, etc etc., but humans by far are the most entertaining. You lot have accomplished so much! Advancements in medicine, art, technology-

(With one last big hit, the computer makes some kind of a rebooting sound.)

-AH HA! There we go! Now, what’s your name, and “DOB”?

LIV

Liv Bo Merriman. January 1st, 1991.

DEATH

City of birth?

LIV

Winchester, Massachusetts.

DEATH

And the name of your first pet?

LIV

...The Great Catsby?

DEATH

Lovely! Sorry, just a slight security question.

(He goes back to typing on his computer; then with one final click...)

Annnddd... perfect! Your reel should be in Section 745-13-1604.

(DEATH grabs his scythe and raises his arms; curtains opening to reveal endless rows of reels. He gestures to LIV to follow him. LIV is hesitant but obliges.)

LIV

I never expected the Afterlife to be... a Blockbuster.

DEATH

Many have that reaction. It's good to keep up with your human trends - ya know, for comfort. I noticed that a lot of y'all get really happy in a place like this, so I spent up to a century renovating. Pretty proud of it if I do say so myself! Would you say that you're feeling comfort right now?

LIV

Uh... sure.

DEATH

Oh good!

(DEATH uses his scythe to link a reel and pulls it from a high shelf. He then leans it against the shelf to examine the film.)

So what's the last thing you remember?

LIV

I was driving home from work, pouring rain, I couldn't see a goddamn thing, and then ... All I remember seeing were two bright lights getting closer to me, then just black.

DEATH

Ah, yes, right here. A man in his Silverado lost sight of the road and drove over the line, hitting your car dead-on.

LIV

Oh my God...

DEATH

The sound of the collision disrupted a near-by elderly woman watching her *Family Feud* marathon and she called for the ambulance. The man was pronounced dead on the scene, his body on the other side of the road ... A tragedy... (Remind me later to collect the paperwork on that.)

LIV

And ... what about me?

DEATH

*Technically* your heart has stopped for a couple seconds - hence why you're here - but it looks like you will be saved and can return to your body soon. You still have a couple frames left in you.

LIV

Whoa, whoa, whoa. *Frames?*

(DEATH holds up the remaining film to LIV to show only 48 frames - 2 seconds of film left.)

What does "a couple" mean? Minutes? Days? Decades?

DEATH

Ah well, you see, it's not an exact science. "Time" doesn't exist here as it is a measurement you humans thought of - very creative by the way - but I've found that we are typically good at getting a second worth of frames to equal one human year. With a margin of error of 5% or so.

LIV

And the reel has never been wrong before?

DEATH

Nope. Every being gets their own completed movie when they are brought into existence and those are the events of their life. We've had people storm in here before, trying to alter their film. One even stole my favorite Sharpie to draw a new ending, but the film is indestructible.

LIV

... So what day does it ... ya know, all end?

DEATH

I don't have an answer for that. Again, with Time being a human-made concept and all, it's impossible to pinpoint.

LIV

How does it happen?

DEATH

Oh, I'm not allowed to say, that goes against the protocol; but don't you worry, this will all be a fuzzy haze when you wake up and you can go back to blissfully living your life. The film shows you waking up to a bright sunny day and you'll have one of the best hospital sandwiches-

LIV

-What if I don't go back?

DEATH

Hm?

LIV

What if I don't *want* to go back?

DEATH

...Well, that would be absurd. Why wouldn't you want to go back?

LIV

You said it yourself, I only have a couple of frames left.

DEATH

But that can really mean anything -

LIV

- For all we know, those frames can amount to 2 seconds. If you say, "dying is the hard part" and I'm already here ...

DEATH

Liv, you don't understand how rare it is for people to get a second chance-

LIV

But what's the point if the end is already near?

DEATH

You've already spent 12,674 days on Earth not being promised a tomorrow. How is this any different?

(This takes LIV back for a second. They are now aggravated).

LIV

At least let me know what to expect.

DEATH

But that goes against-

DEATH (continuous)

LIV (overlapping)

- protocol.

Fuck your protocol!

(LIV grabs his scythe, ready to slash the film, but DEATH holds the reel protectively across his chest.)

LIV

Just give me the film!

DEATH

No!

LIV

Do I not get a say over my life?!

DEATH

I'll not be assisting in your death.

LIV

That's what you are!

DEATH

But do you see the privilege it is to *have* a reel at all?!

(Beat.)

I've been in this business for a while now, and every moment is the same. I spend my days watching the films to try and get an inkling of what it's like to be alive, but it isn't the same thing. I'd give up my entire existence if it meant getting a day to live and die.

(With a frustrated cry, LIV throws down the scythe and walks away from DEATH, sitting on the edge of the stage. DEATH joins to comfort them.)

LIV

I just ... I figured now that I'm here, why not get it over with? There's nothing for me there. After *Catsby* died and I learned about, ya know, it scared me - but I still felt removed from it. But then Dad died suddenly ... and then Mom slowly ... That's when I realized this is truly unavoidable. I've been so scared of this for my entire life that I've been playing it easy. A boring office job, no close friends, no drive to keep going. It's just so tiring. I don't want to keep going about my life living this fear. The unpredictability of it all-

DEATH

-Is what makes life exciting. Your film is special, Liv.

LIV

Really?

DEATH

Really. You think that you've played it safe, but everything around you is unexpected. You've had your fair share of hardships: your dad's heart attack, and your mom's breast cancer ... but also think about all of the unplanned joy. Your mom letting *Catsby* into your home after she found him knocking over her pottery, giving you your childhood friend. Your dad ruining his favorite shirt to clean the foul ball that landed in your ice cream at the Sox game, but the two of you laughed about it for years after. Sitting on Salisbury Beach, the sun poking out of the

water at a perfect angle, so you just know it's going to be a good day. The unpredictable creates that balance that life feeds off of.

(LIV takes a beat before grabbing the reel out of DEATH's hand, and examines their frames, looking through their life. They laugh, they sob, they cringe, they feel every emotion, though never looking at the end.)

LIV

You have a great understanding of life for being the embodiment of death.

DEATH

Sounds like I'm pretty terrible at my job then.

(LIV and Death laugh, before falling silent.)

LIV

Do you know what happened to my parents when they got here? Is there a Heaven... or something like it?

DEATH

Honestly? I don't know; it isn't something I'll ever know, but I've always been curious.

LIV

Then hold on to that curiosity. It's what makes you human.

(DEATH pulls LIV in for a hug.)

So... we'll meet again?

DEATH

Hm someday. Who's to say when; but for now, do me a favor? Please, go live your life.

(LIV catches one last glimpse of it all before exiting, a bell ringing behind them. DEATH lingers on stage clinging onto Liv's reel. He walks over to his desk and presses play on the TV. The *Friends* theme continues playing, "So no one told your life was going to be this way." Black out.)

End of Play.



ALEKSANDER BETKO / *View from a Moving Cab*

JASON BOURRET

## Tied Down

His hands take his work home with him—  
grease stains his fingernails, a scar  
slopes along his knuckle like a mountainside.  
He's rotating a tire, popping someone's hood,  
grasping for something he can't quite  
reach—his rusted wrench, maybe my fingertips.

His hard-at-work eyes are a sunset in Oaxaca—  
bits of brown burning with determination and  
glints of green gleaming with  
the memories of a place he's never seen.  
Can a home be imagined?  
“Would you ever leave me? To go there?” I ask him.

He sighs. “You know I can't go to Mexico,  
querido. I can barely speak Spanish.”

\*

What must it feel like to be touched  
by a different sun? A different son—  
a parting gift from a father he never met,  
and never will. In that sense, maybe a home  
can be imagined, which begs the question:  
Are you home?

Would it be an abandonment or  
a homecoming? There is a tether—he fights  
to stay, but something on the other end retaliates.

Maybe the grease under his nails is really the  
soil of another land—a birthmark,  
an imprint of what was, or what could have been.

“That’s not a *no*,” I argue. Language  
does not sever blood; it severs hearts.

KILEY MCNEIL

## Only Child

My swing set was a pirate ship. The splintering frame, the hull, creaked under my weight. I saw the swelling waves that pushed me back and forth on the swing and felt the mist wash over my face. The hanging roped net swung, too, eager to partake in my game. I crossed the structure's green metal monkey bars, pretending they were a rope bridge above an unruly sea. Discarded acorns dug into the bare soles of my feet, spearing reminders of forgotten sneakers somewhere in the house. They'd come off right after school. I was a crewmate sweeping seaweed, pine needles, and probably some dead bugs across the lengthy deck. Though the ship's tin roof obscured the sky, I raised the flags above the clouds and tried to use the sun's position to navigate my way. I was a swashbuckler, my mossy stick sword ever trustworthy in a fight. Forgotten toys in the abandoned sandbox became hidden treasures long searched for. I became every role my pirate ship required except one. The Captain. My mom was the Captain after six o'clock.

Captains had to make work calls and type up their meeting minutes before sailing the open sea. They had to prepare dinner in their suburban house before sailing a ship. Most certainly, they had to clean the counters, the floors, and the windows, pay electricity bills on computers, and write out the week's to-do list before making a hook with their finger and climbing up a child's playset.

And so, I waited for the Captain, voyaging alone in the green-bladed ocean. The journey was rough, waves of loneliness rolling over me as I watched the shadow of my mom, of my Captain, flitting past windows far from the sliding glass door to the backyard. Each time I saw her, my excitement swelled, receding again as she turned toward the kitchen.

*Did she forget I was out here?* My mom wasn't someone who often forgot things, so it seemed unlikely to me then. My unwavering faith in adults was strong at that age. I reasoned, *it must not be six o'clock yet; she'll be outside any minute now.*

I was shipwrecked in a familiar place of solitude. *What an independent young lady.* I was good at playing alone. Lowering the anchor, the scratched-up plastic slide, I tried to start my story again. But the sky was gray, the clouds having stolen their color. My arms seemed too exposed to the wind that had once been in my mind. Where had the white whipping sails gone? My ship became a swing set, and I had no crew, and I was me. The roiling sea was tamed to still evening grass, and the trilling of cicadas took up from beyond what I could see.

The backyard light turned on, drowning me in its harsh call. My dad must have come home unnoticed because he pulled the sliding glass door open. His white-gray beard and jerking chin demanded that I come in to wash up. My dirty fingernails bit my palm, and I stopped myself from asking for more time. I looked back at my swing set. I would need someone to follow me to its crooked ladder. No one but I would grip its splintering wood or climb up to the imaginary crow's nest. No one would push me on the swing as its squeaking hinges sang. Not tonight. I walked through the sliding glass door and closed it behind me. It was time for dinner.

MILLICENT BASLER

## Nelly

Dawn was seeping through the windows of the old, musty bar and everyone was shuffling out, grumbling about imminent hangovers, except for one young man in the corner of the room whose pencil tapped against his cheek in a slow, rhythmic fashion. He hardly noticed as the lights dimmed and the voices faded. His mind was with his work.

Elias had been watching him for over an hour now, the drink he had ordered long forgotten. The man in the corner was not from town, that much Elias knew. His clothes were too new and his cologne too sweet. It was an invasive, flowery scent Elias could smell even from across the room. The man was reading from a small notebook, his lips moving in silent mutterings as his pencil began to leave a darker and darker graphite smear on his smooth, unblemished skin.

Elias turned his eyes back to his forgotten drink, letting his finger glide down the sweating side of the glass. He wondered what the fine fabric of the man's suit felt like. He imagined it felt as gentle as a lover's caress against the man's soft, pale skin.

"Excuse me?"

The sticky, golden drink sloshed over Elias's hand as he jerked, his head snapping up like a prairie dog. The man whose skin he had just been pondering was standing a breath away from him. His eyes were the same murky blue as a stormy sky.

"I beg your pardon," the man continued. "But I could not help but notice you've been watching me for the past hour."

His voice was as smooth as glass and Elias forgot his shame and pride. The only thought left in his foggy mind was to keep this man talking. "Yeah ... sorry 'bout that. I wanted to know what you were writing."

The man's gaze flicked down to the notepad in his hand, as if he had forgotten it was there.

"Nothing of importance, I'm afraid," he said. His eyes narrowed, as if the paper was entirely to blame for this fact.

Elias blinked sharply. The once sweet swaddling of the man's scent now wrapped its tight embrace around his throat and squeezed. The man shifted his gaze towards the window. The light of the rising sun leaking through the window stained his ashen face a golden hue. To Elias, he looked like a god.

"Do you have plans?" he asked.

Elias only managed to shake his head.

The man nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Come along then."

Elias followed like a dog yanked on a chain as the man turned and strode out of the bar. The night air was heavy and thick, but the man's quick pace cut straight through it. His name was Dante Bell, Elias learned. As Elias had suspected, he lived in the city: about a day's train ride away. Dante spoke about himself in a clipped manner, answering questions with as little information as possible. He seemed far more interested in Elias's life story. He seemed particularly interested when Elias said he usually went out in the fields and practice his shooting on the weekends.

Dante hummed under his breath. "That is very impressive."

Elias lowered his gaze, his stomach fluttering like a pit of moths. "It's nothing special. I'm sure you've done far more impressive things where you're from."

Dante stopped as if he had been struck. Elias stopped as well, worried he had offended the man. Elias could practically see the gears turning in Dante's head and he braced himself to make a quick exit.

Elias was so transfixed he hardly noticed the old man slowly lumbering up behind Dante. The man plowed forward, shoving Dante to the side.

"Out of the way, fancy pants," the codger growled.

As quick as gunfire, Dante grabbed the man by the shoulders and swung his fist across his jaw. The crunch of old bones ripped through the still morning like a rogue firecracker. The drifter staggered back, blood already pouring from his face. Elias watched as Dante rammed his knee into the man's stomach again and again.

Dante beat the man for minutes that felt like hours. Elias did not know why he chose to stop, but eventually he did. The man whimpered like a struck dog, curling up on the ground like a child.

"Get up," Dante spat.

Sweat plastered his hair to his forehead. His crisp, white shirt was splattered in the old man's blood and his spotless loafers were scratched and scuffed. The look in his eyes reminded Elias of when Pa had to put Old Nelly down.

He was too young to understand why she changed. Why her lips curled at the sight of him, sending foamy, white drool dripping down her jowls. Why her once warm, cocoa eyes were now empty voids, black as pitch.

"She may look like Nelly, but she ain't," Pa had explained, holding his tiny shoulders firmly and looking straight into his weeping eyes. "She ain't gonna be your Old Nelly no more."

Dante turned his attention back to Elias, as if already bored with the heap of a man hobbling away from him. "You asked me what I was writing back at the bar, right?"

Elias tried to step back but Dante took a step forward, refusing to accept his retreat. Dante pressed the small notepad into Elias's chest. His scent was so strong Elias could barely breathe.

Elias's fingers brushed Dante's as he took the notepad from his grasp and flipped to the first page. It was empty. Flipping through the pages, it seemed the only mark made by the pencil was the smudge that still lingered on Dante's cheek, now mingling with flecks of blood.

Suddenly, the familiarity of the cologne made sense. It was the same as his mother's. She would go to the store on the weekends and buy four

bottles for a dollar and fifty cents. She said if she ever dropped dead, it would be because of whatever nasty ingredients they hid behind that sickeningly sweet, flowery scent.

There was no warmth in Dante's cold, smooth fingers as he placed them under Elias's chin. It was as if he were made from stone. With a surprising amount of care, Dante gently rocked Elias's head back and forth, as if he were inspecting a strange artifact. Elias watched as the creases around Dante's eyes softened.

"You lied," was all Elias could manage.

"I never lied," Dante said. Elias gently tapped Dante's notepad against his wrinkled shirt. "Then what's this?"

Dante's lips twitched and his grip on Elias's chin tightened. Elias squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for a beating, but it never came. He opened his eyes and staring back into those dark, stormy eyes, even if just for a moment, Elias saw Old Nelly.



JESSICA DANILIUK / *Night Pond*

BARNARD V. KROUCH

## Love and Other Lies

There is a child in front of me.  
He has my eyes, my soul, my remembrances of a time before.  
*You love him*, he says.  
I look away to hide my smile, but the roses in my cheeks reveal every  
word on my heart.  
*I knew it! I knew it. I see the way you look at him! It's just like me!*  
How could I be twenty and twelve all in one moment?

I feel like the yellow wallpaper is cackling around me.  
I feel like a child being held after a nightmare.  
I feel like a soldier after Helen.  
I feel like Helen, manacled by the gaze of the other.  
I feel like an ocean in December,  
Crying, screaming, obsessed with every ripple.

Every curve of your sentences fascinates me.  
Your smile, a lighthouse whispering *come home*.  
I felt your pain, as if we shared past lovers.  
I could study the way you looked at the world.  
I should piece you together and frame you on my wall.  
I would follow you into the sand, the sea, the seduction.

Being a slave to my emotions is like eating the world raw.  
For the first time in twenty years, I tasted conversation.  
Our laughs fell in between honey, macarons, and little cakes.  
We were careless, untrained in cavities.  
You are every caramel, melting in between my teeth.  
And I am just like you, a child.

NAOMI OKEKE

## A Girl by Any Other Name

Akwaeke (ah-kwa-ay-kay). The literal Igbo to English translation is python's egg. Like a python's egg, it stretches the mouth, forcing the speaker to make space for it, to consider it. It is not a name spoken lightly. It is a title uttered in reverence. In Igbo, Akwaeke has several meanings, but what my mother meant as she held me in her arms, in awe of this screaming baby with huge dark eyes and even darker hair, was *precious*.

My newly born-again father staunchly opposed it. It was too soon, reminiscent of the pagan gods of my mother's village who would take the form of hulking serpents upon their descent to earth. Hungry gods who consumed the blood and tears of men and delighted in their suffering. As I grew older, my mother would tell me stories of pythons fighting off rabid dogs in the protection of children, of valuables spared in burglaries because of their presence, of the damnation that came upon whoever murdered a snake, the wrath visited on those who killed their gods.

My mother, to appease my father, gave in. Ultimately, I was named Amarachukwu, Grace of God, a new but popular name for Igbo girls. My father tells me that it was by the grace of God that I was born. It was a difficult pregnancy that eventually led to a c-section and complications that would not allow my mother to have another living child for four years. In using God's grace to enter this world, I also used hers. When I was born, I incurred a debt that could never be repaid. My name is an announcement of this debt, a call to action to return what was given. In fear, my parents gave me away to a new shiny god with shiny churches and priests; the luster of imported religion was irresistible. Perhaps they thought it better to worship a god that did not speak the same language as them and thus would never admonish or know them; a sin in Igbo did

not make sense to an English god.

Sometimes, I wonder who I'd be if I had been named Akwaeke. Then, I would have known I was precious unto myself and would not have been condemned to servitude and self-flagellation. My middle name, Naomi, was much less meaningful, arising more from my parents' love of the supermodel than from fondness for the virtuous widow from the Old Testament. It is not a name I call myself, and I have no love for it; it is purely utilitarian, a placeholder. There is no one in this world who loves or knows Naomi. The name is a tarp that protects me from the chill and violence of other people. Every horror I have seen and wrong done to me was done to her. She is my whipping boy, my sacrificial lamb. A day will come when the one person who loves Akwaeke dies, the few who know Amarachukwu will pass, and I will be left with this cardboard name cutout. My actual name will die on the lips of the people I love, and the most authentic parts of me will go with them.

TYESHA PARSON

## Memory's Creek

She rests on pillows of white clovers. Grass tickles her ankles as she absentmindedly interweaves her fingers with it, staring blankly at the slowly changing, cloudless sky. Her breath moves rhythmically with the breeze that rustles the trees surrounding her. Tears roll down her cheeks, steadily streaking her face. Sadness, nostalgia, anger, love, all wash over her body as sunlight drips through the canopy, speckling her and the earth. In the distance she hears frogs croaking, harmonizing with the gentle babble of the creek. Her chest tightens and the hairs on the back of her neck stand.

She remembers the summers of her youth when she would visit the creek with her father. Beams of sunshine would turn his brown eyes into amber orbs and his laugh would ripple through the air. In the shallower water she would wade and splash. She remembers sitting there with him up top their rock, watching the water pass by. Occasionally, a fish or frog would emerge from the waves as if to say hello. That was her favorite part because it felt like receiving a gift from a loved one. They had visited the creek weekly and when she was really young, she would toddle about exploring while he would talk about the creatures and flora that inhabited their place. A botanist's way of showing his love to his daughter.

One of her earliest memories was when she was about four and they would play the berry game. The rules were simple: she would point to any bush, and he would tell her whether they were yummy berries or no-no berries. A safety protocol that he turned fun: he was always really good at that.

“Which one should we do today, honeybee?”

“That one,” she pointed her chubby finger at a large bush near the

entrance of the clearing. It was adorned with bell-shaped lavender flowers and the shiniest berries she had ever seen. She really hoped they were yummy berries. After making her selection she turned towards her dad to get the answer.

“Never-ever berries.” His face and voice deepen in the way it did when she would jump on the couch cushions or color the walls with her crayons. She remembers her disappointment at this verdict, but was soon distracted by a bunny rustling in a nearby bush. As she grew older, her knowledge and understanding of the plants that populate this place grew as well; by fourteen she knew the common and scientific names for most of the berries and flowers. Her favorites were the “forget-me-nots,” or *myosotis scorpioides*. They would bloom every year and last all the way from spring to fall. How could you forget something that was around for such a long time?

When she was in high school, they would sit and talk about her ever-expanding life. She’d go on and on about the drama ensuing in her friend group. How Rebecca and Sarah were fighting over the same boy, even though he actually liked Tessa. He’d question her on her own crushes and although she’d quickly change the subject, she appreciated the interest. College and majors became a common conversation as she neared the end of her junior year. Whether she was staying in-state and what nursing program would be best. He listened and advised her on all aspects of her life. Most importantly, how she should never order pasta on a first date (she never mastered the swirl technique).

Now as she lies in the clearing, the trees above her blur into a homogenous green and yellow mass. How could he have left her? There was still so much he hadn’t taught her. How was she supposed to live the rest of her life without him? Her smooth skin becomes braille marking her flesh with words her lips may never speak. He will never see her cross the stage. Or walk her down the aisle. Or be there for her children. They will never get to experience his light. My god, she’s never going to see his

smile or hear his laugh or smell his scent (mahogany, dirt and just a pinch of peppermint), again. Her body shudders.

A moment—maybe an eternity—later, her hands find her face to wipe away the remnants of her cries. She stands and the black satin of her dress falls to her sides, encasing her in its coolness. She smooths it out. How long has she been here? Has the party—no, reception—started yet? Does it matter? She can't deal with all of that anyways. People crowding her, asking a million-and-ten questions. How is she? Is she going to take a break from school? How long will she be home? Is there anything they could do? Yes. Stop asking so many goddamn questions. And in the same breath they will all offer twice as many condolences. The “I'm so sorry for your loss” and “he will be missed” will fill the air, sucking all the oxygen out of it until she wilts to nothing. She can't. She can't go back there.

The creek crosses her mind but she immediately shakes it away.

“Not now ...” she whispers.

Across from her stands the never-ever berry bush. Its berries glisten from the dewdrops slowly forming on them. Her tired eyes glance back down to the ground she had just stood on. A vaguely human form lies there, the imprint of her body weight. Carefully, she lies back down in her impression, the cool and lush grass welcomes her back as if they were old friends. Goosebumps cover her limbs as the faint smell of moss and river rocks washes over her. Crickets chirping and her own breath are the only things she can hear. With heavy eyes, the stars swirl above as she's lulled to sleep by the symphony of the forest.

White dandelion seeds float aimlessly above her head, contrasting the deep cerulean sky. But it's different, moving in waves and whirls. It's mesmerizing. The lights from earth reflect on it like a lighthouse highlighting ocean crests. The symphony of woodland sounds has stopped, replaced by the singular noise of the creek. Slightly disoriented, she stands and wanders towards the creek. Dew dampens her feet and as she nears the water, grass gives way to pebbles, cool and slick. She

crouches to inspect them, hoping to find a perfect skipping rock in the mosaic of grey and greens.

“Remember, flat and smooth,” a voice calls to her.

“Dad?” She wants to shout but only manages a whisper. Turning towards the voice’s origin, she’s met with deep oak eyes.

“Honeybee,” he smiles.

Without a second thought she splashes over to him, the hem of her dress now soaked and clinging to her legs. He embraces her. She inhales deeply, savoring his scent. His sweater vest scratches at her face. They separate and he wipes the tears from her cheeks.

“How?” manages to escape her lips, as she stares at the man she had seen just hours ago lying in a polished cedar casket surrounded by marigolds, his favorites. He leans back on the rock and motions for her to join. They sit there on their rock, their thoughts oceans between them. Never have they been this silent before. Never has silence rung so loud in her ears.

“Amelie ...” their eyes meet and he continues, “pain serves a purpose, it’s your body’s way of dealing with loss. I hope your life is filled with more joy than pain, but I’ve learned that life is a lot like water rafting. Some stretches will be calm and quiet and the only thing you need to do is float. But some days the water will rush under you and over rocks, threatening to drown you at any moment. During those times we take a deep breath, grip our oars and push through. Eventually those treacherous canals will open up and you won’t constantly be battling the current. My journey is over now but you must continue to live your life and be open to finding beauty in this darkness. When it’s your time I will be here waiting.”

He kisses her forehead. “My precious Amelie.” He strokes her hair. “It’s not your time yet. You must go back. I love you, honeybee.”

As if brought upon by his words, her body is drenched in a cold so intense that she scrunches her face in pain. Pins and needles ripple under her skin. When she opens her eyes again, gone is the mesmerizing

ocean sky, replaced by blinding fluorescent lights. It's so loud. Where is she? Her head feels foggy and her body stiff. She attempts to sit up but is immediately pushed back down. Straps restrain her body, one across her chest and arms and another just above her knees.

"She's awake," a voice shouts from beside her.

He directs his attention to her. "It's okay, you're alright. We are bringing you to St. Louis Medical Center. Can you tell me your name and the current year?"

"Uh ... " Her voice grates like sandpaper in her throat. He picks up a small paper cup of water, drops a straw into it, and brings it to her lips.

"Small sips." He instructs and she starts to drink. The water feels cool and foreign on her tongue. What happened to her? Where's her dad? Why is she shivering? He takes the cup from her and places it back down.

"Better?"

She nods.

"Can you tell me your name and the year please?"

"A-amelie Richards ... 2017."

"Good, good." He scribbles something on a notepad. "We're almost there can you tell me what you ingested?"

"Ingested?" Then it hits her. The forest. The creek. The glossy violet berries bundled in her hands. She ate them. She remembers the sickly-sweet taste as she chewed and swallowed. The warmth she soon felt blanketed her as she floated back down to the grass.

Her head is spinning, her dad ... he's dead. It was all just a dream. A hallucination, probably.

"Belladonna berries. I ate Belladonna berries," she finally answers.

"Well, Miss Amelie, you are one lucky girl. Ten more minutes and we might not have been able to bring you back. You must have a someone looking out for you up there."

The ambulance sirens go silent and the vehicle comes to a stop. The back doors open to a slowly changing sky. The glowing rays of the rising

sun push back the deep blues of the night. Its beams greet her ashen cheeks, peppermint wafts in the air, and “I love you, honeybee” chimes in her ears.



KARINA DIAZ / *La Isla del Encanto*

JAY MONTEIRO

## Blood Vials

ecstasy is chasing the vibration of your voice,  
a low hum that rocks my atmosphere in a scarlet lullaby.

I watch the blushing moon gleam over your wildflower eyes—  
the way each cosmic peephole peers down at you like a sworn destiny,  
and even the speed of earth's rotation  
could never compete with the turn of my head,  
or the ghost of a glance I fiend of your lips.

forgive me and forfeit to me, for I beg to be your greatest sin.  
dreaming up your cheekbones through the nightly clouds of fog ridden  
thought,  
wishing to curl my fingers for you just as I part this lush darkness,  
the ultimate taboo of preying on what I can't have.  
how right it feels to be wrong as ever.  
I give in to your pull, let me touch the warmth of your horizon.

DOMENICK SPADEA

# Setlist

*Carpenter Brut*  
*September 1, 2022*  
*Royale, Boston MA*  
*Doors: 7:00 PM*

When Spotify notifies you via email that Carpenter Brut is touring and coming to Boston, buy a ticket without hesitation. Plus fees, it's only thirty dollars to see your favorite band. This concert is on the first day of classes, but that doesn't matter. Your only class is Andre's at about 3 p.m. tomorrow, so, class or not, you're going. The commuter rail also stops running at some point, so to get a ride back to your dorm, offer to buy your friend Caleb a ticket if he goes with you. Don't feel bad for bumming a ride, you haven't seen him in a while, and you pay for his gas home.

Make plans to arrive about an hour ahead, as you have yet to determine the length of the line. When Caleb asks what type of music it'll be, send him a few songs from their newest album, *Leather Terror*, and call it "synth metal."

Only three people are lined up outside when you guys get to the venue and scope the line. You buy overpriced soup and a drink at Panera down the street to kill time. It's your first time going there. Feel very sick and take a shit in their bathroom. Successfully try not to throw up. The whole experience makes you swear off going back to Panera. It's not much of a loss if we're being honest.

When you return to the venue, it's about fifteen minutes before doors open, and the number of people in line has risen to a colossal seven. Talk about bullshit until the line starts to move. Say no when the guy letting people in asks if you're drinking tonight. You don't have an ID, but that doesn't matter since you wouldn't drink anyway.

There's some winding flight of stairs you must go up, like the entrance to a manor, but the actual floor is pretty nice, with a circular bar at the center. The merch booth in the corner already has a line, so you'll hit that up after the concert. There are no seats, just an empty floor, and the barrier separating the stage from the floor. Only two people are standing.

Walk up, front and center stage, and only move from that spot once the lights dim. Caleb leaves to get a vodka Red Bull at some point. You stay in place, looking at the synth stand demarcated by a massive light-up version of Carpenter Brut's symbol: a series of spiraling, interlocking pentagons. The drums next to it are embossed with the same symbol, as are the shirts on the merch stand.

People will fill in behind you as the start time draws closer. There's a girl next to you wearing some kind of mesh-net-strap thing. You don't know what it's called, but it's all black cloth and forms a pentagram on her chest. She also has about ten facial piercings. Don't talk to her because you're intimidated.

Caleb asks if you think they'll play any of their old stuff or just songs off *Leather Terror*. You hope so because your favorite songs are on the newest album.

When a single woman walks onto the stage and sets up a laptop and a drum pad, she needs clarification. Carpenter Brut is technically a one-man artist except for when he tours, where he's joined by the same guitarist and drummer from the French metal band Hacride. The listing said nothing about an opener, but there's one now. She'll play some electronic music for about thirty minutes, none of which the crowd really fucks with. However, they still give her raucous applause and cheers when she finishes. A year later, you *think* you find her music on the internet. That, or it's another blonde, French woman who makes electronic music and looks like the one you see on stage. You'll add some of her music to a playlist, but you still need to.

The lights dim, and the crowd roars. Three people take their places on stage. Carpenter Brut is an unassuming guy, dressed in a black-collared t-shirt and jeans, but most importantly, sunglasses indoors. You'll swear to Caleb afterward that one of the tattoos on his arm is the banana guy from *The Amazing World of Gumball*, but you aren't entirely sure. The guitarist looks like what anyone would imagine a metal guitarist to look like—long hair and a long beard. The drummer is bald.

It is appropriate at this moment to place the photosensitivity and seizure warning. Please consult with a medical professional before attending a Carpenter Brut show if you have a history of seizures because, if so, you're gonna go fucking braindead by the end of the show.

It starts dark and headbanging with "Opening Titles" into "Straight Outta Hell," one of the most metal-esque combos on the album, flushed deep with flashing crimson pentagons. Synthwave artist GUNSHIP features on the vocals of "The Widow Maker." At the same time, you're drowned in hazy yellows and lax palm trees of "Paradise Warfare." When the opening riffs of one of your favorites, "Roller Mobster," trickle out, you know the rest will be divine. Ride it out with "Meet Matt Stryker," plunging you back into the retina-burning array of lights.

The people around you will fluctuate as the crowd rolls back and forth. Watch a girl next to you take a picture of the guitarist during a solo, caption it as "If you aren't horny during @carpenterbrut, what are you doing," and post it on Instagram mid-song. Laugh to yourself.

"Day Stalker" and "Night Prowler" are two songs that feel like one, the transition only marked by your vision being dunked into bloody strobe lights, gaining respite only in the pink disco of "Lipstick Masquerade," straight off an eighties dance floor with its vocals. Adjust your neck to accommodate for the growing pains from headbanging as you're bathed in "Color Me Blood," furthered only by the vocal feature from Johannes Andersson on "Leather Terror." Who the fuck he is or what the fuck he's saying, you have no idea. You're not a metalhead.

It's still dark, but there's more of a lull after the song. The crowd screams. Make sure you do, too. Get cut off by the most unholy trinity of their live songs, in your opinion. The grinding synths and driving rhythm of "Turbo Killer" bridge into "5 118 574," the shortest little song by far, but no less complicated, until the screaming drops of "Le Perv" throw you back to ripping through enemies in the prison riot level of *Hotline Miami 2*, where this very song was featured (and where you found out what kind of music you liked at fifteen). At some point in this trio of moshing, you can barely retain your spot at the front from the crowd behind. A five-foot-nothing Asian girl is tossed into you quite hard, for which she and her boyfriend apologize. You'll barely feel it, so don't worry.

Another lull in the sound. Scream with the crowd. Expect the lights to go up.

They don't.

They end the show with what you'll come to learn, which is what they end every show with. An absolutely disgusting cover of "Maniac." The pin and shirt you buy that's too big won't matter. Your ringing ears won't matter. Hearing that guy on the way out say that he wishes they played "Anarchy Road" cause it's their best song won't matter because, no, it's fucking not, "Anarchy Road" is not their best song. What matters is that you sing along to one part. You know, the one part. *She's a maniac, maaaniac on the floor...*

DAVID GEENIS

## She Was Buried in an Unmarked Grave

She was buried in an unmarked grave. A rough slab of granite rudely shoved into the ground. The field around her was covered in tall grass and dozens of other graves, most of them with names and dates written for someone more important. Over time, most of the stones have toppled over, but this one ugly stone that I am enthralled with refuses to let time run its course.

The tall stone is now used by hikers as a route marker. The Caucasus Mountains are popular among tourists and locals for their lush beauty and ancient towers rising out of every valley. For centuries, great generals from Türkiye, Russia, and Iran would clash at their borderlands in this little country you call Georgia, though the locals call it Sakartvelo. It was near one of those towers where I found this woman.

Mzia was her name. She lived some one thousand years before today in a village north of the old Georgian capital, Mtskheta, and she is my favorite human. She was a jeweler by profession, though most others in the village would call her everyone's best friend. Her silhouette was always sharp and bold. Her nose was especially striking, pointing out like an arrow.

She joined everyone in the village inn for drinking nights and went to people's houses to drink and shout more with good company. They all loved her, from what I saw. And yet, she was quiet. She sat in her own house for hours and drew up little diagrams for necklaces that she put together using whatever gems and minerals were sent to her aging father's workshop. Though they had her father's name written on them, the Georgian princes and Arab emirs of the Caucasus wore *her* jewels

around their noble necks. I never really cared for most nobles. It's not that they were meaner, they just couldn't see the ground. They were too high in their heads and their generosity was often too grand for my liking.

I think that's what I like the most about Mzia. When those nobles started another border war near her village and famine came, she was always generous. Unlike the nobles, she never really spoke about her kindness. No, Mzia didn't talk much. Instead, she just put a little more food on her friend's plate than her own. She hid a simple necklace behind some kid's bed and convinced the little boy that a kind spirit put it there for good luck.

When Mzia started getting older, the drinking nights got rarer, and she found a husband she loved. I forget his name, but he was kind and handsome. I suppose she just wanted someone to laugh with. He laughed a lot too.

The nobles around Mzia's little village started fighting more wars around them. As Mzia's face revealed more wrinkles with age, more and more of her friends left for better cities. Some moved to Mtskheta and others to cities in the west. Each friend that left added a new wrinkle to her aging face. She buried her husband, and her son never came back from the wars. One day Mzia also died, just like everyone else. Some old acquaintances buried her, but all the good stoneworkers had already left. No one knew how to carve Mzia's name on that stone. Those acquaintances also left soon after. Her village no longer existed in a few years.

Grass grew on her tall stone and the rest of the graveyard also fell into disrepair. Later, the stone would be used as a boundary marker by feudal lords. Later still, the stone was a road marker for weary travelers into the mountains. When most of the wars ended and travelers called "tourists" arrived, the "striking spire" became what it is today. An overlooked grave that became a trail marker for backpackers. None of them know how pretty I thought she was. How much she gave to others and how much she felt. I never really knew how much she felt.

How could I? How can I crawl into her skull and feel it all when I am still but a separate soul? Yet still, I remember her striking silhouette, especially that sharp nose of hers. She probably said “I love you” at one point. Every now and then, I come down and look at her grave just to remember her.

Here she is, I think, back from the dead. Here she is, immortalized on a digital papyrus. Here she is. I remember her, even though I’ve never seen her. Her laugh was like a witch’s cackle, mischievous as it echoed through her mountains.

I keep repeating the same ideas, running around and around in the mountains of my mind. These words have been written a million times before, by me and by others. And yet, I keep coming back to them. I want to rip through the page, the screen, the papyrus on which I write. I want to grab someone and shout at their face and tell them everything that I do not have words to describe. Can they understand it? Can they spell it with their own words? Everything anyone has ever done has been for this. To make someone understand.

To make someone cry with you. Have you ever had someone laugh with you? It’s freeing. The tears that roll down your eyes are freeing when they understand them, when their tears have the same saltiness. Can you cry with me? Can you taste the salt? God, how I want to taste it. Let us break again and again and again in some kind of confused embrace. Let us reap the whirlwind around us both. Let us cry and sing and wail to the ending day, or let us rot in the dirt and the wet moss. You are my favorite human.



MICHAEL MAKIEJ / *Untitled*

GWEN MORRIS

## The Family Tree

A parent's intentions, for good or foul  
Stain teeth like cherry wine,  
Add pulp to the pile,  
With arms locked awkwardly

I can't trust that attempt, a hug  
That weighs flimsier than threats  
Strung up by the mile,  
And taken down by dusk

How am I to put stock into their system?  
Despite shining with promise, appeasement  
They shoved down their pain,  
Gulped down misery by the gallon

How can anyone see a barely there,  
Threadbare family  
And ignore the pink stitchings on our thighs,  
Arms, cheeks and tongues

We may be here to bend the knee,  
Off into lichen stones, marked  
'Beloved daughter,'  
But I've tasted familial love,  
New scars: a resolution  
It sickens mouths scarlet and

Leaves us, still  
Begging for mother.

LONDON VERDEJO TORRES

## Such is the Life of Prodigal Sons

*“Other times, I have come home and felt as if I had finally woken up after a long illness. I suspect these things say more about us than they do about the land itself.”*

- T. Kingfisher, *Nettle and Bone*

By age thirteen, you will solidify your aspirations for your early adulthood. It will be here, in your childhood bedroom, surrounded by magazine scraps, scrapbook supplies, and pencils, that you will map this plan—attend Puerto Rico's best public high school, earn outstanding grades, and apply to only American universities (no schools in PR). Part of you will choose to move away from the island because the public university system, at this point, 2017, does not have the financial means to fund the projects you wish to embark on during your undergraduate studies (and you suspect that this lack of funding will worsen as time passes, which it does). However, another part of you will yearn to leave the island because, for once, the ghosts that follow you will have no choice but to stay behind. Your childhood will not haunt you. Your middle school bullies will not find you. Your father's family will not hurt you anymore if you're an ocean away. You will have nothing to lose, so you might as well leave now.

You won't have any friends at this point—not real friends, like the ones Socrates talks about, the ones you would die for. You will be thirteen and lonely, but you will pretend you know what you're doing with your life because you think you know everything. You're a boy of stubborn nature—once you seal this plan into your vision board, you will not let it go.

You will succeed in the first half of your plan, receiving an offer of admission to PR's top-ranked public school for math and sciences, a

boarding school three hours away from San Juan. Exhilarated, you will accept this offer immediately and pack your bags. You will attend this school for three years and graduate a year early from high school with high honors. Focused on your plan, you will apply to fourteen different undergraduate schools. Half will offer you admission, and you will choose the program 1,696 miles from the island. When you calculate this number, it will seem minuscule at first glance. Once you board your flight to Boston at the San Juan International Airport in the latter half of August 2021, 1,696 will etch into your skin. This distance will cultivate a feeling akin to a continuous shin cramp—most of the time, the distance will not bother you. But every so often, in the wee hours of the morning, when you remember how far you've gone, unwavering waves of pain will wash over you and bring you to the ground, shaking and unable to stand.

Nevertheless, as you board this flight and the swirly clouds and navy sky seem as if Van Gogh's ghost painted them just for you—the big-eyed and precocious debutant—you will think of the calm and collected flicking motion his wrists made with his brush. It will lull you into a tranquil sleep. Nothing could ever prepare you for the life you will awake to as the plane lands.



Sometimes, as a seventeen-year-old, you will scour your Google Drive for the pictures you took of that vision board and chuckle. Here, under Cumnock Hall's fluorescent lights, you will weep for the first time post-relocation to Lowell. You will be in the third month of your first year as an undergraduate biology major, just like you planned years ago. You will then realize that, sometime between your sophomore year of high school and your first few months of college, you grew an indifference to studying science, which is what you devoted yourself to for a decade of your life (the day this happens, it will be the 10th anniversary of your first science fair).

When you turn seven, you will lead your first case study—a survey of a hundred people (some of your teachers, most of your mother's coworkers, and some of your father's friends) to investigate the gradual effect aging has on memory loss. From there on, you will niche your research on mental illness support.

At seven, you will begin competing at science fairs. During the decade when you participate in science competitions, you will complete projects such as prototypes for apps to streamline suicide prevention resources, novel and noninvasive location trackers for dementia patients, surveys that investigated depression and anxiety levels in preteens and teenagers, and case studies that measure the effect that different musical genres have on emotional mood, amongst others.

Later, during your first year of high school, you will pivot into coaching younger kids through their first competitive projects. As a second-year high school student, you will work towards being a Lead Researcher in a project that your high school will complete through grants and collaborations with NASA. In this project, you and your team will devise improvements for a fertilization and irrigation system to grow vegetables efficiently at the International Space Station.

Therefore, everyone you know back in PR will expect you to become the next child prodigy who creates a life-altering prototype and will be shipped straight into Silicon Valley. You will taste dirty lemons whenever people say this to you. You will hate that term—child prodigy—since you don't think of yourself as one. Nonetheless, you will surrender to these expectations and try your best to follow them.

But it will be here, under this painfully bright lamp, as your body sinks into a red lounge chair, that the sharp claws of dread will scratch your ribcage. You will silently cry amidst the bustling chaos of students cheering, laughing, and eating. Part of you will cry because your dreams will now be dead, and you'll have no further plans for your life. Another part will cry because, for the first time, you will disappoint your community—

the friends you will meet in high school—which is family to you, and all you taste as you eat an overpriced ham and cheese sandwich will be the bitter taste of shame.

During this time, you live vividly—steps turn into stomps, and your gentle but messy handwriting turns into page-scratching scribbles. According to some of your work colleagues, your resting face now includes a permanent frown and furrowed brow.

You'll be angry. Angry at the world for not accommodating your needs and letting people who, in your seventeen-year-old head, don't deserve fame be famous. Angry at your school for, in your head, not embracing your innovative energy and your passion for creation. But, when it comes down to it, all of these little beads of anger you will hold on to for a few months or so are bullshit. The entire time you become a ball of rage will solely derive from a deep, tangled resentment you have for yourself because, once again, as you will do for most of your earlier years and adolescence, you will live for other people or be the person other people want you to be. This life was never yours.

And to think this wave of emotion will come from tasting a ham and cheese sandwich and thinking it was bland! Oh, how you will miss a good plate of rice and beans. Oh, how you will miss people greeting you as you walk down the street, speaking Spanish, wearing shorts without shivering (because to you, 60° will be freezing for the first year you live in Massachusetts), or feeling the wind gracefully cool you instead of slap you in the face.

Oh, how you will miss home.

△△△

Samuel is the first friend you told about your career change from biology to English. Your friendship with Samuel is the oldest friendship you hold. You met him in seventh grade, one of the worst years of your life—he's one of the only good things from that year. Samuel is a tall boy with beige skin and curly brown hair. When you meet him at age thirteen,

he keeps it in a neat buzz cut; it reminds you of a soldier's haircut, simple and practical. Before this day, in your mind's eye, you still saw Samuel as that thirteen-year-old boy with a buzz cut and long arms, the boy who made you laugh until you shed tears, the boy who taught you what goodness was—when you were younger, Samuel was everything you wanted to be: good, loved, and bright. After eighth grade, you talk to him over the phone or video call since you moved four hours away from the capital. Then you loosely plan to see him before your senior year, but a pandemic happens, and you don't leave your house until your high school graduation in May 2021. You go without seeing him in real life for four years.

The day you talk with him is the first day you see him in person since eighth grade. He arrives in his parents' sedan, a red Honda Civic from the early 2000s. He will meet you at the park near your childhood house. Once you see the car, you approach it and knock on the window.

"License and registration," you say, laughing.

He gets out of the car, and you greet each other. He's even taller now, about 5'10, and he looks so grown—some facial hair shaped like a goatee, a more pronounced jaw, bouncier curls, and more muscular arms. You look different, too, since you have longer hair below your eyes, a new pair of square glasses, and rougher hands. And yet, although you both have changed so much when you see him again, it's like you never moved, and there you stand, two boys filled with nothing but child-like joy and hope.

You've rarely felt like you understood what home meant. Yes, you have a house back in San Juan. Yet, you've never called it your home because it wasn't (your childhood wasn't the best, but this story's not about that). Although Puerto Rico is your birthplace, and you adore it—even with its many flaws—it is not your home. Home isn't a place; it's the people you love—you could move to Lowell and live there forever, but it will not be your home unless there are people there you can lay your guard down with and be that precocious boy who likes to spew fun facts and talk about why we, as a species, still keep living on.

It is here, in a gazebo, as you and Samuel sit side by side and talk about your career change and how deeply you missed being in San Juan, that you become that little boy again for once. When you hug Samuel for the first time in four years, you finally come home.



During your summer break, you also visited your friends from high school, Paula and Lisa. You met them during the first week of your first year of high school. They were seniors. Paula and Lisa had been best friends since seventh grade, and Paula had finally convinced Lisa to transfer to your high school, so both you and Lisa were new. You met them at your school's laundromat and instantly befriended them. Paula's a few inches shorter than you—5'3—has a square, white face with brown eyes, plump lips, and muscular arms. Lisa's the same height as Paula and has brown skin, long, permanently straightened hair (that she later grows into her natural coils), and protruding cheekbones.

After the first time you meet them, you talk to them every day, alongside their familiar friend—who would turn into your high school best friend—Bernardo, a junior Venezuelan boy with a round nose, thick, jet-black eyebrows, light and scattered facial hair, and soccer-player legs. Before you moved to Lowell, you talked with these people daily for the two-and-a-half years you lived at your boarding school (and over the phone once the pandemic hit). However, once you moved, although you still talked often during the week, you felt the relationships atrophy. Thus, a part of you now wishes to return to PR indefinitely since you finally found the friendships you loved after years of being alone during your adolescence. Moving to Lowell made you lonely during the first year. You yearned for Paula's loud cackles at jokes you made, running errands with Lisa and calling her Vin Diesel since she likes to speed down the freeway in her tiny 2009 Toyota Yaris or watching the newest blockbusters with Bernardo.

Some nights, you dream about what this life could've been like—

getting a shoebox apartment near the Mayaguez campus of the University of Puerto Rico, studying at the library with Bernardo during the afternoons. Going out on Thursday nights with Paula and Lisa, bar-crawling through Downtown Mayaguez (which people call El Pueblo), and then driving up to San Juan on the weekends to see Samuel. But then, you wake up, and your phone sends you a little alert to remind you that you must return to Lowell in a month.

When you mention the idea to Paula and Lisa, Lisa immediately jumps on board, but Paula says you can't, even if you want to do this. You decided to put your career first. You knew you could've stayed, but, perhaps by vanity or an unearned sense of pride, you refused to settle for the professional sacrifice that staying would've been. And, since Paula knows that you never settle, she disagrees with Lisa's idea of having you return to the island.

"You've always been the prodigal son here," Paula says. "We love you, so we cheer you on from afar, even if it hurts. And you know what they say about the prodigal son: he always returns."



During May 2022, you will stay in Mayaguez for a week. On that week, you will see all your friends, and they will celebrate your eighteenth birthday with you, but a bittersweet feeling will coat the vodka shots you swallow at a bar in El Pueblo. Yes, your friends will be there—Lisa will wear a green hoodie that says "LETTUCE" in the front and baggy sweatpants and drink a skinny martini; Paula will be next to her boyfriend (and your new friend), Danny, a white Puerto Rican mechanical engineering student with curly hair and a bushy beard, whom Paula's dated for a year now. They will share an AMF, giggling over little things you don't get. The bar will loudly play Bad Bunny's greatest hits, and the people will crowd the floor as they jump, scream the lyrics, kiss one another, and drunkenly dance. But even as you stand there, wearing a paper hat that says "birthday boy" on your head and letting your sixth or seventh shot of Smirnoff hit, the

impermanence of this moment will hit you first (before the alcohol). Such joy lasts so little; soon, you'll return to Lowell and be alone again.

But you will not realize now that, in a few months, you will meet the first American to make you feel at home. His name will be Robert, but you will call him Bob (unless you want to be annoying and call him by his full name for emphasis, which always makes him laugh). Bob will be your second-year roommate. You will live downtown with him at a hotel your university owns. The room will have two beds placed side by side, a nightstand, three closets, and a bathroom. Bob will be precisely three months your junior but taller than you by one inch (which he will hold over your head forever, but you'll let him have this). He will be the poster boy of American suburbia—a white boy with sea-foam-green eyes, Invisalign brackets, athletic build, and gentle hands.

He will come from a textbook American nuclear family with a loving mother, a funny and gentle father, an older and wiser sister, and a lively and kind middle brother.

Although his life and background will drastically differ, he will be open to learning about yours. Bob will notice the little things about you that nobody else does, like when you get excited about a topic and start talking with your hands or how when you read in bed, you shift between three positions: laying down, sitting crisscrossed, or resting your legs on the bed frame and laying your back against the bed, forming an L-shape (which he will think is hilarious, but later on try it himself and tell you that, somehow, that is surprisingly comfortable). You will learn to crave telling Bob the story whenever something wild happens to you. He will listen and support you. He will let you be that nerdy boy. And he will be nerdy with you, too, telling you about his deep love for *Star Wars* and teen soap operas like *Dawson's Creek* and *The OC*. He will show you movies that, even if they aren't the best films you've seen, will turn into some of your favorites because you watched them with him. You will become brothers in those nine months.

Nevertheless, when you're in this bar, as you attempt to get as drunk as possible, you will never guess what's ahead of you because you're forever the pessimist. But once you meet Bob, just like when you were thirteen, you will once again learn of goodness. In perpetuity, you will find people who, with an embrace or a quiet holding of hands, will teach you the way back home.

AARON WISWALL

## The Basement

Ashley had never liked the basement in her home. There wasn't anything particularly scary about it, she had to admit. The walls weren't dripping with asbestos, the lantern above didn't flicker or stutter. There was no smell of dead bodies or lead paint or really anything at all, save for the rather innocuous odor of her little brother Aidan's old swimsuit hanging from the drying rack, still yet to be washed. The paint wasn't lead, the ceiling had no risk of caving in, and it even passed the radon inspection last year. Ashley had been down there before with her father, had seen there wasn't anything that could possibly scare her. Just a bunch of canned peaches, Prego, and boxes of spaghetti. Her dad walked with her around every inch, explained what everything was. The big metal thing in the corner was the boiler. It didn't kill anyone, it was just for heating their water. Those big boxes had their Christmas ornaments, not a scary killer doll like in the campfire stories. No, nobody was going to jump out from the corner. No, not even Aidan ...

It was never scary when someone else was with her. But Ashley could never go down alone. Never alone. Passing the door to the basement from the living room was enough to start tremors in her heart. Anything could be down there. Anyone. Waiting. Just looking at the door scared her. It looked fine on the upstairs side: the wood, old but unscuffed, the doorknob in need of a little polish. But who could tell what scratches and claw marks lay on the other side? Ashley never wanted to know.

For a few years, Ashley's parents tolerated her wishes, but at the start of eighth grade, her father decreed in an iron tone: "From now on, everyone will be doing their own laundry. And that means ..."—his gaze shifted to look at Ashley in particular—"everyone will be going into the basement to do it."

At first, Ashley could bribe Aidan to do her laundry for her. He mocked her for it and usually put too much detergent in her laundry, but he only charged a quarter and a stick of gum per trip. Besides, Ashley stole those same quarters from his piggy bank anyway. But Ashley's father found out and in addition to being grounded for a month for stealing and owing Aidan four dollars for the services charged, she was forbidden from getting her brother to help any further.

So, Ashley tried her mother instead. For the next couple of months, the two went down into the basement together. Ashley had no problems, though she always insisted her mother lead. That lasted until the holidays, when Ashley overheard her parents saying that next year, they would start strong.

The week after school started again, Ashley's parents confronted her. Her mom tried to be nice about it, at least. She sat Ashley down on the couch and ran her hand over Ashley's bare arm. Her mom's skin was lined with age and could use some moisturizing, but the touch warmed her shoulders.

"Now really, honey," said her mom in a soft voice, "is it really that big of a deal? It's just a basement. All the other girls in your grade go down to the basement. I bet Rhea does."

"Mom, it's pronounced Ree-uh, not Ray-uh. *Rhea*."

"That's what I'm saying. Ray-uh."

"No, that's not ..." Ashley threw her hands up in the air. She let out an exasperated sigh. "I just ... ugh. I just feel ... cold when I go down there." That wasn't quite the feeling she got, but Ashley couldn't really put a thought to *what* in particular she found so frightening. Cold was the closest she could do. The little hair she had on her arms would stiffen and so would the ones on the back of her neck. Every time she opened the door, she felt a breeze.

"I wonder why." Her father didn't even look up from his Macbook. He just snorted and waved a hand in the vague direction of her clothes. "It's January, and you're wearing *that*."

“Not like that!” She threw her father a mean look. “It’s not a temperature thing. I just ... it makes me shiver.”

“If you get cold, wear a sweater.”

Ashley rolled her eyes and looked to her mother. Her mother wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“Sweetie, just do it one time. Then, you’ll never have to worry about it again. Just once. That’s all you’ll need.” Her mother, still looking into the intricacies of the carpet, raised her arm and blindly sent pats towards Ashley’s body. It didn’t help.

The next weekend, Ashley found herself alone in the house. Aidan was over at a friend’s house and her parents decided to take a day trip with their friends from college. To make matters worse, Ashley had neglected her laundry all week. She stared despondently at the filled hamper beside her, then looked to the open dresser, thoroughly looted. A single sock lay slumped over the drawer, but the rest lay empty. Tomorrow she would be seeing Lily. She couldn’t wear dirty clothes to see Lily. She simply couldn’t.

And so, with great reluctance Ashley took the hamper in her arms and made her way down the stairs into the living room. Every step down from her room sent tremors into her spine; each descent felt like it was putting her six inches closer to her inevitable end.

Time seemed to slow as she reached the living room and the door to the basement. It was shut, thankfully. Ashley stared into the wood grains, trying to force herself into a state of transfixation with each knot, to follow every line as it ran top to bottom. Anything to somehow hold herself here until her parents returned. She felt her heartbeat grow heavier and heavier, almost painfully so, like her heart was growing larger and larger with each consecutive beat until the dread drove it out of her lungs and onto the floor, still beating in a sea of arterial spray. She put a hand on the doorknob. Was it always this cold? Surely not, there was something wrong. She shouldn’t go. She couldn’t go. No, she’d wait until it felt normal. She swallowed hard. Her throat was dry. She should get water

for it. Water would help. Water would make everything help. She took a hopeless look towards the kitchen. If she got that glass, she knew she wouldn't come back to the door. She'd run back upstairs to the comfort of her room and wait there under the covers for her family to come back and beg and plead with her father until he promised to never ever have her go into the basement. But she knew she needed to end this fear, like her mom said. So, Ashley kept her hand on the doorknob. She took three quick breaths and turned it open.

The basement door screamed and swung towards her with surprising speed. Ashley jumped back, sending her hamper into the air. But there was nothing. No monstrous killer. No Slenderman. No creepy clown ready to dismember her. Nothing except the long set of worn wooden stairs leading to the basement.

She made herself laugh. It was an absurd thing, really, she had to admit it. Her outburst had sent her clothes scattered around her, and she began to gather them. At least they were already dirty to begin with. But she found her new confidence vanished far quicker than she would've liked and as she crawled between garments, she found every second look was towards the top of the basement stairs, that same insurmountable dread in her chest had returned. Watching. Waiting. She scooped her last shirt into the hamper and stood just outside of the door. There was nothing now preventing her descent. The clothes were ready to be washed. The door was open. And yet her feet remained as unmoving as the floorboards they stood on.

Ashley wanted to cry. She wanted to hide, to somehow fold her body into the hamper and not get up. She knew nothing was down there, but a larger part of her felt that she was wrong, that her parents were wrong. There was no masked killer. No evil bunny. No possessed doll. That much she knew. She didn't know what was down there, but the unknown was so much more terrifying.

She made herself shuffle a couple of steps forward, until her feet

were within the door's path. She forced herself to lower the hamper from in front of her face to chest height. The stairs still lay vacant. Years of consistent use had warped the center of each step and the wood looked pale and almost gray in color. She shimmied further until her toes dangled in the open air. Then she took the first step.

The wood creaked under her weight. Ashley stifled a scream and took another step. The groans grew louder and louder as she descended, like an alarm to wake whatever evil force lay waiting for her. *Were there always this many steps?* Ashley thought with a shudder. She had never counted them, but they felt endless, fathomless, like she was walking down to Hell itself.

After an eon, her slippered feet touched the actual basement floor. She looked back at the stairs leading to the wide-open door and the salvation it brought her. She forced herself to look forward. A rhythmic whirring sound filled her ears, but she reminded herself it was just the boiler. A couple drops sporadically fell from the ceiling. That too was nothing new; she had heard them before when she was with her mother. The air was cool, but the sweater helped, much as she hated to admit it. She flicked on the light switch next to her and a singular beam of seedy yellow light poured from the ceiling around her. But it was something. She walked the laundry over to the machine. Part of her almost wished something would move, not to frighten her, but so that she wasn't the only thing moving. Save for the drips and the boiler, the basement was dead silent and completely still. It was as it should be, but it only made Ashley that much more afraid.

She found the washing machine in the same spot as always. She took the door in her hands. It jumped up far quicker than she thought and the lid slammed into the top of the machine. Just then, the whirs of the boiler suddenly stopped and the drips no longer sounded. There was a horrible second of total, uninterrupted silence. And in that second, Ashley decided that she needed to leave.

Now.

She hurled the clothes from the hampers into the machine, dumped half the bottle of detergent into the machine, and slammed the lid back down with a desperate sort of ferocity. The boiler was whirring again, and Ashley knew it was faster than before. She wasn't going crazy. It had to be faster. The drips were more constant too, almost frantic, as if the house itself was drowning and the floorboards were ready to give any second. She cranked the dial to heavy load, then slammed the start button. The washing machine rumbled to life and Ashley was running, running faster than she had her whole life.

There was nothing that could stop her. No demon would catch her. No ghoul, no voice, nothing. Her legs were the wind and she was gone, running upstairs and never ever coming back. Her heartbeat in sync with the heater and blood rushed to her ears. Then she got to the foot of the stairs and realized she didn't hear the wash running.

An icy terror filled her entire being. She knew she had pressed start. She had done everything right, checked every box, dotted every "i" and crossed every "t." But there was no rumbling of the machine. Just the incessant, ever louder sound of the boiler and the drips.

She made herself come back to the washer. It needed to work or all of this would be for nothing. But she moved on the back of her heels, ready to flee at the very first sign of trouble.

When she got there, she saw the machine working as it typically did. It was old and in dire need of replacement, so its rumbling threatened to dislodge it from its foundations on the floor. But that was oddly normal. She was used to that. Ashley breathed a sigh of relief. The boiler seemed to not be quite so loud. The drips seemed to recede.

Just then, she heard a creaking sound above her. Slow, ponderous, horribly drawn out. The little hair she had on her arms rose to scratch against her sweater.

"Mom?" She called out.

The creaking continued.

“Dad?”

“Aidan?”

She noticed some of the light in the basement starting to fade away. The overhead above her still gave her a golden circle, but she looked past and saw the crack from the top of the stairs waning more and more. Her legs turned to mush. She simply stared, unable to move at all or do a thing. It was then that she heard the heavy, unmistakable sound of a door sighing shut above her. Then the lights clicked off and the seedy yellow turned to black. And Ashley screamed.



JACOB MORIN / *Upon-Avon*

SARAH OMAR

## One Night in the Sudanese Desert

Our bellies rumbled—so we  
silenced it with small handfuls  
of sand. When it was time to  
continue our journey the  
coyotes would shout at us,  
*Get up!*  
*Quickly!*

The small ones were  
then piled atop each other  
in the back of the trunk  
bed of a pickup truck.  
The engine started, and would  
not stop. The drones in the  
sky served as a reminder,  
*Do not stop.*  
When bodies flew  
off the back and left  
clouds of sand—  
we did not stop.

When that boy's hands failed  
him, he held on  
to the bumper  
pleading to be let back on.  
We shot him  
and did not stop.

MATTHEW VOGEL

## *American Oak*

My father told me he would die in the woods. Said to me that when his time comes, he would walk into the forest and let nature happen.

"You're not putting me in a home," he said.

We were in his half-finished garage, sitting in a pair of lawn chairs. The walls around us were raw and open, the studs exposed like bone. It bled insulation like an open wound. His blue-gray eyes looked at me, then out through the open doors onto a neatly trimmed lawn walled in by pines, firs, and oaks. It will be a sad day when those trees disappear.

"I know," I told him. He tapped his cigar on the ashtray. The pale ash crumbled into the dish, joining a thick pile. "I thought you were gonna quit?"

"I'm just going to finish this pack," he said, but I knew I'd see him with another pack right back in that same chair a week from now. But what if I didn't?

I sat back in the chair. Through puffs of smoke, I saw his gray hair clinging to his scalp. I saw the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes pinched together when he squinted. There was a peace about him—this ease that life brings when the glass has been overfilled, and all that comes after is just extra.

A stark difference to the man who just three days ago was in the passenger seat of my car, his face all screwed up in silent agony as something tore through his insides, and I, though hidden, was torn by the sudden worry that my father was capable of dying.

We like to imagine our parents as permanent fixtures. These immutable objects in our lives will forever exist as indeed as the sun may rise or as constant as the trees in the forest. But that is not the truth. The

truth is much more brutal and often far more bitter. It is a slow-acting parasite that grows stronger with every passing year. It squirms in its sour delights as children see the weakness in our parents. When we know the bark went rotten or dead, moss cloaks them, or the slightest bump and breeze breaks weakened limbs that once held us tight and firm.

I always imagined my father wore his age well. He worked long, hard hours at a meat department that was as much an endurance test as running a marathon. But at that moment, as we sat in Urgent Care, with silence between us, I saw what I feared most about age: that the clock was running out, time had withered him, and I could not recall the image of who he once was.

He sat across from me. His eyes shifted with pain, his body stiffened, and I heard his breaths come deep and heavy, even from the other couch. This was not the first time this happened. Years ago, when I was young and easily panicked, my father called me in pain.

I was working at a pizzeria at the time. Almost lost my job that day because his panicked cry for help over the phone sent me speeding down the road, and I ran out of the restaurant without a word. I found him lying on the living room floor, grunting and breathing in agony. The guttural sounds he made would have made the devil hesitate to walk inside. Later, I was told he might not have made it for another four hours. Imagine knowing when you could've died down to the hour.

On the wall above my father's head was a red sign with "ConvenientMD" in stark, angular letters. I found the name ironic. This was the closest urgent care to home, but it was still a twenty-five-minute drive. Something readied in my brain to blame them for being so far if he didn't make it. A minute later, the nurse came out and called my father in.

Patients came and went. One that caught my attention was an elderly woman who left with her husband. She had to lead him towards the bathroom on her way out, and the husband moved at such glacial speed that I worried he might not make it, but he did. What might have

happened without his wife? Was that what my father feared? Relying on someone else? Age doesn't work backward.

Dad was in a room at the end of the hall, hooked up from top to bottom, like they were about to turn him into Robocop with wires coming out of every opening in his johnnies. He was relatively lucid, though I suppose that was the painkiller and IV drip dulling the agony.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Better. I just talked to Michelle. She's trying to figure out how to get down here," he said. Michelle was my stepmother, who, rather unfortunately, was an hour and a half north with her grandchildren, and I had the car.

"We'll figure it out," I told him.

I wanted to help, take some of that burden off, but I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. Nobody trains you for those sudden moments when your father could, possibly, maybe, be dying. There's no certification course for this sort of thing.

The physician told me they were transferring him to the hospital for further observation and tests to ensure this wasn't a repeat of last time. I asked my father if he wanted me to go with him, and to be honest, to this day, I still don't know what I wanted him to say.

"You can go back to work, honey," he said, and I was glad. It was the entire reason I came home: to work at my old job and try to make some money before the upcoming semester. It was sound and practical, but it also made me worry that I had somehow messed up. I think Dad understood this. At least, I hoped he did. I wasn't quite able to be there for him, not in the way a father deserves.

I watched the paramedics wheel my father into the ambulance. Watched those rear doors shut, and I climbed into the car, worrying at the bottom of my heart that I had just watched them package up my father for the last time I'd see him alive. But I went to work. Whenever anyone asked me how he was, I told them he was fine, but I didn't know. I didn't

know because I wasn't there.

Three days later, he was home. I picked him up at midday, and he looked as he ever did—tall and sturdy like an American oak tree crafted his legs. Even the color of his face returned, and he was as sun-kissed as before. Somehow, his skin wasn't as gnarled as before. In fact, he told me he felt almost better than he did before. As we headed for the elevator, we even passed one of the custodians he'd developed a rapport with.

Dad turned to me, all giddy in a way I hadn't expected. "That was Michael. He told me about this really good shoe. He's on his feet fourteen hours a day, doesn't feel anything."

"What's it called?"

"Haka. Boka."

"If you're trying to say Hoka, those things are expensive as hell," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

We left Augusta General and crossed the parking lot. As we got into the car, I looked across the landscaped fields around the hospital towards the endless trees in Maine. I wondered if it was really Dad's time, would he have slipped out in his gown, bare ass in the wind, and wandered into that forest? My father slid into the passenger seat, and I brought him home.

My father did not know how to stop. Once home, he immediately took to chores left undone by his absence. It was as if nothing happened at all. And perhaps nothing did. This time. Though I followed behind him as he rummaged about reminding him to relax, he shrugged me off and continued on. Then I watched my father try and dump a whole load of laundry into the washer, only to accidentally break off the tiny little tab that kept the lid shut. Given his recent return home, I wanted to laugh but figured it inappropriate. But without that tab, it doesn't shut. If it doesn't shut, it doesn't lock. If it doesn't lock, you've just got a giant steel box with a hole in the middle. His empathetic response to that was more emotional than his extent in the hospital. I fixed this later with a spare part.

Afterward, he settled into his lawn chair in his garage, lit that cigar, and looked out across his lawn, across the home he had with his wife in the middle of the woods. I sat right next to him, and we sat in silence.

Dad did that a lot. He'd sit in his chair and watch and contemplate. Sometimes, he shared his thoughts; sometimes, he just looked at me with big, shiny eyes so smooth you might almost think they were glass. It was moments like those that I felt the most was ever said.

It is this image I have of my father. He's always sat there, staring back, silent and contemplative. Age does that to eyes. Deepens them; adds questions and answers. We all have preset images of our parents. Faces set in stone, unyielding and timeless. That could come with knowing them from youth. A teen does not see the march of time taken across their parent's face. Time to Youth is slow and subtle, an ever-presenting sculptor, methodical with every line deepening at a glacial pace. We only sometimes see the world growing around us once it's gone.

I do not have that luxury. There is a gap in the memory of my father, a decade gone because of a messy divorce and an even messier custody battle. I was eight at the time. I thought of this as I sat beside him. Thought about that decade gap and how great a void it was. If you look back on the reel of my life, those ten years are just one long black strip, a blank negative, an emptiness – and a possibility. A possibility of what might have been road trips, fishing trips, afternoon matinees, and advice about first loves.

But that possibility doesn't exist anymore. When filtered away, all that is left is the brief moment with him in that garage, in that chair. And maybe one day he will walk into the woods, but it was not that day.



YAIRE ORTEGA / *Lawrence Riverfront Park*

TRAVIS PARADISE

## Daddy is

the stale stench of cardboard  
on all three of his brown uniforms;  
is ice clanking against my Shrek glass  
he now uses for whiskey;  
is the house's midnight silence  
disturbed by his singing along to *Glee*;  
is Gillette cream, crisp mint,  
clinging to his bald neck;  
is the fire of salsa  
seasoning his every breath;  
is the shimmer of headlights  
as he piles lies  
like boxes on my chest;  
he doesn't know  
I've seen him crying in mommy's rose-pink dress  
stuffed with fruit where there should be breast;  
Daddy's stuck working at UPS.

TRAVIS PARADISE

## Pep Talk

voice saying  
I've wasted the day;  
masturbated twice,  
lounging in cannabis clouds  
eating pancakes cooked  
by Wife.  
I haven't written in days, only  
attended meetings,  
did the dishes, not once,  
twice, hit the bong thrice,  
attempted to shave and  
discovered the bathroom Wife cleaned  
crawling with mold,  
drain clogged with curly black hair,  
a makeshift tampon  
bloody, crusty, beside the toilet  
stares back at my face dripping shaving cream.  
I got splotches on her new fuzzy carpet  
but that's the least of my problems;  
blaring from the  
fire alarm I'd forgotten  
to avoid  
the fourth time,  
Panic.



MARLEY O'NEIL / *Untitled 5*



GARRETT SILVEIRA / *Automobile*



LEXI PERRY

## Metronome

If time should stop,  
I never loved time  
It persists

Aging is  
Like summer waves  
A rushing ripple  
Pushing out to sea  
Endlessly,  
Even  
we do not know

But time must stop,  
Our days become nights

Fully interlocked  
We still burn like suns  
Glow like Venus  
And melt like candles

Until we die

I want to end the days holding your hand  
But I love you  
Endlessly  
All the time we have left  
Is enough comfort than your softer breaths  
Relieving  
Like a security blanket  
Over our bodies  
Drowning into your heart

Our pulses still sway  
How we dance to love  
And we could do this forever  
So I'll fold my hand in yours until  
We can kiss ourselves goodnight  
And be  
Like two old souls  
Full of passion  
In our light  
In our warmth

Until we survive



A. DAVID WUNSCH / *Manhattan*



ZACHARY ZOLUD / *Hazy Horizon in Italy*

LONDON VERDEJO TORRES

## In the Cell

Sometimes, my stomach grumbles after I've just eaten,  
A deep, threatening grumble that  
alerts the prisoners of the new guy's arrival.  
Fresh meat.  
Vulnerable.  
Soft.

My body is a jail I've been trapped in since I was a child.  
It was a creative punishment, He said.  
There's been many days where I've tried to escape it.

I always fail.

My thighs are the cooks,  
My arms are the crooks,  
And my stomach is the cop that bangs

on my cell's bars  
every morning to  
awake me.

He laughs, for he knows that  
I  
will suffer  
once more.

One cannot imagine Sisyphus happy,  
for as humans  
oh, so foolishly,  
we hope.



## Contributors

**Cayleigh Baillargeon** is a Creative Writing major with a minor in History. Her hobbies include taking long road trips with her dog, Walter, to historical landmarks and explaining to people how Eisenhower's Interstate System embodies everything wrong with the United States. She also enjoys gardening.

**Millicent Basler** is a sophomore majoring in Animation and Interactive media and has a minor in Creative Writing. She has an ongoing animated series on the YouTube channel Hooting Pictures called *The McNormals*.

**Aleksander Betko** is a junior in Fine Art, whose work portrays the human condition and landscapes. He is a Team Leader at Jumpstart, involved in children's education. He plans to earn an MFA and become a professor.

**Jason Bourret** is a UMass Lowell graduate working in the Lowell Public School System. He writes fiction and poetry in his free time, exploring human relationships and the human condition.

**Jessica Daniliuk** is a senior Creative Writing major. She is one of the Managing Editors for *The Offering* and the President of Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honors Society. She would like to thank her friends and family for their endless support.

**Emeli Diaz** is a senior majoring in Psychology and minoring in Creative Writing and Spanish. As part of the Honors College, she is doing her honors thesis on journaling and mental health.

**Karina Diaz** is a senior majoring in English Literature with a RHED in Leadership. She is a Team Leader with the RHSA, Vice-President of Tri-Alpha, and dedicates her time to supporting first-generation students at UMass Lowell. Karina volunteers with the Salvation Army and Coalition for a Better Acre. After graduation, she plans to pursue a master's degree in Peace & Conflict studies at UML.

**David Geenis** is a junior majoring in Computer Science with a minor in Biomedical Technology. They are a member of the Rock Climbing Club.

**Barnard “Barney” V. Krouch** is a Philosophy student with an English minor. He’s interested in sociopolitical and aesthetic philosophy and enjoys writing about nature and youth. After graduation, he’ll pursue a graduate degree in philosophy.

**Michael Makiej** is a senior studying Philosophy and Political Science with a minor in Legal Studies. He is a high jumper on the track and field team, a writer for the *Connector*, and a member of the Catholic Student Union.

**Kiley McNeil** is a senior studying Psychology, English, and Criminal Justice. She works as a behavioral therapist and plans to continue in that field after graduation. She enjoys reading and writing and is grateful for the support of her family and professors in pursuing her passions.

**Jay Monteiro** is a class of '22 UMass Lowell Creative Writing alumni. Since they have graduated, Jay has continued their creative exploration through paintings and poetry among other projects. They look forward to branching out in the near future towards more opportunities, outlets, and life altering connections along their journey.

**Jacob Morin** is an Environmental Engineering senior with a Film Studies minor. He hopes to use his degree to better the environment. He was the President of UMass Lowell’s Off-Broadway Players and has a passion for filmmaking, writing, and photography.

**Gwen Morris** is an English major with a concentration in Creative Writing. She enjoys illustration and hopes to publish children's literature and poetry.

**Naomi Okeke** is a junior Biology major with minors in Painting and Creative Writing. “A Girl by Any Other Name” is her first publication.

**Sarah Omar** is a junior majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She is a proud Palestinian-American writer who is inspired by her homeland and seeks to portray the beauty her region has to offer through her writing.

**Yaire Ortega** is a freshman majoring in Criminal Justice (Crime and Mental Health) and will minor in Chemistry. She’s also part of the River Hawk Scholars Academy for first-generation students.

**Marley O'Neil** is a College and Department Operations Manager at Francis College of Engineering. She has also run a landscape photography print business since 2017.

**Travis Paradise** is a UMass Lowell Creative Writing graduate and founder of the Creative Writing Club. He is now the CEO and Creative Director of his video game development company.

**Tyesha Parson** is a senior at UMass Lowell and co-founder of the Creative Writing Club. She's pursuing a bachelor's in English and a French minor. She plans to attend law school after graduation.

**Alexandra "Lexi" Perry** is a junior majoring in Creative Writing with a minor in American Studies. She is a member of the Lowell Writers Group and a regular participant in open mic poetry events within the Merrimack Valley. She is a proud guinea pig mom and candle collector.

**Garrett Silveira** is a UMass Lowell student majoring in English with a concentration in Literature and has an additional major in Philosophy. He has had an interest in photography since an early age.

**Domenick Spadea** is a graduate of UMass Lowell with a degree in English with a Creative Writing concentration. He has a strong interest in archival work and enjoys both reading and writing fantasy and history.

**Lynn Sullivan** is a Fall 2023 UMass Lowell graduate in English Creative Writing and Theatre Arts. They were a Creative Nonfiction editor for *The Offering* and Secretary for Off-Broadway Players. They are now working at Merrimack Repertory Theatre as a Production Assistant. Lynn thanks their friends and family for their support.

**London Verdejo Torres** is an English major from San Juan, Puerto Rico. He's the President of UMass Lowell Literary Society and a Managing Editor of the UMass Lowell *Offering*. After graduation, he will attend NYU's Creative Writing MFA program.

**Matthew Vogel** is a senior English major concentrating in Creative Writing with a minor in German. He hopes to continue his education in Germany and one day pursue a career in academia.

**Aaron Wiswall** is a senior majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Medieval and Renaissance Studies. He is a campus tour guide for UMass Lowell and is revising a fantasy novel in his little free time.

**A. David Wunsch** is an Emeritus Electrical and Computer Engineering Professor at UMass Lowell. He taught a course on the principles and history of radio to liberal arts majors for 15 years. He studied under Minor White, a renowned photography educator who also taught at MIT.

**Zachary Zolud** holds a Master of Science in Innovation and Technological Entrepreneurship from UMass Lowell. He works as a Lead Technical Writer for Photonis / Exosens. Zachary's grandparents on his father's side were Polish immigrants after the Holocaust, and on his mother's side, they were immigrants from Italy. He enjoys playing his 12-string guitar and writing music, as well as pretending he likes working on home projects.

## In This Issue

Cayleigh Baillargeon  
Millicent Basler  
Aleksander Betko  
Jason Bourret  
Jessica Daniliuk  
Emeli Diaz  
Karina Diaz  
David Geenis  
Barnard V. Krouch  
Michael Makiej  
Kiley McNeil  
Jay Monteiro  
Jacob Morin  
Gwen Morris  
Naomi Okeke  
Sarah Omar  
Yaire Ortega  
Marley O'Neil  
Travis Paradise  
Tyesha Parson  
Lexi Perry  
Garrett Silveira  
Domenick Spadea  
Lynn Sullivan  
London Verdejo Torres  
Matthew Vogel  
Aaron Wiswall  
A. David Wunsch  
Zachary Zolud

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