



THE OFFERING

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MASSACHUSETTS

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2021

THE OFFERING

A PUBLICATION OF THE UMASS LOWELL LITERARY SOCIETY

2021

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About the Literary Society

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

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

To stay informed about literary activities on campus, visit *The Offering* website or the UMass Literary Society Facebook or Instagram pages. For more information, or to request submission guidelines, write to **offering@uml.edu** or contact the club advisors, Professors Maggie Dietz [maggie_dietz@uml.edu] and Maureen Stanton [maureen_stanton@uml.edu].

See also:

<https://umasslowellclubs.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/literary-society>

<http://sites.uml.edu/the-offering/>

<https://www.facebook.com/UMLLiterarySociety/>

<https://www.instagram.com/umloffering/>

About the Name

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

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

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

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Cover photo: Michael Nuzzo/*Sticks*

MICHAEL ANTHONY

The Meadow

As the sun takes its seat in the heavens,
the flowers paint wonders across the land.
If you were to watch for but a few seconds,
your mind would be imprinted with the most beautiful brand.
The petals scatter on the wind,
enveloping you in an aromatic caress.
The colors invade your mind,
almost feeling quite possessed,
but when the sun steps down from its seat
and the flowers close their petals to rest,
you no longer may enjoy your treat.
Swiftly leaving a longing in your chest
at the memory of the petals. You nearly weep
as you watch the flowers fall into a soft and gentle sleep.

ZAK ATTIOUI

Engineering Classroom

For the past two months my imagination had grown empty. Sitting in Reinforced Concrete wasn't helping, either—or so I thought, at first. Professor McMill blabbered about things I didn't care about; and by surveying the classroom, I could tell many students didn't care either: most were on their phone, while others were on their laptops. But there were a handful of students who did pay attention to every small detail she spat out, even the unimportant ones about her life. I called them the Front-Row Students. Their eyes never left Professor McMill or the board while their pens scribbled on their notepads for the entire seventy-five minutes.

I turned to the kid who always sat next to me. He rested his shoulder on the wall and stared on his laptop screen from the start of class until the professor said the class was dismissed. I peeked on his screen without turning my head. Even if I did face him, he wouldn't have noticed. It was as if he was inside the game he played, and programmed to leave the classroom once Professor McMill said, "Class dismissed." The scent of sweat reeked from his sweaty shirt, tight on his large body, but I couldn't blame him. The entire class held at least sixty students, in the late spring, with only one air conditioner running. We were all sweating to some degree.

I closed my eyes and entered my imaginary world, attempting for the hundredth time to occupy it with characters and a plot. The meadow had many flowers up to my ankles; they danced to where the wind took

them. Roses, tulips, lavenders: they were all mixed together like a dance party.

“Ed. Ed! Can you answer the question?” Professor McMill’s voice brought me back to my sad reality.

I slowly opened my eyes. They resisted leaving my imagination. It felt better than the reality of life, which clearly wasn’t a good sign. I slightly shook my head and turned to my Professor, sensing all my classmates’ eyes on me, or at least those of the First-Row Students. I kept my eyes on Professor McMill. She held the marker a few inches away from the white board, ready to write.

“Can you repeat the question, Professor McMill?” I asked. “My apologies.”

Professor McMill sneered at me. “What is the stress on the beam at point A?” She slightly looked at the board then back to me.

I stared blankly at the board, realizing she had started a new topic I had no clue about, or at least didn’t completely understand. I tried figuring out the solution, but the beam didn’t have a roller or pin. The problem had a beam with a fixed end and there was a distributed load from point C to point A. I had never seen a beam with a fixed end.

“The board doesn’t have the answer on it. Did you work out the problem?” Professor McMill said, tapping the board.

Let me work it out in my head and I’ll have an answer for you, I thought. “No, professor...” I spoke. “It’s not that I don’t have the solution to the problem. I have it. But for me to give you the—”

“Just give me the solution!” she spat.

I paused a moment to allow her to talk. The longer I stalled, the better. Once she stopped, I continued to stall some more while I worked out the problem. “Well, I will provide you with a solution. It’s very easy to give you the solution. In fact, that’s the easiest part of the question.” No, it wasn’t. “It’s a matter of finding the correct units. Like you say, Professor... I mean Dr. McMill—”

“That’s enough!” She pointed at me with her marker. I just needed a few more seconds to get the solution. It was at my fingertips, but it kept sliding off like butter on hot toast.

McMill turned to the other side of the class and called on another student. I looked at my fellow classmate: she wore her hair in a weird fashion. Nothing I was used to seeing. Half was braided, and the other as curly and loose. *Thank you for that idea*, I thought. *I will include that weird hair design for my main character.*

“The answer is 4.5 kips per square inch... or 4500 pounds per square inch,” I called before Professor McMill asked the question. The hardest part about the question, at least for me, was knowing there was a moment at the end of the beam that was fixed. After that, I punched in the simple numbers in my head just like one does if a problem was ten plus ten.

McMill turned back to me and rolled her eyes. I don’t blame her. If I was in her position, I would’ve hated my job. In fact, engineering wasn’t something for me. She wrote the answer on the board. While she continued lecturing about things I could care less about, I entered my imagination once more, a world exclusive to my mind.

The main cast of my new book inspiration lined up in front of me, shoulder to shoulder. I’ve always known the cast for my new novel. The girl in my Reinforced Concrete class with her weird hair was the main character: she was quiet and did as she was told without defiance, but she never joined the First-Row Students. She remained loyal to herself and never gave in to the full-of-themselves First-Row Students. The chubby kid who sat next to me could be her assistant. The kid who didn’t talk but knew the ins and outs of the web—maybe that would come in handy.

Professor McMill had to be the antagonist; no one liked her. It would be the perfect role for her, but only if she was a foot taller—maybe she would look more intimidating. As I thought of a much taller Professor

McMill, the one inside my imagination grew. Actually, there were a few people who liked her. I saw their faces behind her after she grew to her maximum height. They're called the First-Row Students. She only had about ten followers but that's perfect for a start. I smiled as more ideas flooded my mind. It's been a long time since my imagination worked like it did.

I stepped away from my imagination and returned back to the real world—Reinforced Concrete class with the real Professor McMill wrapping up her lecture. I've written all my ideas.

“Class dismissed,” Professor McMill said, as I finished writing the last note.

JASON BOURRET

Fireball

Our memories are left scattered like
constellations in the night sky.

Do people stargaze upon us?
I wonder what they call us...

Every star has its dark spots.
Still yours seemed invisible
but did I even try to see them?

I'm left the dimmest in our arrangement,
fizzling after you drained me of light
because I used all my love to keep you
warm

and then you shot off
into the depths of space.

Maybe I'll see you again,
like a comet that returns every decade

or maybe you'll go too far, too fast,
and crash into the sun.

JASON BOURRET

The Week Grandma Took a Turn for the Worse

Tuesday, May 26th

Mom asked me to go with her to my grandmother's house. My grandmother had Alzheimer's and she had been getting significantly worse over the past couple of days. Mom had spent hours playing phone tag with health care workers in hopes of getting a nurse to come check Grandma out, but it proved to be a bit difficult, being in the midst of a pandemic and all. Mom had eventually got ahold of somebody and a nurse would be there that afternoon to evaluate my grandmother. However, her hospice bed had been delivered that morning, so we already knew that it wasn't going to be good.

We arrived at Grandma's house around 1:30 in the afternoon. The nurse was due to arrive in about half an hour. Mom twisted her key and we entered the house. There we were greeted by my grandma's health care aid, Faith, who lived with her during the week, and my grandma in her hospice bed. She was in a comatose-like state: breathing loudly but not responding to anything.

Faith was on the couch, watching some crappy game show spin off on my grandma's old box TV that somehow still worked, despite its grainy image and glitchy lines covering a majority of the screen. Mom ripped open the dark red curtains, which she hated, to try and brighten up the depressing room with sunlight. Grandma had always liked those curtains specifically because they kept the room dark. And the only

times she would ever open them would be when she wanted to peak out and spy on what her neighbors were doing.

I remember Mom doing the same exact thing when we used to go after I got out of school to get Grandma off the bus. During the day, before hiring her live-in health care aids, Grandma went to an elderly daycare program while my cousin, who lived with her at the time, was at work. So for the couple hours between my grandma's return home and my cousin's, Mom and I stayed with her.

Mom would yank open the curtains and complain about how much light they blocked. My cousin's cats loved when Mom opened the curtains, evident as they sprawled out on their backs and let the sun hit their stomachs.

It was a constant gamble of whether or not Grandma would remember me; some days she'd enter the house and upon seeing me, her face lit up as she exclaimed, "Oh, hello Jason!" in a way that almost made it seem like she could never forget me. Other days, she would have to ask my mom, "Who's that boy?"

The lone air conditioner in the corner of the room barely cooled us off. Maybe it was because of how small it was or maybe it was because it was 15 years old, but either way its sputtering of semi-cool air wasn't doing it for us. Grandma had always liked to keep the thermostat set to 80 or above. I'll never understand how she could keep the temperature so high and still wear sweaters while curled up under a blanket.

Mom left the room to lower the temperature and I sat down on the other couch, across the room from Faith. I could tell she was distraught. She had been with my grandmother (or Mrs. Mary, as she liked to call her) every week for about a year now.

"Come here," Faith said to me, so I did.

She began to go through her phone and show me pictures of her

children back in Nigeria. They were twins: a girl and a boy. She smiled in adoration at their photos, as did I. I couldn't tell if she was trying to distract herself from the situation or me. Probably a bit of both.

My mom returned and we sat in almost complete silence, staring at the glitching TV screen until the nurse arrived. My mom asked me to head to the sunroom on the opposite side of the house. I don't think she wanted me to hear whatever the nurse had to say, but her words bounced off the walls and echoed through the silence, inevitably making their way to my ears.

"It's time to stop feeding her," the nurse said. "If you continue to feed her, she could choke on it."

Faith didn't like this at all. It was her job to be a caregiver, and she felt as though not feeding Mrs. Mary would be neglecting to take care of her.

"All we can do now is keep her comfortable until the end."

After about ten more minutes, Mom thanked the nurse and she left. I returned to the living room and was greeted with a sad tension hanging in the air. Eventually, Mom and I said our goodbyes to Faith and Grandma and headed back home.

Wednesday, May 27th

I woke up to a text from Mom that she had sent from work. Apparently, Faith had called my aunt early that morning and said my grandma was doing pretty poorly. Mom asked if I wanted to go over and say my goodbyes to her.

I debated it for a while. I had seen how badly she looked the day before, and now she was doing even worse. Did I want that to be the last image I had of her? At the same time, I wouldn't have felt right not going to see her one last time. I agreed, and when Mom got out of work, we went.

She did appear to be worse. Her breathing seemed heavier and

her mouth hung open wide. She was unresponsive. If it weren't for her random spurts of loud gasps, it would've been easy to mistake her for being already gone.

I still remember how quickly things seemed to spiral after Grandpa died. Grandma became a lot more dependent on us, because it had been so long since she had known a life without my grandfather. She'd come over to our house practically every day, often stayed for dinner, and almost became a fourth member of our household.

It was about a year after Grandpa's passing that she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. But at that point, it was only little things she forgot: the name of that TV show she used to like, the name of that distant relative who lived down in Florida. Things that any of us could forget.

Now she spent every Christmas with us, so she didn't have to wake up to an empty house. She slept in my bed and I slept on an air mattress in my mom's room. I was so happy to have her there. I didn't have to wait until the family got together later on in the afternoon to see her.

I still remember the homemade stocking Mom and I made for her to hang with ours. It was red and white, and on the white part we wrote her name in glitter paint: *Grandma* in blue and red and gold. I always made sure her stocking was hung up on the hook next to mine.

"Hi, Grandma," I said when I was in the room with her, "It's Jason." I wasn't entirely sure what to say. In the past, I had never been given the opportunity to actually say one last goodbye, and I didn't want to ruin it. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I hoped that she could hear me and remember me. It felt strange. There was so much I wished I could say to those I didn't have the chance to in the past, but now that I had the chance all the words left me. "I love you."

Thursday, May 28th

Many of my other relatives went this day to say their final goodbyes to her: their grandmother, their mother, their mother-in-law, their sister. They hadn't had this opportunity with my grandpa, so like myself, they wanted to make the most of it. I can't be certain what they said, but I imagine it couldn't have been any easier for them than it was for me.

Friday, May 29th

I woke up at around 11:00 AM that day. Between summer break and the quarantine, my sleep schedule was in shambles and it was a constant gamble as to when I would get up. I did my normal routine: grabbed a Nutrigrain bar for breakfast, brushed my teeth, worked out, then began some homework for the Spanish 2 summer course I was enrolled in.

Around noontime was when I got the text from Mom. The text dropping the bomb that Grandma had passed away that morning. She told me that she would be heading straight over there after work and meeting her siblings to begin the process of sorting everything out with making the funeral arrangements.

I passed the news on to my dad. He got in touch with my mom and headed over there as well, leaving me home alone. He asked if I wanted to go but I declined.

Despite knowing it was coming, I was still shocked. I didn't know how to feel. I was happy that she was finally free. No longer going day by day, slowly forgetting everything about the world around her. But she was still gone, and I would never see her again.

KALIISHA COLE

Boston

The city encrusted with art,
young and old painters
holding graffiti cans or paintbrushes,
music that rings throughout
the streets of TD Garden
on a Friday night.
Young and old readers alike
share in book festival delights
from Roxbury to Cambridge.
The aesthetic of the galleries
as people peruse through
the ISGM or the MFA.
There's even art within Boston's architecture,
towers one step closer to touching the sun.



EVELIS CRUZ/*Shop Corner*



EVELIS CRUZ/*Summer Blossoms*

SIERRA DUNCAN

Burns

The torn family portrait was
still in the frame you broke
when it was thrown into the fire.
Shattered glass cutting anyone who
got close enough to see the
burn marks that isolated you
within that moment.
My walls were bare;
there was nothing to see in this
run-down church I had claimed sanctuary in.
Women like me belong in faded memories,
not forever smiling from photographs
where they were hung.
Still,
upon seeing you
I gave up my language,
my hands, and my name to
try to make you whole again,
but the wood gave me splinters
and I never quite fit with my blunt cuts.
I was never meant to call a frame home,
not like the girl you had burned brightly for,
the one who you kept warm with your flames.
I'm just made to get dirty
with the ashes of what's left of you.

SIERRA DUNCAN

Juniper

If I keep my eyes closed
I can see the ruin of the garden I once was safe in.
How the orange tulips that wrapped
themselves around the white fence
as tightly as you kept your arms
around me when sleep began to kiss the corner
of your mouth have withered.
The last bit of green left with your eyes and
I listened to the dry petals fall to the ground,
the way I would your breath as it grew steady those quiet
November nights.
The words we once sang together
wrapped tightly around my bones
like the ring you gave me.
That fall Georgian night with you when I knew that
the moon would never look the same and that
it wasn't about choosing to fill the valley in my fingerprints
with either Zeus or Aphrodite,
but instead with you.
Yet we no longer live together in The Book of Ruth,
and she will never find her way
following the map you made of my veins.

ALEXANDER EDEN

Flight

Soaring up above,
calm clouds smile and drift on by.
The journey begins.



ALEXANDER EDEN/*Mirror to the Sky*

NEIL FAHEY

The Annual Family Headache

From the kitchen, I quickly rounded the corner into the greeting room. Remember, shoes in the basket, boots next to the basket. Shoes in the basket, boots next to the basket. I grabbed a handful of footwear off the ground, none of which was mine, and—

“Hey Neil, can you empty the dishwasher?” my mother asked me from the kitchen.

“Sure,” I answered without thinking. I put the boots in the basket.

“Clean up the welcoming room after that,” my dad called from upstairs.

“I’m already doing that!”

“Oh...”

Normally I would be annoyed that he told me to do something I was already doing yet again, but we were hosting a Thanksgiving Day dinner for my three grandparents, my mother’s two sisters and two brothers, her three siblings in-law, my eight cousins, and my own family unit. It was a gathering of twenty-two people. I did not have time to complain. As soon as I resolved the boot dilemma, I went back into the kitchen, passing my mother on the way. She had jet black hair, was wearing an outfit she deemed appropriate for the occasion, and had deep bags under her eyes.

I started unloading the dishes when I was given another “request.”

“Neil, can you reach that can at the back of this cabinet?” my mother politely asked.

Quickly putting cups away, I reached into the cabinet and grabbed

the... spinach stew?

“Why are you making spinach stew?”

“The Lamricks asked us to serve it tonight.”

The Lamricks were our relatives through my mother’s second eldest sister. No doubt she would bring her two daughters and husband with her. We’ve considered them eccentric ever since a family vacation where my aunt insisted on staying at a local farm instead of the perfectly adequate hotel across the street, but this was still strange for them. “Speaking of whom,” I said, stacking some plates, “they are running late.”

“Your aunt is probably giving us extra time to clean.”

I wanted to ask why we were frantically picking up the entire house, including the rooms no one would go into, when everyone already knew of our slobbish ways. It was even a running joke in my extended family that our old kids’ playroom was forever crammed with junk except on Thanksgiving. But I’ve never been given an answer to that question before now and asking for one on a high-stress holiday couldn’t end well. I herded that question back into the pen of things I’m not allowed to ask my parents about because reasons.

“Aren’t you going to change,” my mother asked.

I looked down at my workout shirt and sweats. I hadn’t been to the gym recently but still wore them for the comfort factor. “I’ll change when the Lamricks get here.”

Without warning Friday, the family dog, started barking. He was a small terrier-mix, but his bark doesn’t clue people in on that. It’s loud enough that we didn’t bother fixing our doorbell when it broke; Friday replaced our doorbell. I heard creeks and cracks beneath me, slowly getting louder, until my sister opened the basement door. “The Lamricks are here,” she called to us.

My mother raised an eyebrow at me. “I’ll change after we say hi to them,” I amended.

Some heavy footsteps replaced the creaking, pounding on the ground and made Friday bark even louder; it was my dad.

Standing a handful of inches taller than me, he had greyish-dark hair, was wearing a collared sweatshirt, and was quite handsome, according to himself. “Is the basement clean?” he asked.

“And swept,” my sister finished proudly, holding her head up high. She had our mother’s features but right now she looked more like our father to me.

“The dishwasher?”

“Emptied,” I replied.

“The—”

“—dining table is set,” my mother finished for him.

My father relaxed a little. “And the turkey?” he prompted her.

“Burnt.”

His eyes popped. “Burnt?!”

I laughed. “It’s still cooking.”

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s enjoy this Thanksgiving.”

A wave of cold air announced the Lamricks’ arrival as my father held the door open for them. The Lamricks all wore heavy winter coats and were shivering but they had bright smiles on their faces. After they lost a couple layers, we exchanged the typical greetings, hugs, and pleasant small talk... then another car turned onto our street. Then another, and another. The moment we opened our doors to one family unit the rest of the guests seemed to materialize out of thin air. Within an hour of the Lamricks’ arrival the previously empty house was stuffed with my extended family. After we managed to unclog the welcoming room, I ended up trapped in the kitchen with one of my more curious aunts.

“It’s so kind of your parents to host us every year,” Mavin said. My aunt was still wearing her coat and, for some reason, thought yoga pants were suitable for a holiday dinner... which reminded me I had yet to change and was still in my sports clothes. She was the oldest of my

mother's sisters, although no one was allowed to acknowledge this fact. "Thanksgiving used to be a trying time for our family. Some years all of us would fight over who gets to host it, some years none of us would volunteer and we'd fight over whether or not we would celebrate as a family, and now we get to fight at your house. So, how's college?"

"I'm not in college right now."

"But aren't you still attending?" She kept leaning closer to me, so close I could smell her minty breath. I don't like the scent of mint and Mavin knew that, but she didn't seem to be aware of my discomfort. "I could swear that your mother said you were taking classes."

"I am taking a couple night classes."

"And what are those about? You can't keep us in the dark forever. Are you making friends in your classes? Oh, do you have a girlfriend yet? Come on, you can trust me with these things. I won't tell your parents," she said very untruthfully.

Luckily for me, my aunt got distracted by a loud popping sound. My mother had opened the first champagne bottle of the night.

"Alright," my mother called out. "I need to pour this quickly, so who wants a glass?"

"You'd better be pouring me one, sister!" My aunt joined the rest of her sisters at the kitchen table, completely forgetting everything she asked me about.

I felt more comfortable now that I wasn't being interrogated, but when my mother is already drinking with her sisters, it's time to leave. The party was just getting started but I needed a break. I'd been cleaning all day and would have a fun dinner with everyone later. I took a stroll around the house to see if there was anywhere quiet to be for a while. In the TV room, my father was blasting a football game and talking about the president's upcoming impeachment trial with his brothers-in-law--not staying there. Some of my cousins went outside to "start a fire," according to another of my aunts. There was no fire as far as I could

tell, but there was definitely a strong scent of smoke outside. I don't mind them doing that but if I wanted to hang out with people under the influence I would have stayed in the kitchen.

I found my father's dad and stepdad alone in the abnormally chilly dining room, both waiting for a turkey that was nowhere near ready. They each wore a tucked-in white shirt. My grandfather had a head of thin grey hair and a bushy beard with only the center of his chin shaved bear, whereas my step-grandfather was rocking the bald egghead look. They were glaring at each other, but neither would say a word. When I was younger, I assumed they just liked staring contests, and I'm still not sure I was wrong. Almost every room was filled with people I didn't want to be around right now or was uncomfortable for some other reason. I could have retreated into my room, but if I did it wouldn't be long before my dad shamed me for it. So, I headed towards a place that was guaranteed to be at least somewhat more isolated, which was wherever my maternal grandmother, Nancy, happened to be.

After a quick search, I saw her lying on a couch in the living room. An elderly woman nearing her eighties, she had dyed her hair blond in contrast to her dark-haired children and grandchildren, and was fairly short, although the cocoon of blankets she wrapped herself in made that difficult to see.

"Hey Nana," I said to her, taking careful steps to make sure I didn't surprise her. "Why does it look like you're getting ready for hibernation? Do you want me to turn up the temperature?"

"Hi darling," she responded. "No, you don't have to do anything. I'm more than comfortable as is."

"Okay, but you'd better not blame anyone if they confuse you for a comforter." With all the blankets she'd gathered, that wasn't much of a stretch.

"Someone already has."

Confused, I leaned in to ask my grandmother to repeat herself when

I noticed Friday was asleep on top of her. “He acts more like a cat than a dog,” she said.

I smiled at the cute sight. “We get that a lot. I guess he is the reason you didn’t get up for the champagne.”

“I’m happy to watch them from a distance. They don’t want me to be too close anyways.”

“Well, in fairness, you are known for causing... incidents.” I was trotting on thin ice.

Her eyes narrowed. “If they don’t want my company then I won’t force myself on them.”

“Come on, they love you,” I assured her. “Maybe not as much as Friday does but that’s a difficult standard to hold anyone to.”

“I don’t mind,” she assured me. “This Thanksgiving is still a blessing. After losing Merry this year, I needed to see everyone. Although I have to admit, whenever I pictured this holiday it didn’t seem as crowded in my head.”

“It’s a little late to complain about that. If you care that much, you should have stopped at four kids.”

“Each one of them is a miracle and I will never say otherwise.” It’s rare but the fierce mother does slip out of her on occasion.

“My mom told me about Merry,” I felt the need to say. “Sorry I never got around to meeting your sister. Whenever we tried things just didn’t work out the way we wanted them to.”

“She wouldn’t have liked you anyways,” Mavin said casually, while petting Friday.

That struck a nerve, but I was used to it. I expected this when I chose to be in the same room with her.

“That mouth of yours would have offended Merry sooner or later,” she continued.

“That’s a bit harsh,” I managed to say. “Are you sure that opinion has nothing to do with me not going to church in a decade?”

“Oh, don’t get me started on that,” she said, starting on that. “Do you want to go to hell? I can’t believe your parents didn’t educate you on the Bible. You don’t even have one in your bookcases.”

“You looked through my room?” I practically shouted, slamming my hands on my lap. “Jesus Christ.”

“Uh, ah, uh,” she tutted at me, waving her index finger back and forth in my face. “This is what I meant by mouth. Stop being sacrilegious and watch what you say.”

“If you want me to change then lead by example!” If the rest of the house wasn’t so noisy everyone would be staring at us.

“I’m old enough that I don’t have to care what I say. I’m going to die soon anyways.”

I laughed at the absurdity of my grandmother’s favorite justification for her behavior. If people are alive, their words can be an influence on others that will last long after they are dead and buried. I’m not sure who gave me that belief, but it certainly wasn’t the person in front of me. But I wasn’t going to say any of that. The whole argument occurred because I didn’t hold my silence earlier. Doing that twice would make me as guilty as her for continuing the fight.

“You’ve been saying you are going to die for the last twenty years.” I was smiling now.

“Forty if Mom isn’t exaggerating. I’ll thank you for your concern, and for not saying these things when I was little, but can we not do this on a holiday?”

“If you don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, I won’t feel the need to.”

That was good enough for me.

“Does something smell like it’s burning to you?” my Nana suddenly asked me.

I couldn’t smell anything but it wouldn’t hurt to check.

“Hey Mom!” I called into the kitchen. “How’s the turkey doing?”

My mother, cocktail in hand, lurched around the corner, splashing some wine on the floor in the process. “The turkey? Oh, it’s burnt.”

AMELIA FANTASIA

Poem for After I've Disappeared and You're Still Looking for Me

My knuckles begin to bleed
from driving them into your nose
on that before-spring night
in March, bone splitting my skin.
It would be years until I was ready
to apologize for that and mean it, unwilling to
let it go, how you said it was my fault
the dog died and I said it was yours.

The next morning we sent you off to learn
how to shoot a gun. In your farewell
photograph there are blue and purple blotches
beneath your eyes where we tried our best
to conceal the bruises. We smiled at the camera.
I kept my hand behind my back.

After the war ended we sat
at your kitchen table and I said *I'm sorry*
about your nose, but you told me not to worry;
it made the other soldiers wary of you,
when without your fucked up face you would have
looked like a piece of marram grass flickering
in a strong ocean breeze. Then you said
It wasn't your fault, and began to cry.

I'm sure there is somewhere,
one last wild place in the forests of the world,
where you might see the shadow of

somebody you still love, slipping
between the trees and leaving
a trail of poems in its wake
like footprints. The sound of the dog
barking is far off, but not so far
that nobody would hear when you said
*I still keep your garden. Last week
the strawberry plants began to bloom.*

AMELIA FANTASIA

Year of the Snake

O is in the kitchen, baking our memories into chocolate chip cookies.
It's the year of the snake and we're trying to be kind
despite the fangs, encouraging the pansies on the windowsill to bloom
in winter, when the snows flood the world
and every inhale is premeditated.

Skins litter the house: some folded up nicely—
some draped over the back of the couch, as if we've just come inside—
some lying crumpled on the living room floor
where we threw them, unbearably angry to have changed
another time. He says we keep growing
out of ourselves and soon we'll grow out of growing,
bark creeping up our ankles to petrify
around our bodies, our hands reaching skyward toward the moon

like we are begging to have something back.
I make a list: warm spring night, winter constellation,
bite to the neck that doesn't kill but instead
conveys a want I haven't been able to speak out loud.
It's here somewhere, in one of these skins.
Give me a moment and I'll find the right one.

The last of the cookies comes out of the oven. I bite into one
and then it's years earlier, when I first moved into his house
and couldn't speak the language but he sang
to me anyway, his voice like the flutter of a thousand butterfly wings
beating against the air. It wasn't the only thing
I'd ever heard but it was quite close, and as I swallow
I remember he said he once dreamed of a big god,

her hair falling from her head in ocean waves, and confessed
he thought she was me. A want he has
never been able to speak out loud. In the dream

I know whoever he was seeing had placed her hand
on his head and said, *You have worked hard. You must be tired.*
He is. The hollow of his cheeks makes room
for cottontails to move in and make a nest, unafraid of
the possibility that they may be living
in the mouth of a snake. From his place in front of the oven,
mitts covering his hands, he asks me if the cookies are good.
I tell him they are. I feel the skin of my face begin to peel.

DANA FIELD

Here You Go

There comes a time in life when the world buries you. It's not dissimilar to a dream where you find yourself digging—scrabbling through a mountain of soil and rubble, gasping for oxygen, wondering if you're headed toward sky. And then you stop. You wait silently, sanguine in the warm, compressing blackness, listening for help—the scraping of shovels-on-rock—hoping to God for a glint of sunshine on steel while you try to breathe, earth clogging your sinuses, filling your mouth.

It's been too long. You're not expecting shovels anymore, but dirt. More dirt. More pressure. If the world's going to bury you she might as well do it right. But the world doesn't bury its dead. She is an expert horticulturist. She planted you in the trench and waited. Days. Weeks. Months. She's patient. And then one day you inhaled through the muck, like someone shoved a bellows between your lips. But instead of hot air, water gushes into your body, your skin cracks like a shell bursting from the moisture—God, it hurts like hell. A murky glow clouds your sooty vision but your eyes are squeezed shut, reluctant to adjust to any brightness after being so long in the dark. Reluctant, but not unwilling. You used to enjoy the sun. So what's a little dirt?

The headlights that had been pointed directly at my vehicle turned sharply away and were now beaming toward an apartment building. The driver had briefly crossed into the opposite lane—my lane—to make a wide turn. Wider than necessary. It was night and all I could see were headlights. Fool didn't even use his blinker. That's what threw me off. Of course he wasn't coming into my lane, playing some sick, cinematic

version of chicken with my car. I didn't even know him. I wouldn't have engaged. People don't do that in real life. It would have been his fault if he had hit me. I had slowed down anyway, just in case.

I hate driving at night. It's all halos and strobes and blind spots. Technically I'm allowed to drive at night, but I have to wear my glasses, so I tell people I can't. At any rate, it was a last

minute decision I had put off making and now the night-driving couldn't be helped. I wanted to get to Georgia for the morning.

There's only one thing worse than driving at night, and that's stopping at night. At a gas station. In the middle of nowhere. I'd rather piss my pants. But I needed coffee. And gas. Everyone gives you the side-eye when you pull up under the fluorescent lights and pretend to double-check which side the tank fills up on. Like I'm the one who looks like a murderer. You all look like you live here.

Six hours to go. I glanced over at the passenger seat. I could easily make out the bulge I had taken care to buckle in. It had felt right to put the seatbelt on. I never wore mine except for when she rode with me. In the darkness I pictured the chalky scuffed dashboard where she put her feet up and the frayed blue belt pressed gingerly between her breasts. I guess she would think it ironic that it was me who buckled her in this time. Ironic isn't the word. Fitting. She loved words. She loved crossword puzzles and reading. She could tell me what word I was thinking whether I closed my eyes to remember it or looked at the ground and squinted. She carried a notebook everywhere with her and filled it with her words. I haven't read it. It was so much a part of her I debated burning it, too. But I couldn't let go of all of her. Not like that, all at once. I don't know if I'll read it. It's enough to just have it.

I've never been a night person. Not that I'm a morning person; I just like to be awake. And I like to be around people. Not necessarily talking to people—just near them. She was my opposite in those regards. She loved to sleep but stayed up till three in the morning. Then she would

get up at eleven and spend hours reading and drinking coffee and wandering from room to room by herself. She could be alone with her thoughts. And that journal—worn black leather with an elastic band that didn't quite keep everything together, just from falling out. She wrote in black ink and left pens everywhere. She'd grab a pen before leaving the house and throw it in her bag with all the other pens that were in there. So she'd take one out and stick it in the glove compartment. "You never know," she would say, shrugging. Her pens were in my backpack and my underwear drawer. Our dryer is streaked from a pen exploding in some pocket. Not sure how it survived the washer.

The sight of the smoggy-pink horizon filled me with dread and desire. I still had an hour to go and I hadn't decided how I felt. I figured the feelings would come but I prayed that they wouldn't. I knew I was getting closer because the flat landscape had given way to hills. You couldn't see the hills themselves, but the patchwork of treetops that ebbed and flowed with the land broadcasted their rolling, undergirding sprawl. Scrub oaks covered in gray Spanish moss were now rich evergreens with intertwining maple, beech, and ash filling in the rest of the verdant color spectrum.

The world was more saturated. Living in Florida is like living in a sepia photograph. I feel more gray for living there. It's draining. It sucks the life out of you like the mosquitoes that permeate the humid air. She would have liked that analogy. Her urn catches a stray ray of light ricocheting off my watch and glitters in agreement. Her urn. I had let the funeral director pick the color—a deep blue. She never had a favorite color, just some she liked more than others. I didn't want the urn to be a color she liked. That seemed counterintuitive. No. It seemed wrong. She had painted the walls in the kitchen an orange-y color—"Peach Butter," she said it was. The name was as important as the color. "It's in the kitchen, it should remind you of food. And we can't do anything about these stupid, pink counters. Seriously." They were gross counters,

Formica the color of Band-Aids. When the director had started telling me the names to choose from, I cut him off. They shouldn't name those colors.

It was light enough out that some of the cars I passed didn't have headlights on. I was wrong about stopping at night being the worst thing. Breakfast from a gas station—that's the worst. But the grocery stores weren't open yet. I should at least be able to get up to the overlook without much traffic. It was a weekday and there wouldn't be many hikers out, either. She would have loved the sunrise. She knew she would. She wanted nothing more than to be somebody who woke up with the sun. "It's just so natural," she would say with a lucid look in her eyes. Her green eyes with the flecks of copper. She hit me when I called them hazel.

There was one other go-getter out, a jogger who had stopped to stretch using the rough wooden railing that separated the public from the hundred-foot drop. I waited for him to be well on his way before getting out of the car. The air was damp and felt colder than it should have on my nose and ears. I was sorry I wasn't wearing something warmer. I realized I was shaking. It wasn't this cold last time I was here. The mist hung over the valley like a cloud that didn't want to be in the sky. It blanketed the trees but didn't hide them—determined green needles jutted up through the white chiffon. It was a picture of disparity I felt in my soul, like a sharpness piercing my flesh, but mercifully staving the blood lest it should drain out or stain my hands or my clothes.

She would have liked it here. She could tell instantly if she didn't like something or someone, and insisted that she had only been wrong twice in her life: once about a person and once about bramble wine tea (but only after she had it with honey). But she was quick to repent of her wrongness, thanking God that he hadn't allowed her premeditated—arbitrary?—judgments to win. Her faith was a quiet one, an indebted

one, and quite personal. She had a hard time allowing herself to be loved and an even harder time expressing her love for people she truly did love. Her favorite quote was from James Joyce: “Why say something is very beautiful? Beautiful is enough,” and I think that’s how she tried to be. She loved words and would never misuse them. I guess that’s how she cared for people, too, now I think about it.

I don’t pretend she was perfect. She had her faults. But memory has a funny way of smudging those kinds of things. And they were things that really only bothered me, I know. Things I would give anything in the world to complain about just one more time. She left the tea bag in the whole time she was drinking. “Doesn’t that make it bitter?” She dismissed me with a finger and said she didn’t notice a difference. She spilled water every time she poured a cup or filled a pot, and then threw a towel over it instead of wiping it up. She only wore her glasses in the morning or when she was sick and I loved her in them but she switched to contacts. She criticized the way I can’t make small-talk. Critiqued. She would critique the way I can’t talk about sports or the news. I wanted to talk about things that mattered. She said people would talk to me about important things if they talked about the weather first. I knew she was right, I just didn’t have the patience for that. I have a bit more now. She’d like to know that.

It felt wrong to be at the valley without her, like I had left secretly while she was at work or in the shower or just at her mom’s or something. It had been her idea to come because she had never been to the mountains. As I thought and stared the mist began to vanish, leaving only a ghost of itself to wet the foliage. It’s my favorite kind of water because it’s the hardest to explain and gets the least recognition. I looked at her urn waiting on the bench. No dew had settled on it. I was a little sad for that but not surprised. She hadn’t been here long enough. She had liked dew, too. It was another mystical morning occurrence she never woke up early enough to experience. That’s why she found it so

fascinating, surreal.

It was mid-morning now and the sun was starting to bleed out from between the clouds and I was beginning to feel breakfast in my gut. That wasn't the feeling I had been waiting for. I picked up the urn and turned to start down a little footpath, just to the left of the wooden railing that allowed you to hike down into the valley. The thing was awkward to carry. I let the momentum carry me downhill, finally stopping after about fifty feet, and took the lid off. I blinked down into the partly-shadowed, gray-white ashes. Maybe I should have worn gloves? That didn't feel right. Should I wait for a bit of wind? I closed my eyes, grabbed a handful and let it fall next to me on the path. I should say something.

“Here you go.”

I replaced the lid and kept walking.

SAMANTHA Garrett

Observations from Shipley Swamp, Massachusetts

I

At the end of the day, Mom and I sit to watch the sun
at the swamp's edge. Duckweed collects in corners
where long-dead trunks of pines sprout through the water
like old promises. And as the beaver steers underneath,
she casts a wrinkle through the mirrored-sky water.
It is alive with landing insects, rich with blooming algae.
Bullfrogs clammer under the cool pulls of swamp mud,
their last songs loud before the final curtain of cold
sinks them under for winter.

We see the same swamp
that wedges itself between roads,
squeezes itself between a construction site.
It is a land carved by beavers, once sloped
by glacial ice. It is unknown.
Mom points to the birds in the sky.
They fly like ducks, she says.

II

I sink into a memory of what the swamp gave to us last summer:
a yellow and grey duckling, peddling alone in our pool,
abandoned from its flock, trying to live.
Mom's eyes childlike and glistening as she held it
in just her palm, wrapping it in a towel,
the little thing peeping for its mother.

And then a whole weekend of
giving it warmth and water and a home,
hearing a hundred voicemails from
wildlife rescue facilities,
Mom going out to search for its family
while it nestled itself under my chin.

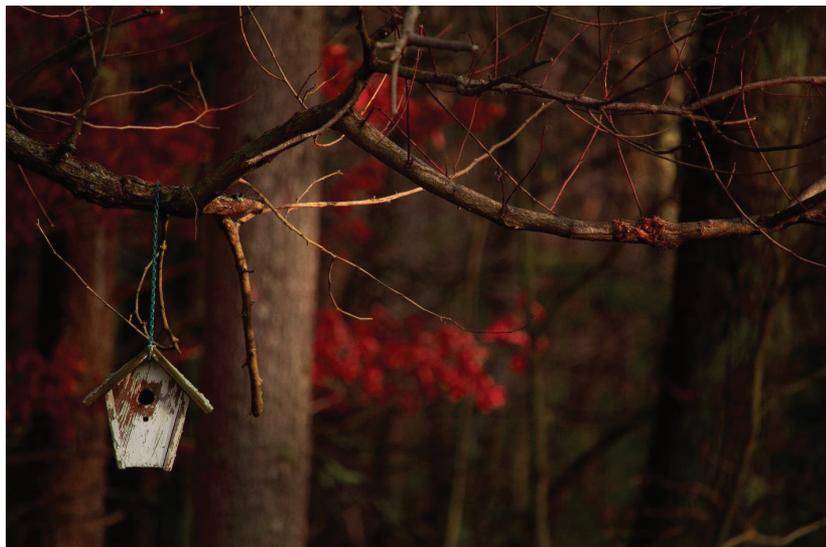
But as much as we tried,
as many hours we spent fighting
for this one tiny thing,
one morning,
it did not peep for a mother.
It was still and cold.

III

Out of nowhere, at the swamp, we watch
as a silent family of wood ducks
glides in for the night,
ducklings following in a perfect line,
pausing right in front of us. They are
black against a setting sun; they
ruffle their oil-slick feathers in
the yellow sky water. The ducklings
stand on the old tree limbs poking out
of the water.

I do not need to look at Mom
to know she sees the same thing.
We are still as doe in the fading
of the light.

I can't say so much as a gasp;
Even a whispered sound will send them
gliding back behind the brush—
even a ruffle or hushed voice
is too much for them.



AUSTIN GERRIOR/*Untitled: Birdhouse*



AUSTIN GERRIOR/*Untitled: Seagull*

BLAKE HAMMOND

The Ridge

Ayla came into my room last night, shaking. Scratched at the door with her paw and its rumbling in the latch got me out of bed. Not that I was asleep; Dad was howling again, Mom crying. Something about her having asked Mike's wife to tell her husband not to bring beer over anymore. He came bursting in the past weekend with a thirty rack of Buds and my Dad and him sat out the last warm day by the pool. He doesn't swim in it, my Dad. Just runs the net through and lies under the cobwebbed umbrella by the old table he'd dragged up onto the porch. Mike's a truck driver, his only friend I guess. Goes off on long hauls for weeks at a time. My mother set me up with his son Tyler right after we moved up here. Kid always wears black t-shirts, shorts all year. School-shooter type, you ask me.

But Mom was crying. Dad was going on and on about how he'd put the TV through the window if she didn't start putting out. I kind of hoped she would too, so I wouldn't have to see him tugging it when I went down for a snack after dinner. I knew my sister was awake in the next room but there wasn't much to talk about. I knew if I knocked she wouldn't answer or anything like that. Not that I'd ever tried it before. Ayla was shaking like nothing else by the foot of the bed and wouldn't come up, like she was trying to stay low. I just told her everything's going to be fine, and slept on my left side instead of my right so I faced out to the rest of my room and threw my arm down over her shoulder. She dropped her head and stopped panting.

Next morning is the second snow of the year, first time it's hit on a weekday and we're out of school. I can't sleep past seven even if I tried though; when we hear the door slam out onto the back deck as my father leaves, all the bedrooms open up and we come out for the morning: my sister, mom, and me. My sister all wrapped up in a blanket, grouchy, and her hair disheveled.

"They were at it last night I guess?" I say to her, but she just groans. My mother smiles like nothing happened, wrapping up her neck in a scarf, off to work herself. She is silent about last night but turns a blind eye while my sister piles sugar onto a bowl of cheerios, little crystals crumbling through the craters. Just kisses us on the forehead and reminds us to take the dog out. Then she lingers till Dad's truck rips out the drive, right over the snow in his big truck with a yellow plow. Isn't high enough to get pushed down yet, but he'll be home first today so my Mom can pull in.

Ayla follows me around the house as I unwrap a Kind bar, put some water on to boil for instant coffee. She waits outside the door while I wash my face and then sits looking out the window in my room while I change, ears up and her mouth half open. On the glass, there's a breathing cloud that swells by her nose. I pile socks over my feet and force them into my boots which are laced up around the oldest Levi's I've got. Pull my jacket over a wool sweater, then I set about zipping up my backpack. I check the binoculars are still in their holster, clipped onto the dense orange fabric, slide my knife through the other strap and clip it, pulling it tight. Takes me ten minutes to find Ayla's collar in the mess of shit downstairs. Once I put the collar on her she knows we're going out and gets to whining. Sister left her cereal in the sink, stopped eating it once she got through the sugar.

I head downstairs to get the pellet gun out of Dad's workshop. There's a bottle in the bottom drawer of his toolbox, but I've never tried it. I don't want to. Never will. I stuff the pellets into my pocket. Tie my

scarf up and let Ayla out through the garage. Have to set the gun down against the woodpile though, run back upstairs to my phone. I slide the screen up and text my girlfriend, asking her what's up. Gina says she wants to kiss me at the church dance on Friday so I have to put my work in. Set it down still charging on the windowsill in my room and clunk back downstairs in my big boots; check to see if she's responded when I get back, something to look forward to.

"You better not be taking the gun out, I'll tell Mom," my sister shouts from the TV, scrolling through OnDemand.

"Oh yeah?" I say. "Go ahead." I think about taking the .22, but I'm not feeling risky today. No point bringing the wrath down on myself, not right after a big fight. "It's just the pellet gun," I say to her before I close the door.

Ayla's waiting outside, rolling around in the snow. Keeps going while I walk by her, then jolts by me when I whistle. Trail head's ten feet off the house.

Trail runs up around some logging roads, big one goes down around the ridge. The path off the house goes straight up it, but I take Ayla down the bike path to the small trail through the swamp where nobody else goes. Nobody knows about that way.

Over the summer, I found a thirty rack of Buds like the one Mike brought over last weekend on that big trail. Fresh one, even the cardboard intact. Ayla and I hauled it up all the way to the ridge and hurled them off one by one into the ravine. Bet you Tyler put them there.

The route I take her today, the little trail, is usually wet. Right after the snow melts you can't walk it, but it's been dry three weeks before this snow came, and anything left is frozen up. Don't even have to balance on the post set across the stream that lingers or hop along the rocks when it gets marshy. Just set the gun into the wilted fabric on my shoulder where it's used to sitting and sink my boots through the snow. Might be some squirrels out still. Once the trail opens up a bit I crack the barrel and

finger a pellet into place, grabbing a loose one out of my pocket from last time. Got to do it before your hands get too cold, but I've got gloves in my backpack just in case.

There's a cavalry jingle as I walk along, Ayla far up ahead of me; the clanking of metal on metal and plastic containers rolling around in my backpack, the chiming of her tags. She knows the way and bounds through the snow in long, light strides. Sounds like I'm a pioneer as I trudge through, the snow coming in columns and everything smelling wet, smelling fresh, smelling untouched.

My dad tried to drive through this part of the trail with the snowmobiles at the first snow of the year, just a couple of weeks ago. But it'd just gotten cold, and he dug his ski right into the muck. The track spun out, kicking mud up into my face and caked the plastic screen of my goggles. He cursed into the night, bathing in my headlight, and threw his helmet into the brush. By the time he calmed down the ground froze over and he couldn't even get his ski out. Sent me back down the logging road to the house to get an axe for him. Told me to grab his whiskey too, that's how I know where he keeps it. Stuffed it and the axe in a saddlebag and ran it back, then pulled up on the ski while he hacked at the ice for an hour, taking enormous gulps from the bottle. Offered me some but I shook my head. Let me smoke a cigarette though once we got it free. Even let me stay home from school the next day.

When we reach the ridge I hear someone talking to Ayla up ahead of me. I start to speed up, but slow down when I hear they're friendly. Ayla's quick to make friends; I could learn from her. I take the gun off my shoulder and hold it facing the ground, making sure the safety's off. Pull the sleeve of my sweater out around my wrist and wipe at my nose, sniffing, spitting as I come out of the trees onto the open rock.

There's the soft whirl of a Jeep on the ridge; can't believe they got it up here. Big stars and stripes dangling off the driver's side, *Don't Tread*

on *Me* off the passenger's, line of floodlights above the windshield, pink words along the bottom but the snow's piled up a bit and I can't make out what it says. Guy's all wrapped up in a Carhartt jumpsuit, inspecting his back tires then jumping back to the wheel and pounding the gas. They spin out in a pocket of ground caught in a swale of the rock. He's got it stuck trying to turn around and head back down. I wave to him and call out for Ayla, then see her up at the top of the rock. There's a woman kneeling down by her, long braids falling out of her beanie. She's got her gloves pinned under her arm, and her hands behind Ayla's ears. They both look happy. Now I really wish I could be like Ayla.

I call out for Ayla again, and muster up enough courage to shout an apology out to the woman. She comes down the rock, smiling, putting her gloves back on. I can barely speak she's so beautiful. As she gets closer I see she has braces. "Hi there," she says to me. "That's a beautiful dog. What's her name?"

I tell her.

"Did you name her?"

"It's Hebrew for tree."

"Oh, are you Jewish?" she asks. Her man pounds the gas again.

"No, I got it out of a book." Ayla leans against my knee. She's a big girl, and her head comes up above my waist as she looks up at me. I lean down and wipe the snow off her fur, keep my eyes on her because I don't want the woman to see that I'm nervous. "Y'all stuck?" I ask.

"Yup," she puts her hand on her hip and laughs as her boyfriend gets out of the Jeep and stumbles over to us. Hits the horn by accident as he falls out and Ayla's head perks up. "I told him not to drive it all the way up."

"I've never seen a car up here before."

"You live around here?"

"Yeah," I point, "Down there."

"You're lucky. This is a beautiful spot."

The man walks up behind me and spits over his shoulder. “Goddamn it, Kaelynn, why don’t you get pushing?”

“I was just waiting for you to ask, darling,” she says back to him.

“What’s up, little man?” He seems suddenly calm. “Nice dog.”

“Thanks.”

“Make sure to hold her back now,” he tells me.

“She’s pretty smart,” I assure him.

He goes back over to the driver’s seat and hits the gas again. Dirt gets shot out over the snow like dripping paint. Kaelynn’s standing right by the middle though so none gets on her. I tell Ayla to stay and run up behind the jeep. Ayla doesn’t move.

I drop my shoulder and bash against the spare tire on the back. I can smell the shampoo off Kaelynn’s hair next to me as we push together, harder, harder, and harder. The jeep hiccups in the mud and seems to bounce out for a second, but we’re cooked in the back and that’s probably not why but it sets back down where it was. “He have it in low four?” I ask her, trying to sound like I know what I’m talking about. She hollers it over to him. Then again. I hear him roll the window down and he pokes his head out.

“What?”

“You got it in low four?” she says again.

“You want to drive it?”

“Come on!” is all she says and starts pushing before he even hits the gas again. Ayla lets out a yawp and I watch her spin around in the reflective tint on the back windshield. Little button of snow on her nose. The jeep pulls out and the man gets out whooping and waving his arms. Pulls Kaelynn over to him and lays a big kiss on her cheek.

“Thanks, brother,” he says to me, arm over her shoulder. “Say, you want a drink?” He pulls a little bottle of Smirnoff out of his pocket.

“No,” I tell him. “I’m alright.”

He passes it to Kaelynn who seems to just let the clear liquid touch

her lips. Then he just puts it back in his pocket. “I already had some in there,” he cocks his head back toward the Jeep. “You want a ride back down?”

“No thanks,” I pick my gun up out of the snow, flicking the snow off, tapping the barrel against the toe of my boot.

“You hunting squirrels?” he asks. “Saw a fucking huge one down the road.”

“Thanks.”

“Come on Kaelynn,” he says and goes back to the driver’s seat. Kaelynn stays put a second, watching me throw my backpack down under a tree. I look up at her briefly, then back down, blushing.

“You got a girlfriend, kid?” she asks me.

For some reason I get the courage to look back at her now. “Yeah.”

“You kiss her yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Bring her up here,” she advises me. “This is a good place for it.” She goes to get into the passenger seat. “What’s your name, kid?” she calls out the window.

I tell her.

“Well, we’ll see you around!” she hollers. Her man turns the music up and taps the horn twice as he pulls away.

I whistle and Ayla runs over to me. Set my gun down by my backpack and start digging out the fire pit. I pull a couple logs out of my backpack, then some lighter fluid. Takes ten matches before one strikes clean and I toss it in. Empty my thermos into the pot I’ve got, then hold it over the low flames till it boils. Rip up two packets of Swiss Miss and toss it in, stirring it with my knife. Pour it right back into the thermos then pile snow up on the flames. Backpack on, everything packed up, I head up to the top of the rock and look out over the trees.

Everything is white, everything, even the sky. A cell-tower blinks like a dying star. I sip the cocoa and sit on an old tire stuck in the slush.

Ayla puts her head on my knee then walks along the edge of the rock till I call her back, scared she'll slip off. She looks like the happiest thing I've ever seen.

Kaelynn was right though. This would be a good place to kiss my girlfriend. I should've asked Kaelynn to show me how, I think, and I laugh to myself and finish off the cocoa, wrap my arm around my back and stuff the thermos down into the side-pocket of my bag.

The snow starts becoming rain, but a light rain. I can feel the wet seeping into my boots and my toes getting stiff. Don't want Ayla to get cold either. I don't like it when she shakes. I pick my gun up and we head back down the short way, the wider trail. Right straight back to the house. They said they saw a big squirrel down that way anyways, so I hope we'll see it.

Ayla knows we're headed home and she bolts it down ahead of me. I move slow, feet sideways down the slippery rocks, starting to show their face again as the rain washes the snow down. Keep my strides in the thin tire tracks from Kaelynn's jeep so the walking's easy. Have to move slow anyways so the pioneer sounds don't scare anything away.

Up ahead, Ayla's stopped in her tracks. Tail wagging, she shakes her whole huge body back and forth, bobbing her head in excited figure eights, her fur sticking up like a razorback. I flip the safety off and watch the tree down my sights.

Little tears of ice come crying down off a branch, then a whole case of snow crashes down as the little thing goes bounding to the next tree. I trace him through the skeleton arms of sleeping limbs and take a shot. He stops and I think I got him, but they don't just stop when you hit them, not with the little pellet gun, not unless you hit them in the head. No, he's just realized that I'm shooting at him and wriggles his way to the other side of the tree. Ayla keeps her head low and moves around after him, dipping her snout into the snow and tossing globs of it up

behind her.

I crack the barrel and fish another pellet out, giving my fingers three huge breaths so I can feel them again and put the pellet in, getting down on one knee. Cold rushes through the denim and my whole leg stings. The squirrel pokes his head out and I take the shot. There's a puff when he drops and Ayla hops away, back over to me. I pat her on the head and slog in through the branches. My hat gets caught and some snow falls back into the collar of my jacket, tumbles down the back of my neck.

We're not far from home and the rain's gone back to snow, so I can take my time. I dig the squirrel out and hold him up. I see that the first shot hit him, only grazed him. Surprised he didn't just take off running. Second one got him under the arm. They were right about something else, too. He's huge. As I walk back home, pleased with myself, I have to keep my arm bent so his head won't drag along the ground, and let my fingers go numb against the open air wrapped tight around his tail.

I see my dad's truck through the trees as we reach the end of the trail. His yellow plow pushed up against a huge tree down the berm of our driveway, driven right off the road. Door's open and the engine's running, exhaust going up out the back like a long thin pillow and I can hear the steady dinging in the pause surrounding our house. Ayla's already at the back door, pawing the sliding glass, but nobody's letting her in. Dad's home which means my sister's back in her room. Least I hope she is.

I go up the deck stairs to where Ayla is and let her in, kicking my shoes off on the low step up into the kitchen before I go in, then wiping them more on the mat. Squirrel's still in my hand. I've forgotten about it. I'm not cold anymore, just my whole body numb and that notch in my throat getting bigger like I want to scream but can't say anything for the life of me. My dad's got his head in the sink, rinsing blood off his face and splashing water up onto the back of his neck. "You left the fucking

garage open,” he says to me.

My sister’s out of the way. She always turns the TV off, like a little signal to me that she’s safe. I don’t say anything. He looks up at me, water stains running down under his hood from where he’s splashed the water. The burst veins along his nose are hidden by the deep purple that’s washed over his face. I’ve got the squirrel tight against my side below the kitchen table so he can’t see it.

“And your sister left her fucking cereal in the sink again,” and he picks it up sloshing the warm, watered down milk onto the floor. Drops the bowl back into the sink.

Ayla runs back up towards my room. I can hear the door shaking. My father comes around the island in the kitchen and sees the dead squirrel. I think for a second that he’s going to yell but instead he just looks at it and his face doesn’t change. It never changes. “You’ve really got to make some friends,” he says.

I call Ayla and open the door back up; she comes bolting down the stairs, squeezing herself under the kitchen table away from my father and out the door. I follow her down the stairs and we sit under the deck with the pile of firewood sheltering us from the wind. I put the squirrel down and take my knife out. I’ll skin it here, and I’ll pull the rusty old firepit out of the garage, and I’ll cook it up for Ayla. I don’t want to go back into the house.

It’s my sister’s birthday tomorrow, and nobody’s gotten her a cake yet.

MELISSA JUCHNIEWICZ

Spring Night

There was a swampy pond up Route 62 then down a little dirt road you had to know was there, that was just the right spot when you were thumbing to Maynard in the summer and no one's picking you up. Everyone stopped there. Some people would cup their hands and throw the pond water on their faces, some would jump right in. Wayne and Neil would strip down and holler as they cannonballed in. One or two of the girls skinny dipped but most just jumped in in their tee shirts and jeans. No one wanted to stay in long, the bottom was mucky, and it wasn't for swimming anyway, just for cooling off. Sometimes for a moment you'd be by yourself and could sit on a rock in the quiet, no road noise, feel the sun. But that wouldn't last; you'd hear people talking or laughing and then they'd be there and you'd hop down and talk and laugh along with them.

Then the machines came. One day half the pond was filled with dirt the machines had dug up, and the whole summer it went on until the pond was full, then the foundation went in. You could hear the backhoes and tractors from the road when you walked by. One day when the foundation was done a couple of kids walked down to see it and the boys peed on the cinderblocks. The little dirt road was made bigger and paved and then the building went in. It turned out to be a Cumberland Farms. Everyone called it Crumbling Farms.

When it was finished the help wanted sign went up. At that time, most of the boys would work Sundays at the auto auction driving the

cars for \$20 a day. Some of the girls had jobs at Howard Johnson's as waitresses or chambermaids. That was the worst, the blue uniform, the white plastic shoes, the same in the restaurant and the motel. The bosses all made sure you knew that there was always someone behind you to take your job if you didn't do it right, like you were just part of the buildings.

May walked out one day, took the apron off and threw it down, and the day boss shouted after her that she'd better bring back the rest of the uniform. The only thing she'd miss would be the walk home past the penitentiary to her place, feeling the weight of the change in her pocket. It got so she could tell almost to the penny how much she'd made in tips by the weight of the coins. Not long after she quit, when she was tired of being broke, May went into the Cumberland Farms and said she'd work. The lady that managed the place asked if she could run a cash register and May said she could, then figured it out as she went along. She got a few two-hour shifts to cover for lunches then the lady asked if she'd be willing to work the overnight shift and May said sure, so she did that now and then.

Debby thought it was pretty funny, May behind a counter ringing up candy bars and drawing cokes from the machine. Mostly the job was selling cigarettes, and one of the big things working there was you had to do a cigarette count twice every shift. May stole them anyway and miscounted on purpose. She stole them for Debby, too, but not for anyone else who asked.

When the register had five \$20s in the drawer, you had to fold them twice and stuff them in a slot in the floor where the safe was. You were supposed to keep track of how many times you did that. You also had to do a drawer count at the beginning and the end of the shift: the pennies, nickels, dimes, everything.

Debby was hanging out in the notions section looking at the stuff like aspirins and needles and thread, waiting for May to get done after

a day shift. When they left, Debby picked up the same conversation she had started the night before.

“I don’t know why you don’t want to do it,” Debby said. “I’ve got it all figured out.”

“Cut it out,” May said.

“No really, it’ll be easy. Just before you put the \$20s in the floor safe, take everything.”

“Right,” May said and shook her head. “Get off it.”

“I’ll be outside with my book bag and you give it to me then go back in and call the cops. Lay down on the floor so you get all dusty before they get there,” she said.

May looked at her and stopped. They were walking up the paved driveway that was once their dirt road and it was just getting dark. Route 62 was quiet. It was early in the spring and the peepers were out. May looked up at that first star; someone had told her it was Venus. It was cooler than it was when she was coming to work that day and she wished she had her jacket, but summer wasn’t far off. She looked back at Debby.

“You’re really not kidding,” May said.

That smile of Debby’s started dawning, then May started smiling, and she broke into a laugh. “It’ll be so cool!” Debby said. “We’ll go to Boston. We’ll take the train. We can play pinball and drink.”

“We’d never pass for 21,” May said, then realized she was really in this with her.

“Oh, they don’t care,” Debby said. “You know. We’ll go to one of those places on Mass Ave, there’s tons of them. Come on!” she said and took May’s hand and started skipping to the end of the driveway. May had to skip with her.

Over the next few days, they figured out the best night to do it.

“Wait a minute,” May said. “It’ll be morning after a night shift.”

“When you call the cops call the manager. When she gets there tell

her you're too shook up to keep working."

"Where will you be?" May asked.

"In the woods behind where that point on the pond used to be. Then we can cut through the woods and end up at the HoJo's parking lot."

May nodded her head. "You really do have this all figured out, don't you."

There was that smile May loved again.

May must have thought of a thousand things that could go wrong on the night they picked to do it, but none of them did. After May did it and told the manager she was too shook up to stay, she went up the driveway and circled around back into the woods. She found Debby and they crashed through the trees, pretty sure of the right direction. The moon was bright so they could see when a branch was about to smack one of them in the face. When they got to the Howard Johnson's parking lot, they put their hands on their knees breathing hard, then the hard breathing turned into laughing, and they just laughed and laughed. They walked to the depot and got the train to Boston. They spent almost all the money on pinball.

JUSTIN KAUPPI

Der Maler

In the dense wood of the Argonne Forest, I laid still under a flurry of gunfire. The Germans were suffocating us as we struggled to push forward and remain breathing. The screams of bloodied men extinguished any desire I had to get up and move forward—even if it meant the end through victory. But the desire for any semblance of an end was futile in the forest. I was helpless under the immense weight of bullets, artillery bombardments, and orders from my squad leader. “Johnson, you and Rainey move around the left flank and take out that machine gun!” yelled Sergeant Rowe who was taking cover behind a splintered tree 25 feet to my right. Amidst the chaos, he had lost his helmet. His thinning yellow hair juxtaposed the charred soil that smothered his round face. The shock in his blues eyes reflected in mine.

I looked at Rainey who was taking cover at the base of another broken tree behind me. He was even more petrified than I was. He hadn’t seen so much blood and flesh since he left his family’s butchery in the Bronx. His uncalloused hands gripped his Springfield rifle, shaking it furiously as he fired at anything and everything that moved ahead. He didn’t hear the Sergeant’s orders, so I shouted at him, “Rainey! Let’s move—Sergeant wants us to flank that nest!” I could see his bulging brown eyes peer at me from under his helmet. He took three deep breaths before clumsily lunging towards me. The first bullet tore through his arm, just above the Lady Liberty patch on his uniform. Before the blood could stain the blue and yellow patch, another bullet ripped through his

dented green helmet. When he dropped to the forest floor, I knew he was dead.

I had seen so much death and suffering since the offensive began just two months earlier in September. Poison gas filled the lungs of young boys from New York whose only wish besides catching the next boat back home was to don their gas masks before they were completely immobilized. Shrapnel from artillery and bullets alike lacerated these soldiers who, if survived, dealt with great agony from infection on stiff cots in crowded French churches. And even there, the Spanish flu hung heavy in the air, preying on the wounded. The Great War was going to be our generation's arduous undertaking. If victorious, we would earn the honor and glory shared by our grandfathers who fought to end slavery and reunite the states 50 years earlier. But after only two months of combat, I had already seen too many boys like Rainey sent to their deaths.

Our squad was quickly being depleted amidst the fiery chaos that enveloped the space beneath the canopies. The only living soldiers I could see through the trees were Sergeant Rowe, Private Moore, and Private Rollins. Moore and Rollins were operating the machine gun 30 feet to my right, so I knew there was no one else I could call to come flank the Germans with me. So, I made the sign of the cross, mumbled a prayer I hadn't recited since Sunday school, and prepared to launch myself into the fray. To my left was a narrow opening, void of low-lying vegetation that could trip me up and expose me. There were enough trees to the right of the clearing that would stop most bullets from ripping through me. The only problem was the clearing began roughly 15 feet from my position. I knew if I ran there, I would be spotted and instantly ripped apart. So, I grasped my Springfield tightly under my chest and crawled forward. My face was so close to the ground that the smell of gunpowder and blood dissipated, only to be replaced with

disturbed soil and wet leaves. The brim of my helmet scraped along the ground, revealing worms and pebbles that were only visible when I opened my eyes to see if I was still alive.

I thought regardless of how I went, 15 feet without cover would surely result in my undoing. I continued to blindly crawl until my head was stopped by something solid. Hesitantly, I looked up, fully prepared to see the worn leather boot of a German rifleman with his Mauser pointed at the back of my neck. When I saw it was the moss-covered oak I had spotted earlier, I ever so slightly loosened the grip on my rifle. I put my head back down and listened to the sounds of clashing machine guns. When I realized that the tree was between me and the Germans, I raised my head to relocate and pinpoint the machine gun nest. Darkness was slowly seeping into the forest and I could only see the worn faces of the two Germans behind the machine gun from the flash of the muzzle when they fired.

There were only two of them, but their machine gun made it sound like there were at least 10. The pit of my stomach became a cauldron - brewing a blend of boldness, vengeance and fear as I began to move around towards the German position. Night was quickly falling in Northern France as I stumbled over roots and divots. My breathing intensified and my heart thumped in my chest like it was about to rupture. I spotted another large tree, 25 feet from the nest. I ran to it, miraculously unseen by the two Germans. At its base, I dropped to one knee. Hugging my left shoulder against the damp bark, I swung my rifle up to pick my first target. At this distance and with the little daylight that was left, I could tell which soldier was firing and which was reloading. I aligned my iron sights at the sternum of the firer and tried to control my heavy breathing. My finger slowly slipped down the wooden rifle until I felt the cold steel of the trigger.

Suddenly, my newly found concentration was shattered by the crack of a bullet passing by my head and the sight of a horde of German

reinforcements bursting through the trees ahead. Soldiers clad in dark gray uniforms wearing the unmistakable *Stahlhelm* helmets charged ferociously in a brazen counterattack. I feared that Sergeant Rowe and the rest of the men had been pushed back while I was still isolated behind the tree. I dropped to the ground as it seemed the entire might of the Kaiser's army was being directed solely at me. I pushed my face back into the soil as the volley of bullets sprayed over my back. In between shots, I could hear them closing in on my position. Us American doughboys feared the worst from the Germans, or as we called them "The Huns." I knew if I stayed lying against that tree, I'd be captured and likely killed. So, I let out a scream like a cornered coyote, stood up and ran in the only direction I wanted to - away from the Germans.

Darkness had nearly enveloped the forest as I ran deeper into its clutches - away from the enemy onslaught that was in pursuit. I ran, just waiting to collide head-first into a tree, or worse, into a German foxhole. I pumped my arms viciously through the blackness as my helmet swooped over and above my eyes. Bullets cracked and whizzed all around. I prayed that I was running back to Sergeant Rowe, but I just as well could have been running towards another battalion of Germans. In the back of my mind, I was running home, dreaming of stumbling through my front door where my mother would scold me for wearing such dirty boots inside. Eventually, the barrage of bullets ceased, but my legs refused to stop. Further into the darkness I went as I continued to grow weary. Hours passed as I trudged forward. The weakness in my legs began to react to the exodus of adrenaline as I sauntered over sticks and leaves until the darkness swallowed me whole.

Suddenly, I was home. My family stood smiling in front of the freshly painted red barn beside our small one-story house. Everyone besides my father was there. They stood side by side as if preparing to pose for a photograph, each of them emitting a heavenly glow. I was still

in my unwashed olive-green uniform, holding my rifle as they broke from their huddle to embrace me. Anne, my high school sweetheart, was the first to hug me. She wrapped her arms around me as I rested my chin on her silken brown hair. When she looked up at me, her gentle blue eyes were an unnaturally florescent shade of the summer sky above. She grabbed my hands and placed them over her pregnant belly. The soft, pink fabric of her Edwardian sundress remained clean as I tenderly motioned my soil-stained hands over her. "It's a boy, Arthur," she said. "I'm naming him after you." Before I could respond to the news of impending fatherhood, my mother stepped in front of Anne with a bowl of meat and potato stew in her outstretched hands. She looked up at me with a closed-mouth smile that caused the crow's feet around her eyes to appear. "Oh, you must be so hungry, dear," she said as she placed the wooden bowl in my hands and hugged my slender frame. The pristine white apron she wore gleamed despite almost always being covered in grime and splatter. As I slowly ate the hot stew, she removed the helmet from my head and parted my flattened brown hair to the side like when I was a boy in grade school. My nine-year-old twin sisters, Edith and Susanna, innocently ignored my presence to play in the field beside the cow pen, somehow avoiding muddying up their own pink dresses.

When I directed my attention away from my mother and Anne, I saw my father standing under the grand oak tree beside the barn. The oak tree that had stood stoically long before the stone wall my grandfather had built alongside it when he returned home from the Civil War. He took long drags of his cigarette and stared at me with his tragic brown eyes. He was the only man I feared more than the Huns. The intoxicated nights he spent berating me in the barn while I chopped firewood during cold winters stained my love of home. His stare seemed to summon me as my two kid sisters danced around the yard between us, collecting dandelion heads in my helmet. Reluctantly, I left my mother and Anne to heed his unspoken call. Each step I took towards him seemed to stir up

the wind just a little more. As I stepped off the dirt driveway and onto the grass, my nerves began to ignite. The wind was now rocking me about as the cows and goats began to moan. The brass rooster weathervane atop the barn trembled in a frenzy as I struggled to move amidst the spontaneous, ever increasing storm.

My father remained stern, like a statue at the base of the tree. His eyes remained trained on me as he stood calmly smoking his cigarette. His dirt-stained blue shirt rested rigid on his skinny body as if the tornadic wind whipped around him and only him. At his feet, I fell to my knees, unable to remain upright. Then the wind suddenly stopped. When I stood up, I looked around at the destruction. Trees had snapped in half. Every window in the house had shattered, spreading glass around the foundation. The rest of my family was gone from where they'd been standing. My father then swung his hand firmly on my shoulder and spun me around. He reeled me in so close that the smoldering tip of the cigarette nearly brushed my lips. His face was clean shaven but stained with dirt and saw dust. The smell of schnapps lingered out of his mouth. He paused, removed his cigarette then shouted the last words he spoke before I left home, "Keep your head down, kid!"

A flash of blinding white suddenly burst, and I found myself lying on my back, eye to eye with a new face. His silhouette blocked the early morning sun as the dying leaves of French trees fluttered around him. I was slowly digesting the truth that I had been dreaming and was still in the Argonne when he spoke. "Don't move, you hurt yourself quite badly when you fell." He spoke English, but his accent resembled that of the German POW's I'd heard back at the French camp behind the lines. I jolted back, my eyes now fully acclimated to the blooming daylight.

"Stay back!" I shouted as I reached for my rifle that was nowhere to be found. He moved closer to me in an attempt to calm me down. He towered over me. He must have been 6'5" but had a serious hunch. His

face was long, and his nose was crooked. He had big brown eyes like a cocker spaniel that sat over dark circles. A defeated look rested on his half-shaven face. The gray trench coat he wore had faded into a deep blue and brown after years in the mud. But it was dry and crisp as if he had recently held it over a fire.

“Do not panic. You are injured. I am helping you,” he said with his arms outstretched.

“Where’s my damn rifle?” I asked aggressively.

“I have it. Please do not worry. I am your friend,” he said, dropping to one knee beside me. “You must be still. You hurt your head and foot in a fall.”

I eventually unstuck my gaze from him and looked around at the small camp he had hastily installed amongst a small clearing in the trees. There were no other German soldiers, no nurses, no chaplains—no one. Only trees. To my left was a small fire pit surrounded by loosely placed rocks with charred remains of small branches in it. His helmet was resting upside down on top. A dead and decaying tree laid on the ground beside it. A fragment of a mirror was tied loosely to a tree near my feet. My boots had been removed and were positioned next to the fire, along with my socks. The new pair on my feet were not mine. They were gray like the German’s uniform and were much too large for me. I swiveled my feet left and right to make sure they weren’t injured like the German said. But when I did, a sharp pain erupted in my left ankle. My imminent escape was in jeopardy. I needed to be certain my feet functioned before I made a daring move at my captor.

Leaning against another tree just out of reach were two rifles—his and mine. He remained silent as he dressed a makeshift splint around my ankle, which I was beginning to think was fractured, possibly broken. I noticed he had a scar running across the top of his head. Like the Red Sea divided by Moses, it revealed a straight line of only skin with unwashed brown hair on either side eager to reclaim the desolate

territory in between.

“What happened to your head?” I asked, eyeing his tactical shovel just feet away on the ground near the fire pit.

“I was shot,” he said, running his finger over the bald line. “An English bullet took my hair. If I were any taller, it would have taken my life.”

He gently laughed, revealing a semblance of emotion he hadn’t yet shown. Even when eagerly requesting to tend to my wounds, the gesture was almost hollow. He helped me like a factory worker monotonously repeating step after step on a production line. His hands trembled as he wrapped the last few pieces of linen around my ankle, securing two sticks on either side.

“Why are you helping me?” I asked, running my hands over the bandage around my head.

“We don’t always have to be trying to kill each other,” he said. “Sometimes we can help.”

“Once I can walk again, you’ll take me to your lines, won’t you?”

“Back to my lines?”

“Yes, to your Commander. However, you want to put it. You’re on a scouting patrol, I’m guessing.”

Once again, he began to laugh. He walked around the fire pit and reached behind the fallen tree. In his hands were the razor and rusty metal cup of water he was using to shave with before I woke up. He looked at his half-stubbled face in the mirror as he dipped the razor in the water.

“I’m not a part of a scouting patrol,” he said as he ran the blade over his cheek. “I’m not even in the German army anymore.” I looked around at the unnatural contents of the surrounding area that I hadn’t yet noticed. His khaki bread bag that carried his belongings was slung over a low-hanging branch. His ammunition belt laid purposeless on the wet ground, yards away from the camp. Lastly, there was a gray wool

blanket, strung into a makeshift tent with surplus bootlaces. Like the ammunition belt, it was far from the clearing where the forest was at its most dense. These were the belongings of a German soldier. The same soldiers who killed Rainey and chased me through the forest trying to kill me. So, why was he helping me? And why did he claim to no longer be in the German army? I lied helpless on the cold morning ground, at the mercy of a man who acted like the antithesis of my enemy.

I spent much of that day trying to distract myself by writing letters home, although the thought of escape was always present in my mind. The quiet German, who spoke very little, referred to himself as Elias. He provided me with two blank pages from his journal and a short lead pencil that I sharpened with my knife when he allowed me to. Among other perplexing kindnesses, he gently dragged me to a tree to sit up against. The sun was high above the forest, shining brightly over the small oasis of peace and quiet in the wooded land of death and misery. Occasionally, artillery bombardments could be heard erupting in the distance, although most sounds derived from birds chirping, wind blowing through the trees, the constant crackle of the small fire, and pencils dulling over paper. I completed writing a letter to Anne when I noticed Elias was also scribbling away in his journal. "Writing to your girl?" I asked. He remained focused on his task and ignored my question.

I assumed his friendliness towards Americans like me was limited, seeing as we were only in France to give guys like him hell. "I'm not writing," he finally responded as he held the page out in front of his face for a better look. "I'm drawing." He repeatedly glanced at me and back at his drawing with a small, prideful smile. "I'm a painter," he said as he walked towards me, "without any paint." He reached down and handed me the paper. There I was, propped up against a tree like a neglected wooden puppet. The frightened look in my eyes didn't reflect the warrior spirit I felt I possessed. A warrior at the mercy of his enemy, ready to

escape to join his brothers in the fight once again. However, after only several hours, I was no longer feeling like a prisoner. I felt like I was back home in the hospital after I broke my wrist playing baseball when I was 13. I was under the care of an empathetic professional in a world where brutality was the only means of survival.

That night I hardly slept. Elias ripped his wool blanket in half for me to cover myself with, but it wasn't enough to keep me warm. I asked if I could sleep next to the fire, but he said he had to extinguish it as it was too dangerous at night. He did all he could to not be noticed by any wandering patrols. So, he mulled the embers over each other before retreating to his tent—now half its original size. I laid awake, gazing up at the infinite black. Resting my head on the toes of my boots, I shoved my hands deep into my armpits. I pondered the abnormality of bunking so close to an enemy soldier. I felt my paranoia completely dissipate. I knew I was in caring hands, but the shame of not fighting with Sergeant Rowe and the rest of the men began lurking around my thoughts. The pain in my ankle was still present, but I knew I would soon have to find my way back to allied lines before I was officially pronounced missing in action.

The next morning, I awoke to the sun rising over the trees. The pain in my ankle was far from subsiding, and my back was raw from laying on the cold ground all night. I rubbed my eyes and noticed my rifle now by my side. I heard a noise and saw Elias kneeling at the base of a tree gripping his rifle.

“What is it?” I asked as he pointed the weapon into the forest.

“I'm hearing something,” he said, “I think it is just an animal.”

Alleviated of his concern, he walked back to his bread bag and opened a can of rations. Using his knife, he cut the canned beef in two and placed one half into my hands. The preserved meat squished like

frosted mud between my teeth. The saltiness caused me to wince until he allowed me to take a few sips of rainwater out of his canteen. “Thank you,” I said once I swallowed the last of the preserved meat. He nodded as he sat on the rotting tree that laid on the ground by the fire pit.

“You’re a deserter, aren’t you?” I finally asked, awaking the emotions of the quiet giant.

“Yes,” he said, “but you do not know what this war is really like.”

“What do you mean?” I replied aggressively. “I’ve seen men die, just like you. You’re just a coward!”

“No, not like me. For four years I have been murdering boys like you in France and Belgium. I’ve seen death and sadness in ways that a month in this forest cannot compare to. And for what? Do you even know why you are here?”

I sat against the tree, unable to find the answer to his question. The impassioned scowl on his dirty face glanced away from me as he looked at the sky and then smiled. He took a deep breath, looked back down at me and said calmly, “I’m a painter, Johnson—*ein maler*. I paint places like this. ‘*En plein air*,’ the French call it. I studied it in Paris before the war, and in London as well,” he said as he leaned in to hold his hands over the fire before he continued. “Forty-eight years ago, the Prussians went to war with the people of this country. Claude Monet, the famous Impressionist painter, was one of those people. Only he did not fight like you and me. He refused to die for silly, fat old men bickering with one another. Instead, he studied, and he painted as he liked. You’ll never hear anyone call him a coward, Johnson. He is loved and he is *alive*. That will be me someday, loved and *alive*.”

Elias realized that an ignorant young American like me wouldn’t comprehend his pacifistic disposition. He spent the rest of the day going about his routine with a careless whimsy. Although I didn’t understand his reason for abandoning the war, it was clear to me from his relaxed manner that his confession lifted a weight from his shoulders. I imagine

that sometime in the night, not long before I fell into his camp, he slipped past the sentries with stolen rations, a few extra supplies and a hope that he wouldn't be shot before arriving home in Germany. He had kept his plans for desertion from his comrades and became a nationless nomad, wandering the dense forest hoping to find a safe way out. I don't believe that he expected to make it all the way home without being arrested and executed. It would be impossible. He bet his life on the likelihood that the German army was on the brink of collapse and that any day the war would be over. So, in the meantime, he survived and absorbed inspiration for his next empty canvas.

For three more days, Elias dressed and redressed my splint and head bandage. He told tales of life in Germany and his artistic ambitions for when he arrived home. I told him about my life on the farm in New York. I thought I'd still be lying against that tree trading stories when the war ended. But on the sixth morning, I awoke to him hovering over me. His expression revealed a grave concern.

"Wake up, Johnson," he said quickly. "You must leave this place." He was dressed in his full kit. Everything that had once been scattered was now somewhere on his body. The rocks that formed the fire pit were gone and damp leaves covered the charred evidence. The camp looked as if it had never been there. It was now just another lifeless place in the Argonne. He helped lift me to my feet before handing me a sturdy branch to help me walk. I noticed the sounds of artillery had grown louder.

"You must walk in that direction," he said, pointing to where the sounds of artillery were emanating from. He reached into his bread bag that was slung over his shoulder. Pulling out a white kerchief, he ripped it in half and tied it around the top of the branch. He yanked the knot tight and said, "Your friends will likely think you are German right away, but they won't shoot you if they see this." He stumbled back to examine my appearance and displayed a small smile. The rising sun shone

through the opening in the canopy, partially blinding me as I leaned on the branch. “You are a brave man,” he said, placing a piece of paper in my breast pocket.

“Where will you go?” I asked

“Away from here,” he replied, “to safer place in the forest. If you survive the rest of the war, come visit me in Munich. I will show you my studio and paint you properly next time.”

“I will,” I muttered.

“Goodbye, Johnson, my friend, and good luck,” he said with a full smile.

“You too.”

With an open palm, he pointed towards the trees where he suggested I walk. Without offering the sincere thanks he deserved, I nodded, and left. Dragging my left foot along the ground, I hobbled out of the clearing and into the brush. I hardly made it 15 feet before I heard the first shot ring out. Before I had time to react, another shot burst from the trees. It felt like a hot fire poker thrusting through my shoulder, knocking me to the ground. The impact of the bullet was so forceful that it spun me around in the direction of the clearing. I lay on my stomach in immense pain. When I raised my head, I saw the bottom of Elias’ withered boots. He lay dead with his face in the ground with a bullet wound in a place I’ll never know.

I began to cry out in agony as I heard footsteps approaching from behind. “Montrez-vous!” a voice yelled. I lay impotent in a state of paralysis, soaking my blood and saliva into the soil. Suddenly, I was rolled onto my back by a foreign hand. Through the dirt veil coating my eyes, I could see a soldier in blue looking down at me while another began dressing my wound. Although the rising sun was beginning to illuminate the forest, my senses were beginning to dull as I slowly slipped from consciousness, overcome with pain and emotion. The sounds of the French soldiers speaking to one another began to muffle

as my vision started fading to black. My nerves began to calm as I looked up at the sky above the forest for the last time.

I awoke to the screams of wounded soldiers bleeding through their ragged blue ensembles on dilapidated canvas cots. When I opened my eyes, I saw the sky once again. This time through a hole in the roof of a crumbling church. I looked around, hoping to find Elias laying on one of the cots as well. But he wasn't there. There were no Germans here, and he was dead. The church was illuminated by the midday sun shining through its roof and shattered windows. French nurses paced back and forth in their soiled white aprons, tending to their country's wounded boys. Boys with missing limbs and bandages covering their mutilated eyes. Beside me was a nun, praying over a recently expired soldier. With rosary beads in hand, she closed his eyes, made the sign of the cross, and called two nurses over to carry his body out to make space for another.

I reached my hand across my chest to feel the fresh bandages over my shoulder when I felt the paper Elias had slipped into my breast pocket. I unfolded it as the sun positioned itself perfectly in the hole in the roof, alighting the image with great clarity. I looked down through the dust dancing in the rays to see lines and shades of gray slashing and intersecting, revealing a portrait. It was me again. Only I was not wounded nor sat against the tree. I stood tall with my foot placed sternly on the fallen tree beside the fire pit like George Washington in his rowboat crossing the Delaware. My frightened look had been replaced with one prouder and full of purpose. The trees of the Argonne stood tall behind me like the pillars of the Pantheon of Athens.

The presence of immense pain in the church began to fade as a young, blonde nurse gracefully approached me. She pointed down at the creased page. "C'est toi, non?" she asked. I began to cry, slowly dripping tears over the page. She knelt down beside me, took my chin in her blood-stained hand and turned my face towards hers, "No...cry." she managed

to say. “The war, it is...over.” She then delicately kissed my forehead before carrying on with her duties.



JUSTIN KAUPPI/*Clouds Over Budapest*



JUSTIN KAUPPI/*Springtime in Cinque Terre*



JUSTIN KAUPPI/*Waiting for the Tram*

KAITI MADDOX

Frida, Her, and I

She tells me she is not a man, and I act surprised even though I'm not. We're at the art museum, gazing at Frida as she gazes back at us, her eyes cool and intimidating. The cat on her shoulder arches its back, as if threatened by our presence. We don't belong in the world behind the frame, with Frida and the jungle and her cat.

As she tells me what's been troubling her, she stares straight ahead, speaking to Frida instead of me. Perhaps it's comforting, knowing that Frida's expression will never change no matter what information is divulged to her. Frida is content behind her frame, the gender of the people gazing on her is of no concern to her. Man or woman or any other possibility means nothing to her.

As she stares at Frida, spilling her soul, I stare at Frida, planning my response. Would it be inappropriate to tell her that I already know? That I can't share my life, my soul, my body, and my bed with someone for two years without seeing how their gaze shifts uncomfortably at the mention of their presumed gender? Should I tell her I've been expecting this conversation for months? Or should I make it clear to her that her secret is still a secret, give her the comfort of knowing that she is still, at the moment, protected by the public assumption that she is a cisgender man? I look to Frida, frozen in her frame, straining to remember if there's some right or wrong reaction to the secret I've been told.

Frida has no answers for me. She stares back, challenging me to respond. This is my frame, not hers. She has no responsibility to help

me. Frida has already painted her world and it's my turn to paint my own. So I take my brush and begin to paint my story, our story.

"I love you in any gender," I reply simply. My voice is calm, unchanged. I do everything in my power to keep the swirl of questions, comments, and concerns to myself. This is not my moment. This is hers. I am an audience member, seated politely next to Frida and the cat, watching the love of my life perform her magnum opus. It's time for her to sing the song she has been writing since the day the sonographer cheerily told her parents they were having a boy.

She turns to look at me, for the first time in what feels like hours, though I know it has only been seconds. I force myself to turn and look at her, and find to my relief that she is the same. The same person I have loved for two years, now shining with the glow of relief. Telling her that I love her no matter what isn't rocket science, and I haven't blown it. I bask in her glow for a moment before turning my attention to the future ahead of us.

I ask her what she'd like me to call her, the inevitable next step in the conversation we're having. The words feel clunky and cliché as I speak them, but there's no other way to say them. She looks back at Frida and tells her and me that for now, it would be great if we could refer to her as they, and I oblige, rolling the words through my mind. Practicing for the future. She tells me she's unsure what she is at the moment. She knows only that she is not a man. That she has never been a man. And I assure her that I will follow her lead, that I will adapt as she does.

Things have changed since our meeting with Frida. The Frida Kahlo exhibition has left The Museum of Fine Arts. We have fled our Bowden Street apartment, retreating to the relative financial safety of my parents' attic. And she has become herself. A woman just like I am. Like Frida was. Her own woman. An individual and powerful woman. Unquestionably and concretely a woman.

K. MAI

And So It Goes

57. A body is thrown across the room. Thankfully, they're barely alive.

They stay on the ground, heavily panting—catching their breath. Reaching out their bandaged hand, they slowly pick themselves back up, momentarily pausing whenever a rush of pain kicks in. They lean against the smooth wall behind them as they recollect themselves in their room.

Magenta light seeped through the cracks of where the walls met the ceiling and the floor. They saw their beat-up sneakers speckled with what looks like blood. Their laces were tightly knotted and secured by staples and duct tape. Their jeans had seen better days; there were holes at the knees and they noted to find better bandaging as the dinosaur bandages weren't doing a great job. They pulled their hoodie sleeves down, wincing as the claw marks on their arms rubbed against the fabric. Pushing their matted hair back, they shakily exhaled and forced themselves to move forward—back towards the direction they were thrown from.

Then began the Pull. The Pull was about the same height as them, preferring to avoid the light that outlines the room, but they had noticed at 35 that the Pull had the same stapled shoelaces. The main difference lay in its behavior. The Pull was warm, almost like them. The Pull was a slow boil, rising in temperature, in unexpected hostility. It tugged at heartstrings and the veins in the wrists and has fallen from the hands of

logic.

They walked with a slight limp and their eyes never strayed far from whatever laid on the other side of the room. Not even when decaying hands carefully approached them from their left and right, palms up. They knew they never intend to lunge at them at 10 and meant no harm based on their feather-like grazes against their matted hair.

At fifty steps, the buzzing rose in volume behind them. They knew before 1 that turning around would stop the noise, but by 48 they never bothered to turn around. The buzzing was irritating, at first, like a drill to the skull as if something inside wanted to break out. Yet it has become a comforting background sound. It was the sound of static from a television screen. They didn't want to forget that.

There were a lot of things they didn't want to forget. However, television screen static was the only one that stayed. They didn't remember why they felt shame and fear associated with this memory. They can't be too picky as one memory is better than—

The buzzing had stopped. All they could hear was the light dragging of their feet and the rustling of their clothing. Through their matted hair, they looked over their shoulder. There was darkness. The magenta light no longer highlighted where they got up from. They turned back around and continued moving ahead. They knew at 24 that if they stared at the darkness too long, the Pull would let them go. It was important to be held here with no one but yourself.

They knew the Pull wasn't a friend, an enemy, an acquaintance. The Pull had no complexities and only aimed to lure them. They knew at 17 that no one else was there, but how can they deny any form of comfort in this room, this void?

They believed that they had tried communicating with the room before 1, but the Pull seemed to have told them that there was no one else and there was no point.

They unconsciously cleared their throat with a cough. They forgot

they had made the same mistake once.

They barely registered being thrown backward. The body landed with a thump. 58.

K. MAI

Tiny, Little Things

Grandpa sits in his office. Two large cabinets stood tall against the wall. Light tan wood as its framework—a shade darker than the wood floor paneling it stands on—and accented by tiny gold handles. Glass paneling revealed glass shelves of lovely mysteries and kept out the curious hands of Grandpa’s grandchildren.

The shelves held souvenirs from vacations spent with the family, like a small statue of a beach or a glass whale with a swirl of dark blue. There were the odd fruit statues with miniature versions of the fruit on sticks (the children were supervised to avoid potential choking hazards). The grandchildren especially enjoyed playing with models of bikes with attached carriages that were bought during a visit to Vietnam.

Somewhere else, Grandpa’s daughter is gliding around her house as she sweeps around the dining room, where there’s a cabinet built into the wall. Glass paneling displayed shelves that matched the white walls and were filled with her preferred kind of souvenirs. She didn’t trust her children around these items, but even then they weren’t tall enough to reach the cabinet handle.

This cabinet also had souvenirs from her homeland, like a statue of stacked turtles with bobbing paddles for heads and small paintings of blossoming trees. Her children were especially fascinated with the music box. Heart-shaped, it had a porcelain-like surface, raised by three gold legs. Red velvet lined the inside of the box yet much of its space was taken up by its musical mechanics. Every time the box was wound

up, the twinkling Happy Birthday melody would softly ring out when opened. When they got taller, her children would often sneak the music box out from the cabinet to watch it do its job despite their mother's wishes of keeping the box safe in the cabinet.

On another day, the mother's daughter is walking along the beach with her mother and grandmother. She doesn't have a bathing suit and doesn't care if she finds sand in uncomfortable places. The aunts and uncles prepare lunch as their children splash around in the water. They are attempting to gather enough water to make a moat.

As the sun peaks in the sky, the daughter looks towards the ground. She sees little seashells in white, pink, and blue. She begins to pick them up one by one, making sure that she isn't accidentally kidnapping any living creatures. Grandma stops now and then to point out the pretty ones that her granddaughter should keep. Her mother reminds her to wash them when they get back to her cousins' place as she hands her daughter a plastic grocery bag for storage. As the daughter's cousin's retreat from the ocean, they hand her some shells that she's missed. That evening, the daughter makes sure, after ridding them of excess sand, that the seashells are cushioned in between her pairs of shorts and colorful t-shirts.

The seashells sit in a jar in the daughter's bookshelf. There is a wooden snake from a flea market, rubber ducks from a class machine in New York, and small glow-in-the-dark figures from every trip to Magic Castle. A glass plant from a museum gift shop that has a worm on a string that was gifted by a friend and the smallest pebble from her cousin's decorative rocks sits on the daughter's desk to fidget with. All just tiny, little things.

MICHAEL MAKIEJ

I Know Love

I know love like trees know rain,
in great sheets and gentle patters,
plentiful one day, barren the next,
all consuming; all depleted.

I know love like children know death,
blankly, with only the vaguest understanding.
Shaken up at night by it,
forgotten in the morning.

I know love like a dog knows their master,
frightened at their departure,
staring for hours at that hesitant door,
leaping and licking upon their return.

I know love, and its every purple petal,
like the asters in August when summer love dies.
I know love and its every bloom,
is something to seek and something to savor.

SURBHI MAVI

Three Red Leaves

Float like glazed droplets of blood
to the soft carpet of moss underfoot.
The elephant-skin birch towers above,
gaps between its tangled limbs
forming clean, grey geometries.
Goosebumps raise
on the backs of my arms,
but I untie my scarf anyways:
invite the gentle, cool breeze
to wrap me in its whispering embrace.
The smoky taste of autumn lingers
beneath my tongue – crisp and cold.



SURBHI MAVI/*Disco Lights*



SURBHI MAVI/*Leaving Patterns*

ANGELA MESSINA

Beautifully Bruised and Broken

You were the hues of dusk,
the clouds changing colors in such a captivating way.
The purples in our sky resemble the marks you left on my skin all those
months ago.

You were a serene distraction from the fading of my light,
the setting of my sun and the beginning of my end.
I endured the pain because it came with a mesmerizing view of a false
future.

Your lips tasted like the promise of a starry night
that I might one day be fortunate enough to witness,
but the sun never gets to bask in the moon's light.
So I'm left here, looking up at the sky and searching for myself
behind the beautiful haze you trapped me in.
No one knows that behind you, I slip away.

ELIJAH NORTH

Sonnet '37

My father was a sharecropper in Dyess—
he'd been four when the Mississippi
broke the levee, flooding the fields of rice
for as far as his blue, wide eyes could see.

He grew older, as people do, in years
as well as fears. He became a nervous,
soft-spoken man often reduced to tears
of frustration, always impervious

to my childhood hugs and kisses—displays
of love and devotion, never asking
for anything in return. Now, those days
are like still-life memories imploring

me to admire them, to hold and cherish
them because no one else will. They're selfish.

ELIJAH NORTH

Yates

You wrote of builders and liars,
long before the young Revolutionaries
of Wheeler Road.

You wrote of unrequited love—
“Alas, when passion is both meek and wild!”—
of a time when Frank could look at Maureen
with nothing more than desire, nothing more than bold-faced hunger,
shining in his eyes and governing his thoughts.

Cabbies, clerks, truck drivers, schoolteachers—
they were your children, born and raised in the streets of Yonkers
or the suburbs of the Midwest, longing to be extraordinary
in a dull, complacent world.

They were people you'd never actually met,
from a life you'd never lived. No,
you were the storyteller, living vicariously
through the travails of others.



MICHAEL NUZZO/*Phaos*



MICHAEL NUZZO/*Sticks*

LAUREN ORDWAY

Ode to Spring

Silent, haunting nights,
the silver spinning ice.
Dark and dreary dreams,
Winter's biggest vice.

Wildflowers are sure to bloom—
crunching snow will sleep.
Sweet hymns of feathering wrens
in the coming months to meet.

Howling from the earthly wood,
as the last night feels the chill.
The sun will spread its dancing beams;
its rays again to fill.

Distant laughter resurfaced,
green vines sprouting begin.
Sparkling dew on morning glories,
Spring sure to settle again.

JORDYN REGO

Rome

He should have known Rome
knew love better than he ever could.
That the city would take her hand and
guide her through the web of cobbled
streets, where ruins dripped in beads of time,
between the contemporary and conventional,
detailing every brush stroke, every cut of stone
created by those who lived centuries before.
Where she may walk amongst kings
and gladiators, where she may toss a coin to the
wish collector at Trevi, or pray for eternity in the
Vatican's embrace where he would plead, selfishly,
for a lifetime of seeing the upward curl of her rosy lips,
the snap of her wrist as she flicked a wreath of hair
over her shoulder, the burning shade of her eyes,
forget-me-not blues, and the way
they sparked at the sight of wondrous things.
He knew that he would follow, always
he would, to whatever end. To wherever
the odyssey of her soul ventured. There he would be,
close behind, gathering the pieces of
her saturated heart.

JORDYN REGO

We Were

like young gods,
stumbling our way between the
earth and sky,
the sun scorching our skin,
kissing fire into our souls.
Our bodies cavorting to
the sound of foreign music,
legs capering in harmony to the
outlandish words that burned
remnants into our psyche,

our heads thrown back,
laughing,
our voices yelling to the winds
with teeth bared to the world
as we ventured aimlessly,
recklessly,
winding our way through the
pervading cobbled streets of
Berlin, mavericks saunter astray.

We gripped life between greedy fingers,
capsuled in a bottle of rich ruddy brown,
like prayers,
our lips dyed with the bliss of forbidden
nectar, tasting of stolen ambrosia,
sickly sweet like licorice,
drunk on the prospect of divinity.

Our ripened youth,
beautiful in its frailty, its mortality;
what a bitter triumph it will be
to die when we lived
like young gods.

ASHLEY RIVERA

Maybe Aging Isn't So Bad

There's a picture of me and my father above my dresser. It's my kindergarten graduation photo. I look about five, and my father had a full head of hair and mustache to go with it. I was looking at my father earlier today and it suddenly hit me that he's getting old. He was standing in front of the couch, his hands in his pocket, his grey hair thinning, leaving a prominent bald spot that extended into his receding hairline. I asked him a question about some snow crab legs he said he ordered, and he stared at floor a moment, almost trying to remember what, exactly, he'd told me. When he opened his mouth, he revealed a layer of bare gums at the top and a crooked line of teeth at the bottom, a few missing here and there. He flicked his head upwards as if moving it would help him recall the answer to the question. This drew my attention to his shoulders and his posture. His shoulders were broad and his head seemed like a lollipop on his body. He slouched ever so slightly and, in that moment, reminded of the old man from *Up*. Once I pictured that, I couldn't unsee it. His eyes opened wide to respond to my question, their irises lighting up like motion sensor nightlights with the answer.

"They'll call me when it's ready," he says, with a cough to clear his throat at the end. I stood there for a second, looking at him. When did my dad start to get so old? When did his hair start receding? When did he have to start wearing dentures? When did he start slouching like that? Had he always stood that way? Had he always waited a full 30 seconds to answer a question that I had to ask him twice? All these thoughts ran

through my head as he told me he wanted to sit down now. He'd been standing, and from the way his posture continued to droop, I guessed he was tired. I watched him sit down on the couch, subtly groaning the whole way down. Who was this person in front of me?

I took one last long look at him before looking away. Looking at his figure on the couch, I felt something strange. I sat at my desk, in front of the window in my room. As I stared at the snow-gray colored sky, I let my mind wonder. Am I going to get old like that? Am I going to have to clear my throat at the end of every sentence? Am I going to make noises when I move my body, like a rusted machine who hasn't been oiled in a while, long since forgotten? Does he ever think of things like this? Does he wonder when he got so much older? How much longer do I realistically have with him? With any of the older people I have in my life? Am I going to one day be standing in front of the couch, answering one of my twenty-something year old kids' questions and getting so tired from the effort I got to sit down? Am I going to have to wear dentures?

I suppose having to wear dentures wouldn't be so bad. Yeah, that would mean all my teeth would had fallen out, but I've always had sensitive teeth anyway. That way, I could bite and chew my ice cream like an apple without the fear of sharp, cold pain shooting through my mouth. Maybe aging isn't that bad. Maybe I'm just 21, taking my youth for granted and portraying some false sense of immature wisdom just to challenge the status quo that shames aging. Maybe I'll look back at this when I'm 60 and condemn everything I said, calling myself a close-minded, unappreciative kid who didn't know what she had when she had it. Maybe I'll wonder how time passed so quickly and seemingly not fast enough, and how I ever got so old.

JENNA SOLIMINE

Better Off

We have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It's going to be just fine. -President Donald Trump (January 2020)

It's the scene of a Hollywood horror film:
a mysterious illness is spreading like a California wildfire,
turning cities into ghost towns
and taking out grandmas like an NFL linebacker.

*We're prepared, and we're doing
a great job with it. And it will
go away. Just stay calm.
It will go away. (March 2020)*

Meanwhile an orange man in a toupee
tells millions of people to drink hand sanitizer
before setting out to a golf course
for the three-hundredth time in his presidency.

*And I think we are going
to be very good with the coronavirus.
I think that, at some point,
that's going to sort of just disappear,
I hope. (July 2020)*

But I guess he was setting a great example
to the people of America,
because a wide open

State

Of

The

Art

18-hole retreat

is a great place for social distancing

since no one else is around,

because they are busy

dying in hospital beds

or picking up minimum wage jobs because they just got laid off
and the stimulus check does not cover the fee to golf.

*It's going away. No, it'll go away like things
go away. Absolutely. No question in mind.
It will go away. Hopefully sooner rather than later.
(August 2020)*

But when the cases are rising rapidly
and he finally leaves the golf course,
he throws a massive

mask optional

rally to remind us not to panic.
Because panicking is way worse than
spending the final days of your life
in an over-crowded hospital,
hooked up to a ventilator,
and saying goodbye on a Zoom call
that has a 40-minute time limit.

*Even without the vaccine,
the pandemic's going to end.
It's gonna run its course. It's gonna end.
They'll go crazy. (October 2020)*

After all, most of the people dying
are probably the illegal immigrants
who came from their “shit hole” countries
and got to live a better life in America
than they would have, anyway.

MARISSA TRUNFIO

To Robert

Friend, I know for sure that you do not love me nearly half as much as I love you, for the undulating time between us, and for all the deep truths about society that I have tried to shield you from for so, so long; forgive me for never telling you of my painful past, for shielding you from the harsh truths of our reality, and the mysterious, chaotic truths of those we love; I am sure that I will love you here as you are, forever, since I have not stopped in all this unforgiving time—for whatever form of love this lifelong bond may take, please know that I would prefer for my soul to melt into the weathered cracks of your pure, tender bones than to break your heart through any more knowledge of my own life—of the chaos and mystery of my life.



PHILIP WAKEFIELD/*Untitled*

ZACHARY ZOLUD

Shell Shocked: From a Holocaust Survivor, Zofia's Story*

It was a brisk autumn Sunday in Stasow, Poland. The year was 1942 and the Nazi forces had just begun deporting Jewish citizens and other soon-to-be Holocaust victims from the Warsaw region. A young girl named Zofia and her mother were just leaving the St. Barbara Church after their routine Sunday morning mass. Zofia was calmly breathing in the crisp breeze while noticing the gentle fall foliage against the clear blue Sunday afternoon sky. Above her, she watched recently detached leaves that could no longer hang on to their branches descend and dance to the ground. Upon tracing the landing path of one of the leaves, Zofia noticed a small seashell faintly glistening in the overhead Sunday sun. She picked up the shell and felt the smooth ridges with her fingertips. Zofia's mother noticed her young daughter admiring the shell and smiled down at her.

"That's a very pretty shell," her mother observed.

"It is," Zofia replied. "I think it's from the Baltic. Shells never make it this far."

Zofia then looked up to see her mother's face frozen in fright. Zofia followed her gaze to see a blackened mob of about fifty Nazi storm troopers swarming the streets of her village like wasps invading a new hive for their queen. It was mere moments before Zofia was grabbed and pulled away from her mother's side. The Nazi soldiers gathered up and herded every young woman and teenage girl in the area that they could

find and loaded them onto nearby cargo trains. The Nazis allowed each girl's family one hour to retrieve some clothes, a few belongings, and a bit of food for their daughters. One hour, while the girls waited on the cramped cargo trains, completely helpless and detached, like the leaves falling from the trees around them. Zofia was only sixteen years old.

Zofia remembered the story of what happened that day, almost eighty years ago. "They [the Nazis] put us on cargo trains... and we had to stand in one spot with our suitcases between our legs," she recalled. "They made us do it on the train from Stasow to Berlin... and again from Berlin to Hanover/Linden. That's where the camp was."

Zofia described these painfully long train rides as "...hours of travel, standing in one spot... I was crying very quietly to myself because I didn't want to risk getting in trouble by crying too loud."

Upon arriving at the labor camp, the Nazis immediately shaved the girls' heads and applied a chemical solution that killed any possible disease-carrying insects that might have landed on the girls during the transportation process. Zofia's job at the camp consisted primarily of washing countless blood-saturated Nazi uniforms. She did this for several grueling and tireless hours every day of the week. Her only break came on Sundays when she was allowed to go to a Catholic mass service. For meals, she and the rest of the girls were fed turnip soup and nothing else once every three days.

"It was one of the most disgusting things I've ever eaten," Zofia remembered, "but when that's the only thing offered to you for three days, you take what you can get."

About three years later, all of this torture finally came to an end.

"The girls and I reported to our stations and noticed that there weren't any [Nazi] officers. We haven't been that confused since the day we were taken."

A British soldier approached the girls and in a warmly reassuring voice, he told them it was all over. They could return home.

“It was such an overwhelming feeling of relief and joy,” Zofia reflected. “We didn’t know what to do. We cried and we hugged each other. We went outside and then we went to nearby vacant stores and took food and clothes.” Zofia began to smile and let out a faint little laugh. “Some of the girls even took pounds of meat from a butcher shop and ate until they got sick.”

Three years. Little Zofia was stuck in that camp for three years, doing some of the most monotonous and exhausting chores imaginable under horrific working conditions. She was finally liberated. She was finally a free woman again. She had endured one of the most deadly and traumatic events to have ever happened to the human race.

Now, a woman of ninety-three years, she is vibrant and energetic. Zofia is the kind of person to welcome you into her home and offer you a home-cooked meal of pierogi and kielbasa before you are able to return the greeting. Her knowledge of the English language is just as strong as her knowledge of the Polish language, and sometimes she even tosses in a few Polish words for emphasis amidst her English sentences.

“After finally seeing my family again, one of the first things I did when I got back home was to go to St. Barbara’s,” Zofia said with a soft smile. “I actually looked all over the place but I couldn’t find the little shell I dropped three years before... I didn’t think I would... But I didn’t even care. There were so many times when I thought I would never make it back there ever again. But I made it... I made it home.”

**This is a work of nonfiction, though minor details have been changed to protect privacy.*

ZACHARY ZOLUD

Essence of Towniehood Part VII

These townies rely solely
on their local townie paper,
written for townies,
the busy-bodies with nothing more exciting
and nobody to show them better.
Written by townies,
the townies that could never quite
get their careers off the ground
anywhere and any more
than the daily local townie item.
Their issues lie
in the local 7-Eleven.
Right by the townies
standing outside,
asking for alcohol and
smoking cigarettes.
Welcome to our little town.

Contributors

Michael Anthony is a junior at UMass Lowell aiming for a Bachelor's in Creative Writing. He loves to put words together on a page that make you want to dive in and get lost in them. He hopes to be able to teach up-and-coming writers about the true potential in the written word.

Zak Attioui is a double major in Civil Engineering and Creative Writing. He is an avid reader and writer who completed four manuscripts, one of which he's currently querying. Zak hopes to become a full-time author, but for now, he will settle for a career in civil engineering.

Jason Bourret is an English major with a concentration in Creative Writing. He enjoys writing in all genres and could not be more grateful to have his work published in *The Offering*. He would like to thank his friends and family for supporting him and hopes to publish more in the future.

Kaliisha Cole is a sophomore English major with a concentration in creative writing. She writes poetry and fiction and has three published poems and two more in the works. She is the Arts & Entertainment editor of the UML *Connector* and a reader for *The Offering*.

Evelis Cruz is a senior pursuing a degree in English Journalism and Professional writing with declared minors in Spanish and Art History. She enjoys art and believes that the right pieces can add positivity and enrichment to life. She is thankful to her professors, close friends, and family for their constant encouragement, love, and support.

Sierra Duncan is a student at UMass Lowell studying English. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and is currently working on a novel. She hopes to get her MLIS and work as a librarian in the future.

Alexander Eden completed his undergraduate studies in Biology in 2018 with a minor in STEM teaching. He is a current graduate student in Biology department (graduating May 2021) as well as a full-time teacher at Greater Lowell Technical

High School. Whenever possible, he enjoys engaging in the world around him through traveling and experiences. He believes that adventure teaches more than any textbook can. He is grateful for all the support he has received in his educational journey and hopes to have a meaningful impact on anyone that crosses his path.

Neil Fahey is a student at UMass Lowell. He is currently working on obtaining an English degree and several other creative works.

Amelia Fantasia is a senior Creative Writing major. She is thankful for the support of her friends and family, and loves them dearly. After she graduates she hopes to move far away from the city and cultivate a small vegetable garden.

Dana Field is a senior at UMass Lowell, completing her bachelor's degree through the university's English program. She found her love of short stories and children's literature through classes taken there. Her inspiration comes from nature, her family, and a fascination with southern American aesthetic.

Samantha Garrett is a recent 2020 graduate from UMass Lowell who majored in English and minored in French. Her work reflects her woodsy New England upbringing and admiration of nature. She thanks her friends and family for their constant love and support.

Austin Gerrior is a student at the University of Massachusetts, currently completing a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering.

Blake Hammond is a Creative Writing major at UML. He has completed one novel and is currently working on a collection of short stories. In addition to writing, he is in the top 1% of Young Thug listeners on the planet.

Melissa Juchniewicz is an English Department faculty member at UML. She teaches in the First Year Writing Program, and also teaches children's literature. Melissa is presently the coordinator of the Writing Center. Outside of the University Melissa participates in a number of writing and reading communities.

Justin Kauppi is a senior double majoring in Creative Writing and French. His work reflects his time spent as a soldier in Afghanistan as well as his time spent as a student in France. He hopes to continue to travel and document his experiences in both photography and writing. He thanks his friends and family for their constant support and encouragement..

Katherine Maddox is a senior Journalism and Professional Writing major and Lusophone Studies minor working through her second to last semester at UMass Lowell. She has been writing endlessly through quarantine, completing projects ranging from memoir pieces to one act virtual comedies. She is currently planning a wedding with her fiancée (the star of her piece), and looking into various possible master's degrees.

K. Mai is a freshman majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Psychology. She is trying her best to exercise her writing skills and hopes that you're having a lovely day.

Michael Makiej is a freshman at UMass Lowell, currently pursuing a double major in Philosophy and Political Science. He is also a high jumper on the school's track and field team. He was inspired to write poetry by his grandfather, who would often recite entire poems from memory.

Surbhi Mavi is an international student from New Delhi studying Biotechnology at UMass Lowell and is a recent graduate in Biology and Psychology. She is a COVID-19 surveillance lab technician at UML and a Teaching Assistant for microbiology. She is currently working with the Lowell Association for the Blind for her DifferenceMaker project Eyecan, and hopes to help the visually impaired community. Her other research at UML includes understanding the mechanisms of Alzheimer's disease as she aspires to be a neurologist someday. She enjoys calligraphy, snooker pool and hiking in her free time and thanks her family for the love and support.

Angela Messina is a junior majoring in Elementary Education and Moderate Disabilities and minoring in English. She thanks her family and friends for their encouragement and support in pursuing her passions for both teaching and writing.

Elijah North is a senior English major at UML. His two poems, "Sonnet '37" and "Yates," are dedicated to Johnny Cash and Richard Yates, respectively. Elijah plays it cool.

Michael Nuzzo is a graduate of the Computer Engineering and Sound Recording Technology programs at UMass Lowell. Both of his pieces that appear here were shot around his house in central Massachusetts during the 2020 pandemic, and his photograph Sticks is inspired by a George Saunders short story of the same name. He is honored to have his work recognized by and among those who care deeply about the literary and visual arts.

Lauren Ordway is a senior in English Literature and plans to graduate this summer.

Jordyn Rego is a senior majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Art History. She is currently the Fiction Editor in *The Offering*. Her work is reflective of both surrounding nature in her New England home and travels abroad. Jordyn hopes to pursue a career as both an author as well as a teacher after graduation. She thanks her family and friends for their constant love and support.

Ashley Rivera is a sophomore English major with a Creative Writing concentration. She is currently the co-managing editor for *The Offering* and news editor for the student run newspaper, *The Connector*. She thanks her friends and family for their constant encouragement and support in doing what she loves.

Jenna Solimine is a senior majoring in Public Health at UMass Lowell. Her poem was inspired by Nikky Finney's "Left," a piece introduced to her in Professor Anthony Szczesiul's poetry class. She is a member of the UMass Lowell cross country and track and field team.

Marissa Trunfio is a senior at UMass Lowell through the Online & Continuing Education program, majoring in English Studies and minoring in Psychology. Her senior Capstone class is in Creative Writing Nonfiction, and she has plans to get her MFA and teach English after graduating.

Philip Wakefield is an alumni of UMass Lowell, majoring in Music Business; he graduated in 2016. Aside from tinkering on older motor vehicles and making independent music under the name "Astronaut Mike," he is also an avid fan of photography. This sunset is one of the shots taken during his free time at the university, where he often practiced his hobbies on campus. He is aspiring to become a better musician, photographer, and mechanic in the future.

Zachary Zolud is an alumnus of UMass Lowell, where he earned BAs in Professional Writing and Psychology and a Master of Science in Innovation and Technological Entrepreneurship. He is currently a Lead Technical Writer for the Life Sciences Division of GE. Zachary likes homemade pierogi with his Babci, writing music on his 12-string guitar, and trying to convince himself that he doesn't need to buy yet another guitar. Zachary would like to thank his awesome father, mother, brother, Babci, girlfriend, friends, and his two puppies. Unfortunately, the puppies cannot comprehend being supportive because they are young and also they are dogs. But he would like to think they would if they could.

