

# ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLIE

By Jonah Howell

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Guest editor LEVI PLATT writes:*

*Howell's command of language and the beauty he's found in things both unsettling and derelict is just a delight to read. One cannot help but be enthralled by Meloncholie Mercer's enigmatic and foreboding presence; when she ruminates "It gets better once you lose yourself," you know there is menace behind it, but you're never quite certain --until it's too late-- why. On the face of it, what Howell accomplishes here is a deceptively great piece of horror that harkens to the era of the Southern Gothic, but like all great literature Anatomy of Melancholie is so much more than a simple homage or exercise in artifice and style. What lies at the heart of this piece, what truly leaves us coming back to his work--is its tragedy of Modernity*

"I just don't speak the language here. Y'all ever feel like that, like they moved you to another country?"

*When the ever out-of-place Jefferson utters his dilemma, Howell's gambit --to yoke an almost otherworldly tale of horror with the very human, very devastating tale of the cost of Modernity-- comes into focus. When we are introduced to North Carolina's rapidly changing Raleigh/Durham area, Howell's expert writing lulls us into a sense of narrative familiarity--a simple, beautiful orientation of time and place. Yet, he is also deftly steering our focus towards the sense of growing isolation and resignation felt by those whose once solid foundations of home, culture, and belonging is taken away from them; we need only pay attention to Jefferson. It is Jefferson's (and ultimately our own) sense of powerlessness and resignation to the overwhelming force of change that keeps me coming to these pages. It's the devastation of "losing yourself" Howell has so thoughtfully captured on these pages that makes each read of Anatomy of Meloncholie better than the last.*

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

## Anatomy of Melancholie

Her parents were not cruel, they were just from the country. They had never heard such a word, and when they named her, they thought they had assembled a new and otherwise meaningless string of syllables. Not that they were unintelligent: Her father, the fifth-most productive farmer in Veerstoff County, North Carolina, solved cube roots in his head as a hobby, and her mother was the county's best dowser. When you say her name straight across, stress on the first and third syllables, *Melancholie Mercer*, it does produce an inexplicable ring, as though layers of clouds, rubbing together just right in a high wind, had begun to rain chords in F# minor.

None of us realized what her parents had done until Veerstoff High finally closed in 1997. Back in '94, a new Interstate 85 bypass had rerouted all the truckers through the faraway metropole of Greensboro, and Veerstoff was left to subsist on corn and clandestine trickles of moonshine.

The high school held on for a few years, downsizing and restructuring until it resembled a nineteenth-century schoolhouse, with one teacher for the freshmen and sophomores and one for juniors and seniors. In late '97 the capitol sent an auditor, and the next summer we each—all one hundred twenty-four of us—received letters of admission to a public boarding school in Durham. North Carolina School of Science and Math, they called it. The buses would come and round us up at the end of the summer.

Melancholie, Jefferson, and I, going into our senior year, were assigned to the same bus on August eighth, and we waited together at the corner of Main and Lower Spring just after sunrise, sweating in the morning fog. Down Main we could barely see the ballpark, with its pennants from the '40s and its peeling hardwood bleachers. Lower Spring was nothing but dull reddish cedar stumps in both directions. Saplings bowed over between them, mourning.

Jefferson joked, "If the bus doesn't come, Mel can teach us."

She laughed. She had set out to read every book in the county library, in alphabetical order by author, when we were twelve. Soon after that, she had taken on such a darkly weighted demeanor that Jefferson and I had sworn off non-necessary reading forever. If I remember

correctly, she had finished the last “O” book the previous night. Teachers generally resented her until, at sixteen, she figured out how to play-act her age.

Jefferson made another joke, but I refuse to write it. This was a long time ago now, and way out in the country.

The bus arrived around eight, headlights shrinking in the fog as it bumped toward us. The rest of our senior class, about fifteen of them, had already boarded. The bus took a tooth-rattling three-point U-turn over a cleared cedar lot, and Mel rambled to us about Ozzy Osbourne and Ozymandias, some kind of whittler, for the full hour-long ride into Durham. She seemed nervous, but we could not imagine why. Jefferson and I, we had reasons to worry. We were about to enter an academic environment with standards. But as far as we could figure, Mel should feel like she was going home.

The first day in our new English class, later that week, the teacher, Ms. Zercher, laughed. “Melancholie? I’m sure that’s a typo.”

“No, I’m here.” She sank in her seat.

Ms. Zercher stared at her for a buzzed moment, eyebrow cocked, then sped distractedly through the remaining names. I found out later, when I worked for the same school as a record-keeper, that Ms. Zercher had filed a complaint with the administration, thinking that, and I quote, “these hicks are playing jokes on me. Jefferson Davis? Really? And Melancholie?” The assistant principal called their families for confirmation, and we never heard any of it.

After two weeks in Durham, Jefferson started to take on Melancholie’s darkness. The three of us had, by some glorious stroke of luck, scored rooms on the same hall, and we spent most of our nights either playing poker together or else shooting the shit over moonshine scored from older friends back in Veerstoff.

Melancholie often showed up late. She always sped out when school ended at 3:30 to go and walk around Durham. Deprived of the Veerstoff Library, she had taken to reading the city, she said, and she was certainly happier for it. I had not seen her so *light* since we were little kids. One night, halfway down a jar of lemon moonshine, she admitted of her literary phase, “It felt like I was walking through ropes, thick gray ropes, and they wound around my shins as I walked, and they were so heavy that it felt like I couldn’t move anywhere.”

Although I intuited that such a thing could not be contagious, it seemed like Melancholie had overcome it only by passing it on to Jefferson. So on our second Saturday, several shots deep, I asked him, “Man, what is it, have you started reading?”

He gazed up at me—he had been staring at the imitation-wood floor of my room—, and I saw that his eyes had retreated deeper into his head. “No. I just don’t speak the language here. Y’all ever feel like that, like they moved you to another country?”

We had no idea what he was talking about, so he explained, “My family’s been in the country for centuries. There’s ways of talking that are good for corn and cattle, then there’s talk that’s good for offices and suits. Ditto for movements. Even my fingers are traitors, my hairs, my spleen.” He wiggled his fingers, and his thick silver class ring flashed in the fluorescence of my bedside lamp.

Melancholie nodded. “Now you see how I felt. It gets better once you lose yourself.”

The night after Halloween we found Jefferson in a pile of vomit, jars scattered around the room, with a letter and everything, and we called a hospital and cried until they swore not to tell the school. We called his parents, and they seemed to sense something we didn’t, and they called the principal and said there had been a sudden death in the family. Jefferson went home for a couple weeks and came back silent. While he was gone, Melancholie stayed in town almost all the time, and I hardly saw her.

Melancholie. She was tall, I remember that much. Her legs seemed like they reached up to my navel, and her neck always craned forward like she couldn’t hear Jefferson and I talking. She kept her hands in her pockets, but I knew her fingers were always moving, playing with stray threads, balling lint, jangling keys.

Her face was somehow widened, somehow lengthened, like a deep sea creature that a biologist had pulled up from high pressure. There is a grand secret there, a parallel between depressurization and depression—that when you pull a person out of the kind of pressure they know, all the organs that once pushed against that outer pressure spill out, and they cannot move, or they cannot figure out where to move, and so they distend, or their mind overruns its boundaries. I imagine a blobfish which, under several thousand meters of water, is well-adapted and even beautiful, its sleek lines set off attractively by the darkness that surrounds it; but it

cannot survive for long in the light, in a small tank. It overflows itself, it frowns by structure, it explodes on impact with our world.

Melancholie's feet always pointed straight ahead, but her knees caved inward, as though she were trying to hide herself. Usually she smiled, but usually she could not, but she forced it anyway. Once we arrived in Durham, her shoulders began to slump, their blades skewed outward like clipped and useless wings, and she started wearing a thin iron chain as a necklace. Slowly, her accent shifted, not toward that of Durham or away from her natural voice, but off in a different direction entirely, like a bumper that flies off the road after a head-on collision.

Her neck was long, and her hair was short and strawlike. She showered every couple weeks, and she did not shave her legs or her armpits, and so folks in Veerstoff thought she had lost sight of Christ, and folks in Durham thought she was from the North, which, in Jefferson's native language, would amount to the same thing, though he did not see her that way.

She walked slowly, looking mostly at the ground and at the rusty pine stumps, until we moved to Durham. Then she sped up, and she spoke of the great life of the city, which Jefferson and I dutifully avoided.

She introduced herself to everyone in Durham as Mel, but we knew her name, and she never asked us not to use it.

Jefferson returned the week before Thanksgiving. He said nothing in class, and none of the teachers pressed him, thinking—correctly—that he must be mourning. He still met with Melancholie and me at night, but he lost every game of poker, and he barely drank, and we did not ask him about *The Night* or about its letter, thinking that he would explain things to us when he was ready.

The last Friday before Thanksgiving break, Melancholie waited for us after class. She had never done this before, and I chided her, "Finally realized the city is as depressing as the library?"

She grinned. "No. I want to take y'all there."

Jefferson winced visibly, and she lowered her face and glared at him. "Especially you."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

We walked with her out the school's wrought-iron front gate. Jefferson trailed the two of us by a few feet, staring at the sidewalk. Just outside, an old green signpost pointed the way downtown, and she led us in the opposite direction.

"Isn't Durham that way?" I asked.

"Eh, it's everywhere. I'm bringing you to the better part."

We walked on for about thirty minutes until dense-packed streets of ramshackle vinyl-sides gave way to pines and oaks. Though it was late November, the sun shone alone in a nearly clear sky, a few thin clouds strung along the treetops like eels' ribs, and we sweat in the heat. She turned into the parking lot of a remote apartment building and pulled out a flashlight.

"The hell," Jefferson said. "Thought you were taking us to Durham."

"I am." She led us through the back of the parking lot onto a narrow dirt path that curved away through the pines. Out in the needled underbrush a trio of armadillos chased each other around a dead brown bush. Up ahead through trees and holly shrubs I glimpsed the rectangular concrete opening to a storm drain, about six feet high by five wide.

Coming around the next curve, Jefferson ground his teeth, "Ain't no way I'm going in there. What kind of shit are you trying to pull?"

"Do you trust me?"

He could not say, "no." Even then I realized that Melancholie had played a dirty trick, trapping him in the same kind of no-exit language game the city kids used. I did not say anything but stared into the drain. I could see maybe twenty feet in, then nothing. Its gray walls streaked by leaking runs of orange mold, it looked like the rippling intestines of some undiscovered animal, more mineral than organic. Something echoed from within, loud and tinny, but then it echoed again several times, and I decided that it was only a drip, runoff from yesterday's rain.

We stopped for a moment at the entrance, digging our shoes into the mud to keep from slipping back down the trail. Melancholie turned her flashlight on and shone it into the tunnel, illuminating nothing but the same gray with irregular orange streaks. She stepped out in front and stood for a while with one sneaker on the threshold, looking out into the moldy corridor, intensely silent. Then she gave a quick blip of laughter and we followed her in.

Jefferson fell behind by a couple steps, staring at the slime that slicked the floor, and Melancholie and I walked side by side in front until we came upon a sort of antechamber, a wide

room, maybe fifteen feet, with quick slaps of graffiti up the walls and somehow, impossibly, an old candle chandelier hanging in the center.

I ran through a daydream that we might meet some tunnel person, like an anthropomorphic mole or a cave-bat, and we would be invited to join them, their society down there, in small chambers like this and tunnels that spanned the underside of Durham. This chandelier was old, certainly pre-electric, and I had thought several times, as we walked that first straight stretch, that I heard other footsteps, which I had dismissed as echoes.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jefferson shiver and turn away from the chandelier, and Melancholie asked, pointing to the twin tunnels that projected from the chamber's far wall, "Left or right?"

"Don't you already know?" Jefferson spoke softly.

"Of course. But I want you to choose."

"Left."

"You sure?" She asked, lowering her eyes.

He hesitated. "No. Right."

We fell, after about thirty feet, into the same formation as before, Melancholie and I in front, Jefferson a couple paces behind. This tunnel was shorter and narrower than the last and round, and we splashed through the thin trickle of water that ran down its trough, not bothering to walk along the drier sides. The drain branched off to both sides at unpredictable intervals, sometimes into tunnels just as wide as ours, sometimes into tiny chutes not much wider than a house's gutter pipe.

Passing the wider openings, I sometimes thought that I heard quick movements like those of some large animal hurrying out of sight, and that I saw shadows darting away from Melancholie's light. Several times I heard Jefferson jump away from one of these openings as though he had seen more than I had, or he had seen as much but understood more, but he said nothing, and I did not dare ask, not while I saw the utter calm of Melancholie as she led us deeper into what I now recognized as a serious labyrinth. As I caught fleeting glances of the tunnels we passed, and I felt the weighty quiet that soaked the place, I nearly grasped what drew Melancholie there every day. After walking for so long, we must have been squarely beneath downtown Durham.

The ceiling of our main passage dropped to a tight two feet out in front, and Melancholie veered into a leftward branch, not quite so high as the hall we had left but tall enough that we could walk upright if we bowed our heads. A crusty iron pipe ran along the concrete to our left, leaking clear fluid into streaks of dull blue. Jefferson cleared his throat like he wanted to say something, but he kept quiet and slogged on.

Far behind us, something crashed into the water. I could no longer explain it away as our echo: It splashed loudly, then a slipping patter as it fled, careful not to be detected. I shot a questioning glare at Melancholie, and she chuckled. “Rats.”

For a confused, terrified moment, I thought she was lying. “Melancholie, what is this place?”

“Exactly what it looks like. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Jefferson gripped my sleeve, the one furthest from Melancholie, and we trod on around bends and over small, slick humps for an hour at least, and we heard nothing more but the sounds of our footsteps and the dripping of that iron pipe into its blue smears. Jefferson’s class ring bulged frigid against the back of my arm, and I shivered.

She led us down several more branches, each tighter than the last, so that we were almost on all-fours by the time we came to the second big chamber. This one bore no chandelier, and its walls were bare but for a pile of objects, arranged like a tiny shrine, in the far right corner: an empty photograph frame with damp cork backing, a full snakeskin, a pair of shoelaces. Melancholie made her way slowly around, fingering her necklace and humming an indistinct tune. It was no song I had heard, and it progressed in aggressive starts and stops, accelerations into silence, with no particular tonal arrangement but always seeming to rise, more similar to a quickening wind through the rusted walls of an iron shed than to any music I knew. Once she reached the shrine she crouched and inspected the snakeskin with focused curiosity, balancing her flashlight on its hind end so that it would light the whole room.

I had stopped right inside the threshold, and I found myself panting deeply. The room, its walls sparsely glittering in the dull light, smelled of mildew, not the gritty mildew of gym clothes, but a clear, piercing sourness that set my head spinning. I only noticed that Jefferson had stopped behind me when he pushed past, rushing into the room and squeezing himself into the corner opposite Melancholie.

He pressed his back into the slimed concrete and sank down, shaking his head. His shins seemed to grow several inches, and they jutted up on either side of his face, pointed knobs of knees angular through his jeans. Hands on either side of his head, he squeezed his hair in full fists and spoke in the same submerged tone as before.

“I know what you’re doing, Mel.”

“What do you mean?” She looked over her shoulder. I noticed her vertebrae, sharp and serpentine, protruding beneath her shirt.

“I saw it. I’m leaving.”

She jumped up and sprang to the entrance beside me, barring his way. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“And why not?”

She hesitated. “You don’t know which turns I took. You’d get lost.”

“I’ll go up one of those ladders and out through a manhole.”

“No.” She said it too quickly, and she added, as though apologizing for some rudeness, “Even if you found one, they’re heavy. It would fall on you.”

He could not argue. He had never lifted a manhole cover before and could not know how heavy they were.

Jefferson buried his face between his thighs. “Why, Mel?”

“I love this place.” She left two Kennedy half-dollars beside the frame and walked toward the only tunnel onward.

Three branches later, after wading through knee-deep clear water and crawling through a thin chute, we emerged into a wider tunnel, just high enough to stand in. By this point, the orange streaks had disappeared, and the iron pipe had curved upward and away aboveground, and everything was perfectly grey in all directions, and I had seen no graffiti for at least an hour, no signs of human contact but one more mound of objects, at the end of the crawling chute—a stick crudely whittled into the shape of a shoelace and a few beads strung onto a thick leather cord.

Melancholie slowed her pace now, but still she maintained the same calm demeanor that had so relaxed me before. I had no idea what Jefferson was raving about, and I figured he had fallen into some dark paranoia. I wanted to say that we had known her since we were kids, that we had always trusted her, and that he was being crazy, but I did not see how it could help, and I

did not want to become another one of the city kids that thought he was off his rocker, so I kept quiet and squeezed his fingers when, as we emerged from the thinnest chute, they reached back up to grip my sleeve.

Now and again I heard more crashes behind us, but I joked to myself that, if something was following us, it was terribly clumsy.

Coming to a new fork, Melancholie paused, looked down both passages with her flashlight, and took the rightward path. We followed, not knowing by what criteria she could have differentiated the two. Jefferson trembled. I felt it in my sleeve. But he walked on, silent. I felt his head turn each time we passed a ladder and each time something fell into the dark water behind him.

Far sooner than I expected, we came to another room, larger than the others and shallowly domed. At its center hung a bare, rusted chain, maybe five inches long. The rest lay bare—no graffiti, no shrine, nothing. The underside of the dome bore miniscule traces of having been painted, but nothing like an image remained. Melancholie went straight to the chain and ran her fingers along it several times, slow and methodical, stopping at particular links and rubbing their sides. After some time she resumed humming that same asymmetric tune, louder this time.

I walked along the sides of the wall as I had seen her do, looking for whatever it was that she saw in them. Atop the concrete was nothing but a faint, thin film, not quite mold but not quite simple dampness, something of a category I had never experienced. Melancholie was fully absorbed by the chain, running her long fingers up and down it with intense focus.

In a moment of confusion I noticed that there was no pressure on my sleeve. I whipped around and scanned the room several times for Jefferson as though, in spite of its emptiness, I could have missed him. I bolted to the entrance, and Melancholie indulgently beamed her flashlight down the empty tunnel. I darted my gaze back around the room and then ran, slipping in unnamable film, down the tunnel, finally stopping and screaming out, “Jefferson!”

I heard nothing but my own echo. Sprinting back into the room, I found Melancholie as calm as ever, still examining the chain.

“We need to go back and find him.” I felt ridiculous saying it. It should have been so obvious.

“I had to bring somebody.” She did not look away from the chain, but fondled its lowest hanging link, scrutinizing it closely, her eyes only an inch away.

“Huh?” I looked around the room and tried to remember when I had lost the feeling of him on my arm, but we had walked so far that I could not pinpoint the moment. I remembered him crouching in that second chamber.

She turned to me, and she ran her eyes along the nascent lines in my forehead, down the side of my jaw, and over my neck before shooting her gaze toward the ground. “It’s better that he isn’t here,” she said quietly. “Trust me.”

Suddenly gripping the chain with both hands, she added, “But he is probably lonely.”

I bolted back down the tunnel, groping blindly for a ladder. Behind me I heard the smooth, confident strides of something I could not reconcile with the careless splashes I had heard earlier, and I ran harder, slipping and nearly falling on the film that coated the underside of the passage.

My hand leapt off the wall into a wide indentation, and I slid to a stop as the rusted upright of a ladder scraped the side of my thumb. Loud, rapid splashes reverberated down the tunnel in both directions as I clambered up. Just when my face broke through a dense net of cobwebs, the crown of my head rattled against the manhole cover. Remembering from the brief flashes I had seen earlier that a concrete cylinder closed tight around the ladder at the top, I leaned back against the narrow walls and heaved with both arms.

The cover raised a couple inches, and I struggled up one more rung for better leverage as heavy footsteps scrambled to a stop beneath the ladder. A thin sliver of light illuminated the backs of my hands, and I fixated on it, willing it to widen, and the cover shuddered up as, below me, quick taps shook the ladder, tings of metal against metal.

With an upward surge I threw the cover over onto its back and scrambled up the last few rungs, hefting my shoulders over the reddish rim of the manhole. Long, frigid fingers wrapped around my ankle, and I kicked out wildly with both legs. My free foot made solid contact, and I pushed up onto a desolate parking lot. I saw a quick flash of livid grey skin as my pursuer fell back, but I heard it catch only a few feet down, so I braced my hands beneath the cover and, with a heavy grunt, swung it back into place just as the thing gripped the edge.

Its fingers writhed back and forth and scraped at the asphalt. A heavy ring on one of them clanged against the iron rim of the hole, and muted slapping sounds escaped from beneath the cover as it threw its back against the concrete walls, trying to find leverage to lift its fingers free.

I could not move but stared at its fingers, transfixed, confused, and I knew that I could not lift the cover from above, so I ran toward the street and out through downtown Durham, passed flashing lights and neon and darted through crowds of stumbling drunks, waiting cabbies, and sororities in formation, accelerating relentlessly, though my knees ached for the first time, and every humid breath scalded my lungs, because if I ran fast enough, I thought in delirium, I would forget.

At Thanksgiving dinner my mom leaned over and whispered into my ear, “You seem different. Darker. I don’t mean to, you know. You’re not the kid I knew. The one I raised.”

I took another bite of mashed potatoes and nodded vacantly.

“God has his plan for you. I know it. His path is narrow, but He won’t let you stray.”

That night I took a jar of corn whiskey I had stashed under my bed and walked out to Lower Spring. The cedar stumps, normally a vital red, glowed colorless beneath the waning moon. I wove my way through them to an overlook, maybe a quarter-mile out, where a short hill dropped off into an endless valley out to the horizon. The stumps reached halfway down the slope now, and the nearest treetops leaned up toward me. I downed half the corn whiskey in one go and stared out into the valley until its jagged canopy blurred into the slate grey above. Taking another gulp, I vomited thick and heavy onto the nearest stump, and in a rush of exhilaration I swigged another mighty throatfull and unloaded. I heaved until I brought forth nothing but bile, and the bile came thick, and I tossed the jar and its remnants down the slope and turned and staggered back toward home.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *The FOTD editors’ comments on my story in Issue 5, “Amor Fati,” spawned this one: They wrote, “We’re pretty sure that if Howell had lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century his name would be Robert Burton and he would’ve written The Anatomy of Melancholy.” And so, pulling styles from H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James, I wrote melancholy into Melancholie, whose name and anatomy drive her*

*into the very condition for which she is named. The tunnels in the story actually run beneath the old American Tobacco Campus in downtown Durham.*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** *Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. You can find his recent work in Maudlin House, Half Mystic Journal (Issue 8), and the fifth issue of Fleas on the Dog.*

**EDITOR'S BIO:** Levi Platt. Utah Valley University. I am currently finishing up my undergrad in Creative Writing where I have taken a weird turn as a fiction writer originally and moved more towards the realm of creative nonfiction. I still am not sure why. Maybe it's a masturbatory thing. What do we make our homes in our time? Where do we find "home"? How do we find it, if at all? This essay is a piece of that meditation that I am hoping to turn into a set of essays on the subject. It is both a telling of a place where a ten-year-old me found "home" at a time when I really didn't have it amongst family and my attempt to weave a narrative together that tells the story of the development history and release of my favorite video game--based on various interviews, wiki/fan pages, and articles throughout the years that have followed Yu Suzuki since he made the game. To be clear, it isn't reportage, it's more like me trying to piecemeal a narrative that makes sense that could explain how a game made by a middle-aged Japanese man could have such a profound and ultimately artistic impact on a child. Or in short, trying to understand what the man intended to make, and what the boy found in his creation. His essay **Shenmue** appeared in Issue 6.