

ESPRIT



SPRING 2022

ESPRIT

The University of Scranton Review of Arts and Letters

Spring 2022

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Spring 2022 Awards:

The Berrier Poetry Award

Elizabeth Giannone

“Despite Daylight”

The Berrier Prose Award

Bethany Belkowski

“Blackhawk Down”

The *Esprit* Graphics Award

Bodo Johnson

“Milker”

Spring 2022 Award Judges:

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Contents

<i>Peek</i>	Molly Neeson	5
<i>Quantum Quest</i>	Conor Dougherty	6
<i>Nugiperous Gentledame</i>	Eric Dittmar	7
<i>The Breaking Wheel</i>	Oak O'Connor	8
<i>Exodus</i>	E. Kerr	14
<i>Throw</i>	Max Messenger	14
<i>Raisin Girl</i>	Elizabeth Giannone	15
<i>Drunk and in the Way</i>	Molly Neeson	16
<i>The Gap</i>	Elizabeth Giannone	17
<i>Banana</i>	Anthony Ciampoli	19
<i>Curiosity Killed Itself</i>	Lauren Kraemer	20
<i>Time Stood Still</i>	Conor Dougherty	25
<i>Despite Daylight</i>	Elizabeth Giannone	26
<i>Olympus</i>	Devang Patel	28
<i>Embrace the Shake</i>	Megan Zabrouski	29
<i>Pining Neighbors</i>	Elizabeth Giannone	36
<i>Universal Conference</i>	Devang Patel	37
<i>Remnants</i>	Max Messenger	38
<i>The Guardian</i>	Max Messenger	39
<i>Peek</i>	Bodo Johnson	40
<i>Loft</i>	Bodo Johnson	41
<i>Milker</i>	Bodo Johnson	42
<i>Girl With Lights</i>	Molly Neeson	43

<i>Silent Pond</i>	Nia Long	44
<i>Old Mill on Sunday</i>	Nia Long	44
<i>If You Should Love Me</i>	Elizabeth Giannone	45
<i>Anesthesia</i>	Bethany Belkowski	46
<i>Grave at 6 a.m.</i>	Nia Long	47
<i>Bedroom Cabaret</i>	Bodo Johnson	48
<i>Rosin</i>	Skyler Ralston	49
<i>I brought you into this--</i>	E. Kerr	50
<i>Mas[c] Synthesis</i>	E. Kerr	51
<i>Duplex Crucifixion</i>	E. Kerr	52
<i>Aspersions</i>	E. Kerr	53
<i>Sister</i>	Samuel Marranca	54
<i>Kindred Decay</i>	Nia Long	60
<i>Maryamia</i>	Sofia Zingone	61
<i>What a Boy Scout Is</i>	Anthony Ciampoli	62
<i>Blackhawk Down</i>	Bethany Belkowski	63

Front Cover Art and Design:
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Max Messenger

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Bodo Johnson
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Peek - *Molly Neeson*



Nugiperous Gentledame

Eric Dittmar

Caught up in her fool-fangles,
Nothing but gizmos and gadgets,
She longs for what she cannot see
Beyond the Østersøen.

Locked away, trapped in the depths,
Never to venture into the land of man.
Her aphotic quarters designed
To preserve her radiant hue and
Protect her noble lineage.

Dreams of cities and ships
Uncloistered her. Whozits
And whatzits left behind,
She absconded to the rocky shore.

Blackened skies surrounded the Østersøen.
Between flashes, ships dashed on the rocks,
Splitting their keels in twain.
Until she too was dragged under,
Never to surface again.

Previous page...

Quantum Quest
Conor Dougherty

The Breaking Wheel

For Saint Julian the Hospitaller

Oak O'Connor

Characters

RINGMASTER/JULIAN

YOUNG JULIAN

MIDLIFE JULIAN

OLDER JULIAN

Various CLOWNS

Notes on production:

- *JULIAN* never engages in clownish behavior. He acts as the straight man throughout, almost as if he is in a different genre than the other characters.
- The action sequences are unspoken. Exaggerated gestures and miming should be used by all except the various *JULIANS*, who are permitted to make sound only when they step out of the rings.
- When the *RINGMASTER* first speaks, effort should be made to differentiate his voice from that of the disembodied *JULIAN* voice.

*Rise on interior. Three large, thin rings are set on the floor of the stage: stage left, center stage, and stage right, like a circus. The downstage area is vacant. In the stage right ring: a suggestion of a home, perhaps an armchair, a small bookcase, and a lamp. Center stage: a bed with a very large headboard, facing forward. Stage left: a suggestion of a hospital; a couple of beds, a privacy screen on wheels. A suggestion of a river as far stage left as the space will allow. Lights are on all three rings. As the curtain rises, *JULIAN*'s disembodied voice can be heard.*

JULIAN: Time is a river, a circle, a hall of infinite rooms. The room has many mansions, and many keys unlock the light. Look, it shines bright on the wheel of fortune. A life begins in death and ends in splendor. It's something to remember me by.

Enter the RINGMASTER from stage left. He crosses to center downstage and speaks animatedly to the audience.

RINGMASTER: Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, step right up! We've got sights here that you won't believe! Step right up, that's right, you won't be disappointed by the fabulous sights we have in store for you for a limited time only! Make room for the lady, now, make room! Everyone deserves a chance to hear!

Beat.

RINGMASTER (cont.): Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. We've got a tale tonight of a man named Julian. Some say he was the greatest host and healer that ever lived - but he had a dark secret. When you stayed with Julian, you were sleeping in a house of curses! That's right, ladies and gentlemen, this was a man who was cursed beyond all imagination! It's frightening! It's horrible! It'll haunt your dreams for nights to come, if you're brave enough to stay! Now, if you're not scared out of your socks, please welcome to the stage the reenactors of tonight's tale of terror! They'll deliver, ladies and gentlemen, oh, they will deliver.

Exit the RINGMASTER. Music and spotlight on stage right ring. TWO CLOWNS, one female, one male, cartwheel and jump into the ring. The female clown is holding a baby doll, and the couple mimes exaggerated distress about the baby. Three PAGAN WITCHES (who are CLOWNS with comical witch apparel over their clown garb) appear from offstage and chase the CLOWNS about, waving wands and flowers and so forth. Perhaps they engage in a brief game of catch-the-baby, but the action remains in the ring.

In the scuffle, a ten-year-old YOUNG JULIAN becomes visible rather than a baby. He is not the JULIAN who has been speaking unheard. YOUNG JULIAN steps out of the ring with one foot. As soon as he takes this step, all action freezes and music stops. He speaks to the audience.

YOUNG JULIAN: I was going to kill my parents. My mother tried to keep

it from me, but she cried about it all the time, so I found out. There was nothing anyone could do except go far, far away. I loved my mother too much to kill her.

He lifts his foot, and action and music resume. The PAGAN WITCHES are chased off, and the TWO CLOWNS fawn over YOUNG JULIAN before miming sorrow. He embraces them both, then steps from the stage right ring to the center ring, vanishing behind the headboard as the TWO CLOWNS wave goodbye. Exit TWO CLOWNS, stage right. Lights slowly down on stage right ring as JULIAN's voice can be heard again.

JULIAN: With one door closed, the next opens. Freedom. A marriage to a widow opens a window of opportunity, no whirlwind hanging overhead. But some doors creak and slip from their latches, and even when they don't, the devil has a way with locks.

Spotlight on center stage ring. A thirty-year-old MIDLIFE JULIAN comes out from behind the headboard. He is not the JULIAN which has been speaking. He looks offstage and holds out a hand, and a different female clown, JULIAN'S WIFE, runs in from stage left. They embrace and kiss, and MIDLIFE JULIAN steps back behind the headboard, waving goodbye before he vanishes from view.

Music. JULIAN'S WIFE freshens up the bedcovers, fluffs up the pillows. Enter stage right the TWO CLOWNS from earlier, now projecting an air of old age, huddled together and shivering. JULIAN'S WIFE notices them, and invites them into the center ring. A brief episode of physical comedy ensues - handshakes with hand buzzers - and the couple get into the bed, completely cover themselves in the sheets, and freeze. Exit JULIAN'S WIFE, skipping offstage. Music stops and MIDLIFE JULIAN emerges from the stage-left side of the headboard and turns to the audience, stepping out of the ring with one foot.

MIDLIFE JULIAN: Satan came to me in a dream. He told me my wife had found another man, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. Overcome with hurt and rage that wasn't all mine, I went to enact revenge.

MIDLIFE JULIAN slowly makes his way around to the stage left side of the bed. He pulls a gun from his pocket, aims at the TWO CLOWNS, and fires. A small banner reading “BANG!” pops out of the barrel. MIDLIFE JULIAN reacts as though the gun were real and he really has shot them. He approaches and rips away the top sheet. The TWO CLOWNS are on their backs holding fake bouquets: dead. Whimsical music sting.

MIDLIFE JULIAN recognizes them as his parents. He drops the gun in horror and runs, exits stage left. Lights slowly down on center ring as JULIAN’s voice is heard.

JULIAN: Fate is the ever-turning wheel. You can outrun it, you can try to trick it, but eventually it’ll come down and crush you hard. Like a ball spinning in roulette, like a top without surface friction. No way to fold, no way to call it. Maybe a way to make up for the dealt hand.

Spotlight on stage left ring. A fifty-year-old OLDER JULIAN steps from behind the privacy screen. He, too, is not the voice of the invisible JULIAN. Other CLOWNS gather at the edge of the river closest to the wing. They jump or step across, one by one, with exaggerated movements of trepidation, surprise, and relief. OLDER JULIAN offers his hand to each, helping them cross. They dance around him, give him giant handshakes. He accepts their gratitude, then notices the audience and steps forward out of the ring. All else freezes as he speaks.

OLDER JULIAN: I started anew and founded a hospice, a haven for sick and weary travelers. I helped them cross the river and nursed them back to health. All was well before Satan came back, but after he did, I couldn’t take a chance again. My sorrow washed over me.

Music. The sounds of an earthquake. All of the OTHER CLOWNS react, take shelter, etc. They disturb the layout of the hospital in doing so, and the place is trashed. When the earthquake passes, JULIAN forces the CLOWNS out, and they all run across the stage and exit stage right.

CLOWN JESUS enters, stage left. He is carrying a walking stick and his face is covered by a cloth hood. He steps effortlessly over the river and attempts to enter the

ring containing the hospital, but OLDER JULIAN refuses to let him in. After several attempts, CLOWN JESUS hands OLDER JULIAN his walking stick, which sticks to his hand. CLOWN JESUS removes his hood. OLDER JULIAN realizes with whom he is faced, and falls to his knees in prayer. CLOWN JESUS places a hand on his head, at which OLDER JULIAN looks up and CLOWN JESUS sprays him with a lapel flower. OLDER JULIAN stumbles out of the ring, and CLOWN JESUS freezes. Music stops. Lights out on stage left ring. Voice of JULIAN, and lights slowly up on center ring, as OLDER JULIAN makes his way to the bed.

JULIAN: At the end of everything, there is the light. After curses, after blessings, and after life. No harm if it all cancels out. But what if the cycle cannot be broken? Are we forever to die, to rise, to blame others and to hurt, like the gambler lashing at the dealer? What is beyond this kind of life? Is there anything at all?

OLDER JULIAN climbs into the bed and covers himself entirely with the bedcovers. Lights remain up on center ring. A brief pause before thunderous applause is heard, obviously fake. The RINGMASTER walks out and stands center downstage. As he speaks, his voice and demeanor slowly change, as if being subsumed by another.

RINGMASTER: What a show, what a show, ladies and gentlemen! Give it up for our amazing, show-stoppingly talented actors and actresses! Yes, this is a tale the likes of which we have never seen before. All this talk of curses, and all of those nasty circumstances our friend Julian found himself in. It really goes to show you, you can't live your life defined by the circumstances of your birth! No, ladies and gentlemen, you have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Pay no heed to the way that you were determined to be before you were conscious enough to make a choice. There's always a way out in this wonderful world of ours! The devil will try to drag you under, try as you might to resist him. Sometimes there may not be a way out. Sometimes all there is is the tide of fate. But you have to remain steadfast. That's the ticket, ladies and gentlemen. That's the way to live your life, unbound by tragedy. Take responsibility and straighten things out no matter what the wheel of fate has in store. Whatever is thrown in your way, you've got to do anything you have the power to do. Just think-

ing isn't the way to do it. You won't get anywhere just struggling against causal restraints. No, you have to do something about it.

It should be obvious by now that the RINGMASTER now speaks in the voice of the disembodied JULIAN. He is JULIAN. He pauses, then turns and looks at the bed in which OLDER JULIAN lies motionless, unseen.

RINGMASTER: You have to break the cycle.

The RINGMASTER fully faces the bed, his back to the audience. He pulls out a gun from his pocket, aims, and fires at OLDER JULIAN. Immediately after firing, he falls to the ground dead, as if he has shot himself. Simultaneously, lights out on center ring.

Beat.

The RINGMASTER remains motionless. All of the CLOWNS (CLOWN JESUS and the PAGAN WITCHES are no longer in their extra apparel) come out of the shadows curiously. They are far less animated than they were while acting, and they cluster around the body of the RINGMASTER. Lights slowly up on all three rings. The CLOWNS investigate; none of the JULIAN iterations can be found. One of the CLOWNS, back to the audience, remains crouched by the RINGMASTER's body, and wordlessly motions the other CLOWNS to gather around. This CLOWN turns to the audience and shows off the fired gun. A small banner that says "BANG!" is sticking out of the barrel.

End.

Exodus

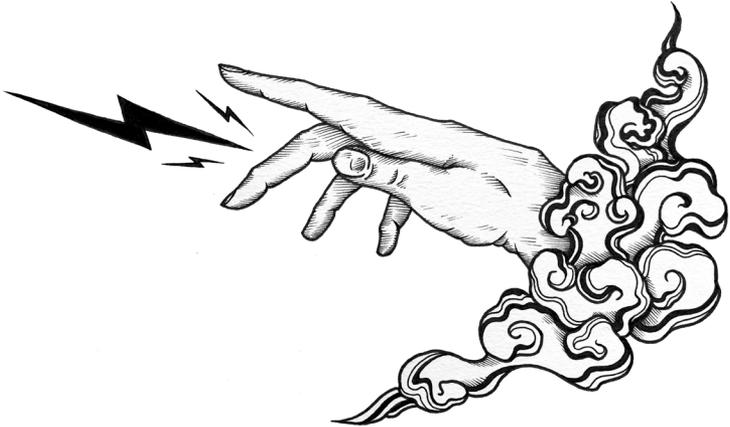
E. Kerr

he had taken from them what was
never theirs to begin with: he was
a consequence, a punishment, in a papyrus

basket floating down a murky red
river, tightly embraced by a mother, claiming him
by blood and trying to raise him

to be a vine entangling the bark in her family
tree — she didn't know he would start fires
when they demanded he bud flowers.

she had intended to keep him
oppressed, and he begged to be
delivered, exiled to live
like the shepherd. his tears became
blood in their bathtub, his voice
croaked out psalms, and as he lay
in the dark one night, offering
up his chest, she lost her firstborn.



Raisin Girl

Elizabeth Giannone

I am attracted to her
Mind, thinks
My lying lips. Sleep
On her encyclopedic body
Which would never be mine.

I love her
Mannerisms
The way she articulates
Words like butter. I am something bitter-
Such that butter does not belong on.

I imagine her
Composing love letters.
Warning me with the door open.
Teaching me how to kiss
The ideas of life with a soft mouth.

Coffee and poetry.
The things I love and the things
She is. Beautiful.
I am just a pair
Of lips which cannot grow.

I wish
I deserved to love her.

Previous page...

Throw
Max Messenger

Raisin Girl 15



Drunk and in the Way - *Molly Neeson*

The Gap

Elizabeth Giannone

I sit on the grate above the river with my legs hanging over the side of the bridge. The thought that the grate may give way beneath me at any moment or the eyebars at either end may finally snap for rusting and years of GMC SUVs full of tattooed women and their freckled sons shaking them set a permanent tickle in my stomach that felt like love— what I imagine love is like. I glance left and right wondering if she is on her way before leaning forward over the cold, metal rods where I rest my arms.

The river below is shallow. The water is clear. I can count the rocks underneath it if I try hard enough, but I don't own patience. I can't afford it. The screeching of the bars under my weight, the turning of the river on its bed, and the howling of the wind envelop me, and I imagine myself, for a moment, on a wooden ship with birds cawing and whales singing and a woman on my arm telling me we are almost there. But here I sit on a bridge in a town in a landlocked state, aching. The loudness of the moon fading in and the yellow of the sky dimming worries me. All I can hear is the day ending.

"It's supposed to storm." My head snaps up, as do the corners of my mouth.

"I hope so," I reply, turning my head back to the water.

"I know so," she claims, matter-of-factly. "I can smell it."

"Do your knees hurt, too?" I ask sarcastically. I wonder where she comes from and where she'll go back to. I wonder if she'll bring me home one day. She is the type of girl who makes other girls nervous in the most comforting way- a raisin girl if ever there was one. She tells me being a woman and being human are one and the same. She tells me that is what being alive means. Sometimes she tells me she is not a woman. My stomach churns.

"My knees always hurt." She slides down to meet me, but she keeps her legs folded. Her eyes follow my back down to the grate I reside on. The

sight makes her wince.

“Still afraid?” I ask, knowing the answer.

“Shut up.”

“You first.”

Her skirt slides up on her pale legs, and her stomach falls out of it just slightly with every timid breath. She is always remaking herself. Rebuilding. She despises her foundation, but it is the one thing she cannot change. Her shoulders slump and her fingers wander the cement in search of small rocks to push over the edge. I catch myself looking at her dirty sneakers and wondering where the dirt is. All around me is asphalt and sidewalk. *Where do you find it?* We sit like this in silence for a while. It feels like hours or days. She looks at her wrist periodically between stolen looks at my face that she thinks I don't notice. Finally and timidly, I ask, “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just tired, I guess.”

“Maybe you should go home and get some sleep. There are always more days.”

“Yeah.”

I stare at the river and frown. She stands, clumsily, brushing herself off and straightening her wrinkled skirt. She pulls her hair back into a low ponytail before turning to leave. I yell after her to get home safe and to message me when she gets there, but she never will. She watches her feet as she steps, and I watch as she gets smaller and smaller.



Banana - *Anthony Ciampoli*

Curiosity Killed Itself

Lauren Kraemer

“I’ll take one bottle of Joy, please.”

The pharmacist reaches behind the counter and pulls out a crystal bottle, half-full. As he clinks it lightly next to the cash register, the sun-shine-colored liquid inside climbs up the sides of the glass, swirling around to reveal shimmering golden flecks throughout. He pulls out a label maker and begins typing up my name and some instructions for how to use Joy, as if I have never used a Feeling before. *I don’t have time for this. Just give me the darn thing so I can finish off my To-Do List.* Through the distortion of the thick glass bottle, there’s a poster hanging behind the pharmacist. It depicts two people on different sides of the planet, each enjoying a bottle of Diet Extroversion: “Enjoy the benefits of being near people, while staying worlds apart!”

“I think you’ll be very pleased with this purchase!” The man smiles, his eyes flecked with gold. “Will that be all for today?”

I shuffle some things around in my gray tote bag and pull out a dark metal container. Its dull exterior absorbs the light radiating from the golden bottle of Joy. “I was hoping to return this bottle of Loneliness. I followed the instructions, but I wasn’t satisfied with its effects.”

The man’s smile transforms into a sympathetic frown. “Sorry about that, ma’am. That one does tend to have mixed reviews, but I’m afraid negative Feelings are nonrefundable.” The frown morphs back into a mile-wide smile, glittering in the fluorescent light of the corner store, as he adds, “I can offer you some additional positive bottles at a reduced price, though, if you’d like.”

The Joy shimmering in his eyes easily convinces me. After all, I came to this store to be Productive, and what is more Productive than a good deal? He places bottles of Fulfillment and Curiosity in front of me. I haven’t seen those on the shelf before. I’m not even quite sure what they are supposed to feel like. I guess Gov finally figured out the right formu-

las. After all, bottling up emotions is harder than it looks. That's why the government only releases new ones every few years. Gov bless all the work they do up there.

"I'll try the Curiosity," I say. I don't have enough to trade for both bottles he recommends. Besides, take too many Feelings at once and you'll end up like the people from Before. Such messes they were, getting all wrapped up in different emotions all at the same time. Once, I even heard a story about people back then having relationships with others, beyond those necessary for a functional life. That sounds like something out of a fantasy movie, though. The man wraps up my bottles in clean, Gov-issued tissue paper and delicately places them into my bag.

"Be careful with that one. It's some strong stuff," he warns. I grab the bottle, but he tightens his grip. He stares firmly into my eyes and adds, "Seriously, more than a drop could be dangerous for the whole community, not just you."

I nod and he loosens his hold. I cross the linoleum floor to exit. "Thank you, sir, and Gov bless."

"Gov bless!" He stares at me until I close the door.

When I arrive home, my mind starts to go numb, and the motivation drains from my body. The bottle of Productivity I had this morning must be wearing off. As its effects fade, I find myself settling back into that warm feeling of nothingness I wake up to every morning. Thank Gov! I've been getting tired of expelling all that mental energy running errands. I settle into my couch, stare at the slate wall in front of me, and bask in the nothingness for a few minutes, or maybe a few hours. Content in just sitting here, I start to pity those from Before, whose unregulated Feelings would never let them relax in pure emotional silence.

After a while, my body gets restless. It's time to get up and walk around. I go to the kitchen and open the refrigerator to see the bottle of Curiosity that I put in there earlier today. The instructions read: "Take one drop of Curiosity once a month to feel a connection to nature and your surroundings."

Huh, I never thought I could feel connected to such things, or anything for that matter. What does that even look like?

I turn the bottle around and a bright red warning label reads:

“TAKE CURIOSITY ONLY IN THE RECOMMENDED DOSAGE, OR LESS. EXCESSIVE USE MAY RESULT IN OVERWHELMING EMOTIONAL SIDE EFFECTS.” I unscrew the cap and pour a drop of the glowing green liquid into my mouth. It goes down differently than other Feelings.

Immediately after swallowing, I wonder why the government decided to put bubbles in this bottle. Usually Feelings go down smoothly, but the carbonation makes the metallic taste linger. My pondering blindsides me. *Gov knows what they're doing. They've taken care of me all 36 years of my life.* The bubbles must be important to the formula, somehow. I wouldn't dare challenge Gov's authority. Still, I can't help but wonder...

Then, I feel the strange desire to go outside and...*explore? Yeah, I think that's the word they used Before.* As I step into the chilly air of the overcast day, I feel strange, like I know nothing about my surroundings, all the things I have known forever. I look down at my Gov-issued white dress and wonder why I can't wear navy pants like the men around town do. What a fun color that is, and pants would make it easier to run errands. I chuckle at the absurdity of my thoughts.

Across the street, one of my neighbors waters her lawn. I think she's lived here for a while now, but I have never spoken to her. I have never needed to. Gov says that as long as we keep to ourselves, we will have peace. So then, why do I find myself walking toward her? *Why do I feel the urge to talk to her?*

“Hello my neighbor the weather is lovely what is your name and I'm good how are you?” I say, stringing together greetings I heard that people used Before, excited to have executed them perfectly. People sure spoke excessively back then. Still, my mastery of the ancient language dazzles me, and I flash the woman a toothy smile.

My neighbor barely looks up from her watering to give me a puzzled glance, and I wonder what I did wrong. *She's not on Curiosity. She doesn't understand. You would have the same reaction if someone did the same to you.* I have never needed such reassurance before, and the filth of government betrayal is thick on my skin. I wave to my neighbor, though she pays me no mind, and continue on my exploration.

The lawn of the vacant house up ahead has never looked so invit-

ing. The grass is cut short and evenly, giving it the soft appearance of those groomed dogs used in Gov enforcement. *What do they use those animals for anyway? To attack people?* No, Gov would never do anything to harm us. I am repulsed by the thought of such a thing, but even more so that the thought was mine.

I shake myself out of my head and decide that I must know exactly what the grass feels like, right now. I walk over and lie down on the bright green blanket, rolling in its softness. *So, this is connection with nature.* There is water on each blade of grass, and I wonder how it got there. The sprinkler could not have possibly reached that far and Gov has not been around to touch up the lawns yet today. I decide there is only one way to get the answers I crave. There is only one way for me to gather enough motivation and interest to seek out all my curiosities. I leave the yard and head back to my kitchen.

I take Curiosity out of the refrigerator, deliberately facing the warning label away from me. I take a large swig from the bottle and a mouthful of the glowing green liquid sizzles down my throat. *I can't wait to see where this takes me.*

I walk back outside and realize I have never wondered why every house in the neighborhood looks identical, but for some reason all I can think about right now are the endless gray boxes spread evenly along the road, each with two darkened windows flanking a white door, guarded by a neatly trimmed yard.

How come Gov can't vary the color a bit? Why did they choose gray? And why is every blade of grass cut down to the shortest possible length? Are they afraid they'll grow out of control?

These thoughts alarm me and suddenly my stomach churns and my forehead drips sweat. This is how I felt that time I drank Guilt. What a horrible day that was. Maybe these are the emotional side effects the label warned about. But how can I experience two strong Feelings at the same time, when I have only taken one? It feels almost as disgusting as those stories I hear about people from Before, expressing something called *Romantic Love* toward one another, whatever that means.

Now, my surroundings look foreign. The asphalt I've walked countless times before is suddenly new, and I can't help but think about

why we pave roads at all, instead of walking around in the glory of nature's green grass. It's not like people still use those outdated transportation machines that require paved streets. *Cars, I think they're called?* I gasp at my own questioning of the beauty Gov has manufactured in this country. Until today, I have never been concerned with the natural world. My life has consisted purely of what Gov has provided for me: my house, my clothes, my emotions. None real, none mine. *Will I ever feel something not brought on by some bottled elixir?*

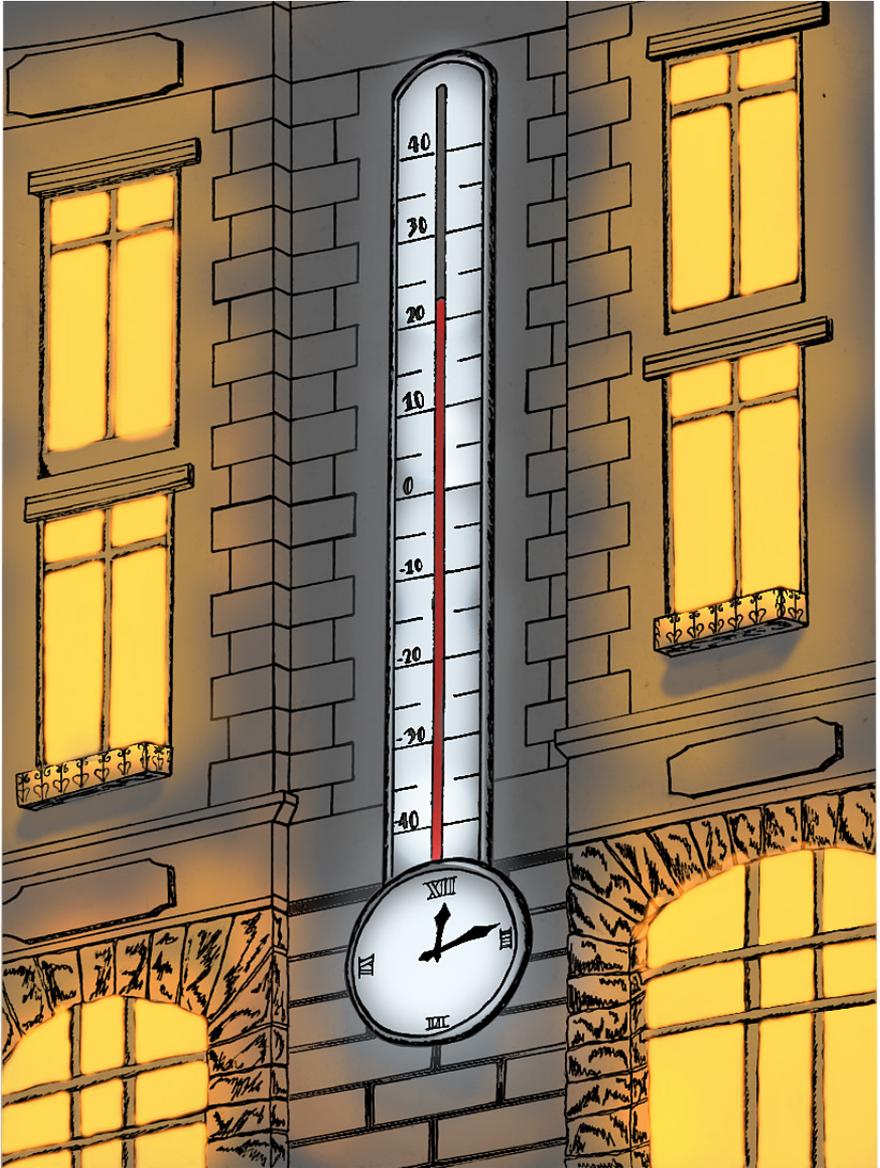
I am now racing down the street, but my thoughts are moving quicker, circling around the idea of artificial Feelings. *If I can feel them, does it matter how they were brought on? They feel real to me, so why do I care if they were sparked naturally? Does their cause make them any less valid?* But that line of reasoning does not satisfy me.

I don't know where I am running to, but I'd be happy to explore any place in the world. Maybe other countries still experience emotions the old-fashioned way. *Oh my Gov, do I really want to feel the mess of emotions I've criticized my entire life?* I've always been grateful for the control Gov has given me over my Feelings, but now I'm distraught. Maybe control is not enough.

Panicking, I find myself back at the corner store. As I catch my breath, my mind continues to race. I see the poster for Diet Extroversion and can't help but feel sorry for the people content in their perpetual alienation. *What is so bad about human relationships anyway? Why don't they want us to connect with each other? What is Gov hiding?* Perhaps preventing human connection is key in stopping us from discovering something truly awful, like how they control every decision we make, whether we realize it or not, or how deeply unsatisfying bottled emotions really are.

This thought sends me over the edge. My head swells with dizziness and my body goes limp. From the floor, I catch a glimpse of the pharmacist just before my eyes roll back. His eyes no longer glimmer, and he is yelling something, but I can't make out the words. Now it's dark.

I wake up in a hospital room. My temples throb and my body is exhausted. Other than that, I feel nothing. No emotion, no Curiosity. I am back in my peaceful state of nothingness. A news channel is playing on the TV. A glowing green bottle appears on screen. The headline reads, "Curiosity: RECALLED."



Time Stood Still - *Conor Dougherty*

Despite Daylight

Elizabeth Giannone

I

I love him for the better
Half of a sunset,
 and so miss it.
He implores me to look.
See? He inquires from the window.
What wonderful color.

But I am trapped behind
Tinted windows
 and underneath the weight
Of this love. A love big and
Bright as the sun-
Pink as the sinking of it.

It is also just as burning.
He is smiling like a child
 and the sun grows larger, still
Falling. The weight on my ribs-
Unbearable-
Until they begin their snapping.

Rhythmic.
What beautiful music you make.
 and SNAP...SNAP...SNAP...
You are amazing.
You are like watching a sunset.
God, I'd hate to miss you.

II

So busy lamenting the sunset,
I blink tears away and

I miss it. The Love.

Yes, dear. The color is nice.

The sun will be back tomorrow,
But the flecks across his skin,

The blue of his eyes, the child
In his smile would leave with him
and me alone.

He stands in front of the window,
Hands pressed to the glass,
Breath fogging it. I cannot tear

My eyes away.

You are not looking, he says.

I do not need to, I assure.

Anything you say is wonderful must be.

His ears perk up. *Then,*

I suppose you must be amazing? He gleams.

Yes dear, I smile, I must be.



Olympus - *Devang Patel*

Embrace the Shake

Megan Zabrowski

Leo has been staring at the same painting for the last ten minutes.

The picturesque scene takes up the entirety of the canvas, and though the painting seems like an image frozen in time, the life that radiates from it is breathtaking. A dollop of gold rises over the horizon, and yellow and orange strokes cover the flower-filled meadow. Pink dry-brushed clouds are dispersed throughout the sky. The bottom right corner of the canvas gives the date of the painting's completion: one year ago, today.

Leo sighs and forces himself to look away before tears threaten to fall. He then rests his elbows onto the countertop and stares into space for a moment. It's just after four. The cafe is deserted, and he only has his thoughts to keep him company.

Though he told himself that he shouldn't let his eyes wander, they do. Various paintings fill the walls, ranging from landscapes to architecture, from portraits to bowls of fruit. Each painting represents a memory captured through acrylic paint and a brush, and Leo can pinpoint the vision behind each one.

One of his favorites hangs near the cafe's entrance. The painting, now almost three years old, captures the Notre Dame Cathedral covered in a light dusting of snow. Like a French winter wonderland.

Leo then glances to his right to have another look at his most recent painting, the sunrise in the meadow. One year ago, today. It's a moment, the *last* moment when things were good. When *he* was good.

"Happy anniversary to me," he mumbles.

He stares at the other paintings surrounding him and swallows down the lump building in his throat. The comfort that once came from these pieces only seems to haunt him now, becoming a constant reminder of disappointment poorly veiled in nostalgia.

All at once, a light chime finally rings through the cafe. The glass

door swings open, and a woman presumably in her seventies hobbles in with a warm smile. Leo stands upright to return the smile before striding across to the cash register to take her order.

“You here by yourself today, dear?” She asks.

Leo nods. “My coworker called in sick last minute, so.”

As he shrugs, the woman shakes her head and pulls out her wallet. She places a ten-dollar bill on the countertop and says, “Have a drink with me, then. I’ll just take a hot chocolate and you can have whatever you like, young man.”

Suddenly, Leo is back in Paris, sitting on a makeshift stool in front of his half-finished painting of Notre Dame. The painting is practically a carbon copy of the actual cathedral standing a hundred feet away. He can barely sit still due to his freezing tremors, but the warmth that radiates from the cup in his hands seems to help. He glances down at the steaming drink. *Chocolat chaud.*

“Honey?” The woman snaps Leo back into reality. *Back to the goddamn cafe.*

The fact that his biggest concern at the time was shivering hands makes him dryly chuckle, but he quickly collects himself. He clears his throat and replies, “That would be wonderful, thank you.”

Smiling at the woman’s offer, Leo only charges her for her own drink. When he hands her the change, she rapidly shakes her head and declines.

“Keep it, honey. As a tip for yourself or your college fund,” she says.

Leo holds back a laugh. Not only has he been out of college for the past four years, but even if he was still in school, both of them know eight dollars would do next to nothing.

As she turns to sit, he grabs a white porcelain mug from the rack and wills himself to keep his hands from shaking. Thankfully, all he has to do is grab the pot of boiling water and pour it into the mug without spilling. *Simple and easy.*

After filling the mug with cocoa powder, he takes a deep breath and grabs for the pot handle. The weight of the pot immediately distresses the muscles in his dominant hand, causing his entire arm to shake. He takes

deep breaths to calm himself down, but the shaking worsens with each passing second. With a sigh, he rests the pot on the counter and switches to his nondominant hand. The position is awkward, but the shakiness on this side is far more manageable. Once he pours the coffee into the mug without spilling a drop, he gives himself an imaginary fist bump.

Leo glances over at the woman sitting in the far left corner, silently staring into space. He sighs, and after counting down from ten, he reaches for the mug and its matching saucer. While his left hand holds the handle, his right hand holds up the small plate underneath. As he slowly approaches the wooden door that separates the counter from the rest of the cafe, he doesn't take his eyes off of the drink.

His logic is that if his eyes are steady and focused, his hands can be too. It fails, *go figure*. Though he travels at a snail's pace, the dark liquid sloshes like a children's wave pool. He takes baby steps across the cafe and silently thanks the universe for the lack of customers. He knows he looks stupid, so the fewer people that see it, the better.

By the time he gets to the table, she looks up and greets him with a smile. From the glow of the sunlight, the woman's grey hair shines, and the crinkles formed around her blue eyes deepen. *She almost looks like Meryl Streep's long-lost twin*, Leo muses, *and an excellent model for a portrait*.

He blinks to rid the thought away and leans forward to place her mug on the table. The mug in his hands shakes to the point where traces of hot chocolate spill out from the edges. The sight only stresses him out more, which in turn worsens the shakes. He screams at himself not to spill the boiling hot beverage on the woman, and by some miracle, the inner monologue works.

Leo glances at the half-empty mug. He somehow managed to lose over a quarter of the drink in transport, as well as on the table. As the brown puddle seeps into the white table cloth, he begins to panic. The woman says nothing.

He's about to turn away to grab a towel when the woman gestures to the seat across from her. "Sit and stay awhile," she says, "I feel like we could both use some company."

Leo quickly sits down and rushes out an apology. She holds up her hand, and he silences. He stares down at the mess he made and refuses to

make eye contact with her.

“Darling, there’s no need to be nervous,” she says.

He eventually glances up at the woman to determine if she’s being sarcastic or not, and judging from her furrowed brows and small pout, her concern is genuine.

“It’s not that I’m, like, nervous. It’s just that...” Leo trails off and shakes his head. The woman glances up from the rim of her mug and raises her eyebrows, prompting him to continue.

“I have this, um, *condition* that gives me hand tremors.” Though he feels as if he dropped a bomb on this poor woman, she only nods in understanding. He continues, “It’s called focal dystonia, and I’ve, um, I’ve had it for about a year now.” He scoffs to himself before rushing out, “I know I shouldn’t be making excuses for why I spilled your drink everywhere but—”

“It’s quite alright. You don’t have to keep apologizing,” the woman cuts him off. Leo bites off the apology for apologizing so much. He nods instead.

The two sit in silence for a minute. While the woman sips on her drink, Leo looks anywhere but at her.

“The paintings in here are beautiful,” she marvels.

Leo travels the woman’s gaze until they land on the painting closest to their table. It’s a simple picture, one that was captured at his mother’s home five summers ago. His mother adopted three baby kittens to keep herself company while he was away at school, and one night when Leo was watching them, the vision of a new painting was born. By some miracle, all three kittens were asleep, cuddled together in a wicker basket. Leo didn’t want to miss the opportunity of painting something so adorable.

“Where did you buy these?” she asks.

“I didn’t. I painted them,” Leo replies.

Her eyes widen as she says, “Really? They’re outstanding.”

Leo chuckles but feels his cheeks heat up from the praise. “Thank you,” he says.

Leo watches the older woman analyze the other paintings around the cafe. He sits at the edge of his seat, waiting for some form of feedback. Though he can’t improve or change what she suggests, that doesn’t mean he isn’t curious about what the woman thinks.

She's staring at one of the still-life paintings of fruit when she asks, "Can you not paint anymore because of your hand?"

He nods but realizes that she isn't even looking at him. He replies, "Yeah, you kinda need a steady hand to paint and as you saw, I don't really have that anymore." His voice cracks at the end of the statement. He tries to cover it up with a self-deprecating laugh, but the woman doesn't join him. She turns back to Leo and her gaze is so intense that Leo shifts in his seat.

"You can still paint, you know," she finally says.

Leo shakes his head. "Trust me, I've tried. Even if I get one stroke I like, I end up messing up the whole painting with a spasm." He sighs and continues, "Besides, I can only spend so much money on supplies if I end up throwing it all away anyway."

She nods and takes a sip of her beverage. When she places the mug down she asks, "Have you ever thought of trying a different style of art, then? Maybe abstract?"

Leo scoffs. "That's not art."

"Then why do they have museums for it?" She challenges, and when Leo doesn't respond, she takes it as a victory and continues, "You're incredibly talented in creating realistic paintings, sure, but that's not the *only* type of art out there. Art is something that should be up for interpretation because it makes the masterpiece all that more meaningful."

Leo sits back in his chair and crosses his arms. "What if my art isn't meant to be interpreted?"

The woman chuckles. "Believe it or not, all of your work has the opportunity of interpretation." She nods her head towards the picture of the kittens, "I'm sure you have a story behind this painting, but since I don't know what it is, all I have to go off of is my own interpretation. You could've been at an animal shelter, and as much as you wanted to, you couldn't adopt them, so you painted them instead. Or, maybe you only saw one cat and wanted to paint three because the number symbolizes something for you. I could honestly go on for hours, honey."

Leo blinks at the woman, letting her words process. He always assumed that people who saw his paintings thought they were decent solely because they looked *real*.

Now, he might not be so sure.

The woman takes a sip from her mug, and when she places it back down she adds, “Given how many paintings are in here, it’s obvious you enjoy it. So why quit? You can always capture the same moment, just in a different style.”

Why didn’t he think of that?

In between Leo serving a few customers, they spend the next half-hour talking about the woman’s grandchildren and the changing weather. As she prepares to leave, Leo thanks her, and in response, she grabs his shoulder and gives him a reassuring squeeze.

“Embrace the shake, darling, and good luck,” she says.

Once the cafe reaches its closing time for the day, Leo rushes to his apartment. He strides up to the door of his office, but pauses as his shaking hand hovers over the door handle. He hasn’t set foot in this room in months, for the last time he did, he ended up on the floor sobbing. He slowly pushes the door open and flicks on the light switch.

A canvas is already set up on the easel from his last attempt, an illegible sketch of a train. None of the lines are how he initially envisioned them to be, and though he should be bothered by its imperfection, he reminds himself not to critique or complain.

After he sets up his workstation, he stares at the canvas. Eventually, he grabs the largest paintbrush available and dips the bristles into the dollop of cerise. His hand trembles as he carries the brush from the palette to the canvas, and lets his hand hover for a moment. He closes his eyes and visualizes how he can make this as “abstract” as possible. All he sees is the darkness of his eyelids.

After a sigh, he opens his eyes and breaks the distance between the wet bristles and the canvas. He focuses on the lively colors rather than the method he displays them. He strokes the brush wherever his eyes catch, and though the random lines are jagged, he pays them little mind. His aimlessness shifts into a rhythm he can manage as if he tricked his brain into controlling whenever his hand would spasm.

Hours pass before Leo drops his trembling, paint-covered hands to his sides. He takes a step back and tilts his head from side to side to analyze what he has done. Though the painting is a combination of various shapes

and colors, he can distinguish a train if he squints hard enough.

Maybe, Leo wonders, the train symbolizes the journey he's taking into a new type of art?

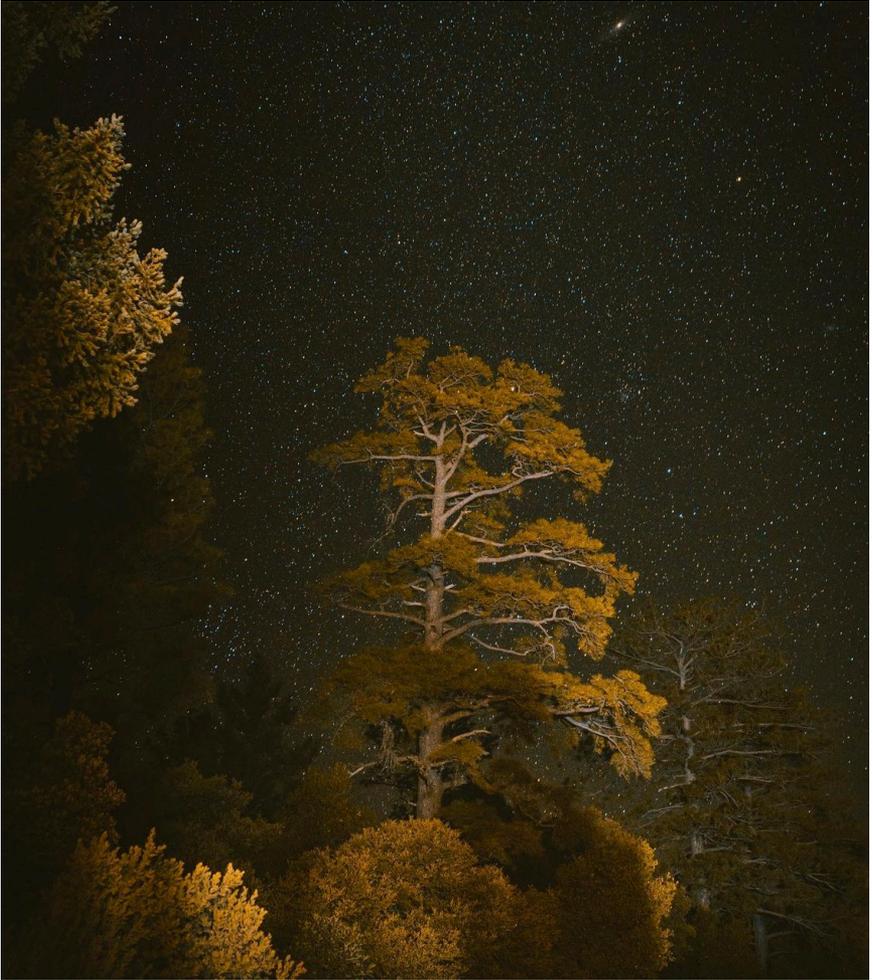
His laughter fills the studio.

Pining Neighbors

- Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"

Elizabeth Giannone

Methinks us both
Apple orchards fruiting.
Wrong.
Pine neighbors,
Infidels,
Crossing a line
We swore was made of stone.
Taking after mother needles,
Stabbing soft soles wandering
In search of apples
We cannot bear. Distance
Does not relieve me.
Does it, you?
I think about you naked
On long walks-
Even on Christmas-
Because the smell
Looms over like a curse.
You should make an enemy
Out of me, Charming,
For you
Know what
Good walls make.



Universal Conference - *Devang Patel*



Remnants - Max Messenger



The Guardian - *Max Messenger*



Peek - Bodo Johnson



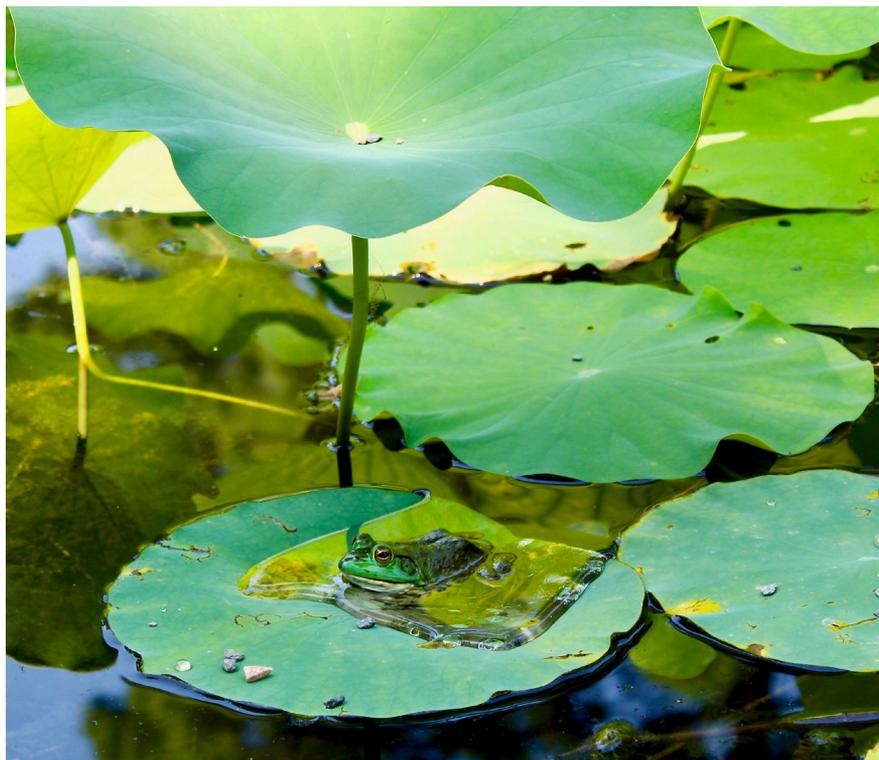
Loft - *Bodo Johnson*



Milker - Bodo Johnson



Girl with Lights - *Molly Neeson*



Silent Pond - *Nia Long*

Old Mill on Sunday

Nia Long

Worn metal rough with rust—
Orange-tinted fingertips.
Still mill sings silent.

If You Should Love Me

Elizabeth Giannone

I wish you would
Not light up each time
I enter. As words come
Like women:
Rarely, fakely,
Or not at all.

I do not want you
To expect me
To make you
Happy or otherwise.
Do not depend on me
For love. For life.

I am not giving.
I am not having.
I drag on always for
 just one more day.
I am wasteful, tasteless,
Misunderstood, and Misunderstanding.
I regift my gift
 and steal it

When you turn away.

Anesthesia

Bethany Belkowski

As the Moon dangles
in the black, I sway in bed
-sheets. Of paper and the past
we speak, trying to push the other
to sleep. But we both lie
on a quilt of browning roses that crunch
and crumble as I roll
deep into your anesthesia
-laced tongue. With pocket providence
I preach to the cavity
I carved beneath your last rib, claiming it
saved me
from the Fall. Into your chest
I press my ear to hear
your stony breaths. Catch
me as I press my fingers
between the pages of
your lips. Find me
in depths as blood crusts the backs of
your teeth. Grind me
into dust with which I can line
my gums. Pull back as I push
past white ridges, slipping,
sliding, knowing there's no possibility
for big stories
in this small room. You watch the Moon
make her smooth descent, waning
and whining until she settles,
once half, now whole. But bound to be
breached, layers part,
and I climb into the cavity I carved
for my repose. Only a moment
to myself. Leave now,
hurled away
with a heavy, heaving,
gasping cough. For air,
I surface. You pull me
close. Your eyes
watch me in the black as I strip
crushed crumbs from saturated skin.

Grave at 6 a.m.

Nia Long

Church chimes break mourn;
Lillies shroud untimely tombs.
His sparrow's hymn plays.



Bedroom Cabaret - *Bodo Johnson*

Rosin

Skyler Ralston

Elegance, grace, poise
Grown woman in baby pink
Nothing if not beautiful

Do what you please with me
Grown woman in a little girl's skin
Nothing if not yours

Desperate, pleading, worthless
Grown woman the size of a little girl
Nothing if not nothing

I brought you into this —

E. Kerr

“I can take you out of it” — my mother —
lost her daughter the first time
she raised her

nails to my chalkboard throat,
scratched *consent* into it; she didn't
expect the words to heal

over, stretch into sheets of new skin,
and she could have lost her son
if she had cut any deeper. I would have bled

streams, sailed through them, destitute,
returning to where I was, when I was
first pulled into this, into her
world with a mouthful of coins.

Mas[c] Synthesis

E. Kerr

I dream in vials
of clear fluid, swimming
with the artificial matter of man
and you can't stand
that I only want my blood
to become a vapid sea of synthetic steroids
leaking from adrenal glands like your eyes
when my face starts to bloom
thickened peach fuzz.

I've fought for this
life-giving liquid,
and I have not lived
until the fine pointed needle slips
below my skin's surface,
sinking itself into the walls
of stratified squamous
epithelial tissue.

Duplex Crucifixion

After Jericho Brown

E. Kerr

Bring me closer to your god;
I don't want to leave this world damned.

I want to leave this damned world.
Hang me on your wall with two tacks.

With two tacks you hang me on your wall,
and my palms bleed until they've dried out.

The blood on my palms has dried
thick like dollops of paint.

Paint me with your dollops, thicker
than wine, you drink to forget *blame*.

Forget that you drank the wine. Blame
precedes forgiveness for all your sins.

I forgive you for all your sins.
Am I closer to your god?

Aspersions

E. Kerr

The vat of holy water, is just
tap water from leaking
faucets with a few pinches
of salt — I can make it

in my bathroom at midnight; I don't need
a man in drapery to tell me if
I'm damned. I know

enough verses from Proverbs to shout
at linoleum countertops — when
sodium grains start to dissolve —

my head becomes the father, the son,
my sternum, hands touch my two
scars on *holy spirit* and don't slip

lower. Don't slip below
the waistline. Don't waste time
praying to clouds and wishing you weren't

born — death doesn't fool
around. Fill bathtubs with consecration,
and cleanse whatever transgressions remain.

Sister

Samuel Marranca

█ Sister █
█ I have been █ writing █ to
you █ the pos-
sibility of you █ well █
█ is █ everything I wish.
█ I was six years old. █
█
mulling █ process.
█ Now █ I am twenty years █
█ into consideration.
I █ expect you to remember me. █
█ your former student. █
█ I was █ your very last. █
█ remember me,
█ “twitchy boy” █
It was the name that you gave me █
█ graced me with that █ deranged
coronation. I have █ nervous tics █ thanks to you.

[REDACTED] my entire life since [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Tourette's Syndrome—[REDACTED] hospitalized, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] affected my physical and mental health. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] thousands on [REDACTED] therapy, treatment, diagnoses, and
consultations. You caused that [REDACTED] emotional
[REDACTED] wisdom. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] satisfy your need of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Schaden-
freude [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] memory [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] when
you broke into the boys' restroom while I was relieving myself
at the urinal [REDACTED] I looked at you
[REDACTED] adult
woman [REDACTED] imposing [REDACTED] exposed six-year-old boy in [REDACTED]
restroom. [REDACTED] law.
[REDACTED] memory [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] stretch my sore
neck [REDACTED] Tourette's [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I raised my head [REDACTED] slammed into the

book by your hand. [REDACTED] headache [REDACTED] one.

[REDACTED] first migraine.

[REDACTED] I was being bullied. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] mistreat

me [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] insult me. [REDACTED] defend myself [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you sent me to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you. [REDACTED] Do you remember. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you should

be—kind, caring, warm-hearted, and forgiving. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Lord.

[REDACTED] you belong to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Charity. I decided to conduct [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the [REDACTED] statement, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] bring [REDACTED] peace. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] your actions [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] mistaken, you have upheld

no standard [REDACTED] you have promised to deliver. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] gone rogue [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] wicked way. I [REDACTED] feel the shame that

you have brought. [REDACTED]

I still remember [REDACTED] I would sob

[REDACTED] begging [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] They did not believe. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you are [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a child [REDACTED] pro-

ected by those parameters. [REDACTED] abuse [REDACTED] is not

in [REDACTED] the Lord. [REDACTED]

I WAS NOT THE ONLY ONE. [REDACTED] other [REDACTED] victim [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] also developed tics [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] spent many days in tears. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Do you remember. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you were brutal. [REDACTED] I can

[REDACTED] remember you.

Did you ever [REDACTED] realize

[REDACTED] cruelty. [REDACTED] sister. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] nightmares. [REDACTED]

Scripture. [REDACTED] little children come to me, and

do not [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

disregard the word of you. people like you
displease

my whole life since hate
I did not defend myself.

you
next. Do you remember.

you asked to keep
that encounter between the two of us.

guilty.

never forget it.

confess sins,

cleanse us from all unrighteousness," **1 John 1:9.**

repent sister. Being

in Heaven—and being wicked.

your case.

nothing
like you. I will love my
heart you likely never will. I will live my

future [redacted]

[redacted] understand [redacted] terror. [redacted]

[redacted] Tourette's [redacted] will not

allow [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] peace [redacted]

[redacted] can you forgive yourself?

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kindred Decay

Nia Long

As kids, we found life's essence
wriggling between outstretched toes sinking
into waning youthfulness and tepid horse manure.

I'd lay out beside the lake's edge and turn my eye
just enough for the luminous, slick ripples to find
my cornea as you hooked those crawlers
and watched the life
ooze onto papa's fingers.

Do you remember the hours in the closet,
our breath caught
between musty overalls, pleated skirts, and plastic-covered trench coats?
We'd tunnel through and find our shared air
through hushed mutters
and dust-covered delusions.

I can't remember if I shattered our *folie à deux* or
if the *unsichtbare fäden* were slowly plucked
by maturation's sickle.

Vacuous eyes scan dark corners as
white-powder residue dreams darken dusk
with a sling of silenced syllables and
the stifled clink of glass.

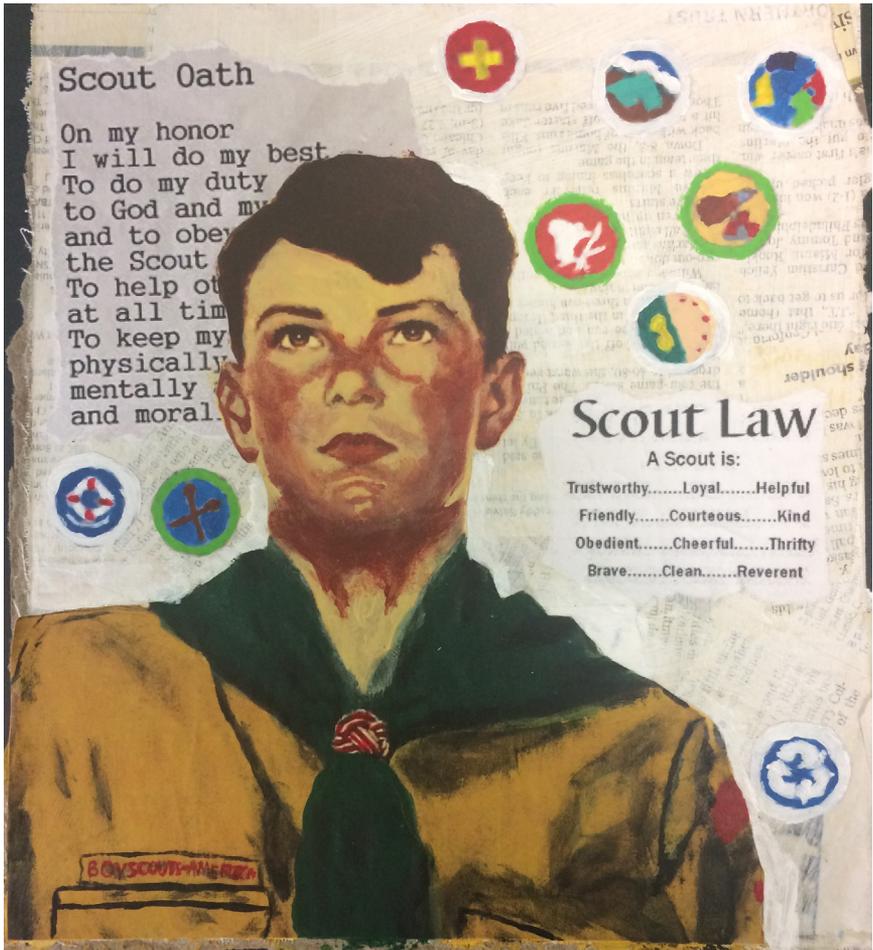
Sly syllogisms

s
l
i
d
e

off your tongue in a
caustic pool of missed meaning
and obsidian daydreams.
I plunge and grasp within the desolation...



Maryamia - Sofia Zingone



What a Boy Scout Is - Anthony Ciampoli

Blackhawk Down

Bethany Belkowski

Carefully balanced on one leg, I nudged the handle of the little pink toilet with a black suede heel. Nearly slipping, I grabbed the top of the stall to ground myself and watched as the water slowly disappeared. I watched the handle flick back up. I watched fresh water flood the bowl. Anything to waste time. I didn't want to go back out. But after fixing my hair in the spotty mirror, I did.

I couldn't help but feel the stares as I made my way back toward the commotion coming from our small table wedged in the corner of the room. Trying not to lock eyes with any of the other guests, I took my seat and turned to face Roy.

"*You need Jesus!*" he bellowed, clear plastic glass in hand, amber liquid running in circles just below the rim. "That's what my mother told me! '*Roy, you need Jesus.*'" The contents of the drink attempted to escape as his speech became more animated. "*Doesn't she know that bitch is hunting us?*" Roy raised his hands and looked to my father for support, who was distracted by fresh scabs forming on his knuckles, and conveniently unable to ponder the deep philosophical implications of his old friend's declaration.

"*Funny thing is,*" Roy continued, "*I gotta picture of him on my wall!*" He paused briefly for comedic effect before giving in to a fit of laughter. My father softly chuckled beside me, still picking at raw skin. He was clearly not drunk enough to deal with his friend's behavior.

Roy, on the other hand, was definitely drunk enough. His breath, hot and laced with the remnants of his last cigarette, jumped across the folding table as he laughed. His crooked smile reeked of at least several hours of hard drinking. After bailing halfway through the funeral service, he must have slipped off to some seedy joint before somehow ending up here. I hoped he didn't drive.

"*Every angle is terrifying. Shit stares into your soul, ya know?*" My father cracked an amused smile at Roy's description of Jesus Christ, and gave a

small nod to appease his friend. I watched Roy's face contort, a joke clearly bubbling to the surface. "*Just like my wife!*" he guffawed, throwing his laughter against the walls. I shifted in my chair, feeling the eyes at other tables turn in our direction. "Not that she can see me now anyways," Roy continued, "My wife's got a fuckin' glaucoma, *so now I ask her if I'm sexy!*" He self-deprecatingly grabbed at his bulging stomach, pointed to his graying hair, and made reference to his browning teeth. "She's good though, got all her eye drops and shit. I don't know, she doesn't let me fuckin' touch any of it," Roy added, still chuckling at his comedic genius.

"I need another drink," my father said with an exasperated yet cheerful sigh, no longer trying to hide his spreading smile. I shot him a look as he got up, but he avoided my eyes, knowing what they said. He carelessly sauntered over to the bar.

"Oh c'mon let him have another, everything's fine in moderation," Roy admonished, clearly having witnessed my glare.

"I guess," I replied tersely. But Roy knew nothing of moderation.

"You drink?" I raised an eyebrow in response. "Oh God, c'mon I'm not a cop, relax."

I gave a shrug, pushing out my bottom lip, "A little, I guess."

"*You guess?* You're in college, of course you do." Roy downed the rest of his own drink, a drop getting lost along the way, finding its home on the cuff of his jacket. "What about weed, when'd you first smoke?"

"I don't."

"What? Hell no— your dad was the shittiest dealer I knew, nearly watched his high ass fall off a bridge in the middle of a deal— *of course you do.*"

"Nope, I don't touch that shit."

"Yo." His eyes lit up. "You cuss? Maybe you *are* cool." I let a smirk peek through as I shook my head in disapproval. "*Yo John!*" Roy called across the room. The glares poured in from other tables, but I was beginning to care less about what they all thought. My father's head shot up from the bar, a few glasses of pale brown liquid situated in front of him. He gave Roy a confused look. "*Yo, your daughter's pretty cool actually, did ya know that?*"

My father had warned me about his childhood best friend the night before as we watched shitty reality TV from our hotel beds. He wordlessly handed me his phone, not bothering to look away from the infomercial or take his other hand from the bag of Doritos he had been nursing for the past half hour. Broken into four deeply intoxicated texts Roy wrote:

Rollin bac from Toldedo tonite

C u tomoroe

Unless you're gonna be up all night??

Then i come tonight

My father, incapacitated by Dorito dust and puffy white sheets, requested I text back, telling Roy to stay put on whatever couch he found to crash on. I set his phone down on our shared bedside table and scrolled mindlessly through my own until I noticed he'd passed out to the drone of the TV. I collected the empty Doritos bag, set an alarm on my phone, and turned out the lights.

I woke to the sound of my father furiously grating a wet take-out napkin on orange-smudged bedsheets. My alarm hadn't even gone off yet. He must not have slept long. He had already showered, and was dressed in everything but his suit jacket. I rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

Within thirty minutes we were in the car. He insisted on driving—I had done enough the day before, kindly chauffeuring us from Philly to his little hometown just outside of Pittsburgh. He tuned the radio to a local station, and proceeded to point out any and all locations of significance from his childhood as he drove. I just sat and observed, taking in the nuances of the quaint town. It was dressed with red ribbons and garland for Christmas, each strand strung across the central street, tied to storefronts on either side. My eyes swept back and forth, only stopping if my dad had an anecdote that accompanied one of the landmarks that slipped past my window. A hotdog shoppe he ate at with his siblings when they were young. Blackhawk High where he and Roy got into most of their trouble. An old girlfriend's house. The Burger King where he and Roy both

earned their first dollars sweeping floors and playing pranks on their manager.

It felt like one of the winter weekends from when I was younger. When we'd wake before the sun to bundle up, climb in the car, and head to the ski slopes. Those drives, more like small voyages, each required multiple pee breaks—one of course at a McDonald's so I could beg my dad for what I dubbed "ski-day hash browns." He'd always cave. I'd munch in the front seat, legs swinging, still not quite reaching the floor, and he'd tell stories about the adventures he had with his dad when he was my age. I loved listening to his stories.

But his dad was dead, and now his sister was too.

We pulled into the funeral home's parking lot a few minutes before the viewing was set to begin. Outside the car, I straightened his tie and pulled lint from his jacket, giving him a moment to compose himself. He wiped his face on his sleeve. I handed him some tissues, knowing he neglected to bring any, and slipped my arm through his to lead the way inside.

Once we entered, I wasn't sure where to situate us. The funeral home was packed with people. I didn't know who was family and who were friends. Guests gathered in swarms around the poster boards lining the walls. Some wept, others pointed themselves out in photos with Aunt Lynn. I squinted from where we stood, trying to figure out what Aunt Lynn looked like.

I eventually gave up and looked to my father, whose consciousness seemed to have drifted to some other place. "Where do you wanna go?" I asked quietly. He looked toward a weary man sitting in a chair at the front of the room. I guessed he was the husband, my father's brother-in-law, but he was visibly much older than my father, graying and clutching tightly to a cane. My father started in his direction, but the old man was engaged in conversation, so we decided to take the long way around the parlor, stopping to glance at pictures to pass the time.

My father pointed to photos of people I didn't know. I nodded, not really listening. I was more interested in the fact that no one had greeted my dad. Every other guest was grouped up, conversing and sharing memories—all except one man with a dark beard and an obnoxiously

red bowtie. He walked toward us. I tugged on my father's sports jacket to make him aware of the incoming presence.

"Hi," said the man in a much higher pitched voice than I had imagined he would have. "How did you two know Lynn?"

The conversation ended within a minute and the man quickly shuffled away, clearly embarrassed. My father wiped his eyes on his sleeve, still rejecting the tissues I supplied. I couldn't think of words to console him.

In another few minutes we reached the feeble man in the chair. Several other family members gathered, finally acknowledging the arrival of Aunt Lynn's little brother. I studied my father's face as he conversed. He stood straighter. He spoke with a strong voice. He had recovered well from the ignorant man's comment.

"Yea, she actually drove us." I tuned back in, hearing my father make reference to me.

"Oh, that's nice," said a tall blonde woman, who looked scarily like the pictures of young Aunt Lynn. My father turned to talk to the old man so I shifted my attention to the woman. "So you drove in? How old are you, like sixteen? Did you just get your license?" I suppressed a glare. She couldn't have been more than two years older than me.

"*I'm twenty actually,*" I replied with a smile I knew she could tell was fake. She mirrored my expression.

"Shame, I wish you guys spent more time out here, we could've hung out or something." My face held the plastic smile in place.

"Oh yea, that woulda been something."

"So nice to meet you."

"You too," I replied between vaguely gritted teeth. I quickly turned to follow my father, who had started to drift away.

He had taken up residence in a distant corner next to a pudgy man with a black bedazzled tie. I headed toward them, averting my eyes from the rhinestones that kept reflecting the light in wild directions. My father was talking to the man but they both faced forward, only glancing slightly at each other when they spoke. I took my place at my father's side.

"Ya, I had to ditch work for a few days," said the stranger with a voice like gravel, "but I've worked my ass off for too long. It doesn't fuckin' "

matter.”

“Damn man,” my father said, glancing slightly at the stranger, “What’s up with your voice? You sound like shit.”

The other man cracked a brown crusted smile, his silver fillings catching the light just like his tie. “Must be all the drugs or some shit.” My father raised an eyebrow. “Oh relax, I’m just fuckin’ with you, nothing hard, just some weed from my kids. They got me back into it. They’re both dealers now, can you believe that! *I’m one proud father,*” he spat with a lick of sarcasm, making it difficult for me to tell if he was joking or not. My father flashed a look of amusement, the beginnings of a smile on his lips. “Don’t worry, I’ve intragated myself into a new life; I’ve turned a new leaf. Hell, I’ve turned all the leaves!”

“*Integrated?*” I offered, impulsively correcting the man’s mistake.

“Ah, so this must be your kid— smart-ass just like you John, eh?”

“Yep, this is my daughter,” my dad said, giving my arm three quick squeezes as he smiled down at me.

“Well, I can’t wait to spend the night with you guys,” replied the stranger, a bit too loud for the setting.

With an honest expression my father replied, “Yea, it’ll be nice to catch up, Roy, it really will.” My eyes went wide. *This? This is Roy? How did I not realize?*

“*Catch up?*” Roy scoffed, “*Buddy, I’m staying with you tonight at your hotel— I just haven’t told you yet!*” I turned fast to face my father, eyes already projecting a heated glare as Roy cackled beside him. My father laughed it off, trying to hide a look of genuine concern. I quickly realized I had to make sure this man didn’t follow us back.

Before Roy could make his case as to why we should offer him hospitality, the service began. He slipped out as fast as he had appeared, explaining this shit was too much for him and that he needed some air; he and Lynn and my father had been too close as kids for him to bear it.

The door slammed shut behind Roy, interrupting the beginnings of Lynn’s military rights. I looked to my father and slipped my hand through his arm, noticing tears had already begun to gather in his eyes. As the flag was folded I squeezed his forearm three times. One. Two. Three. *I. Love.You.* He didn’t return the squeezes.

What he did respond to was the prospect of food. After the conclusion of the ceremony, I quietly suggested we grab something small before heading to the Eagle Club for the dinner, knowing it would be likely more difficult to eat in a moldy community hall basement full of downcast family members. He agreed with a nod.

My father climbed into the passenger side, telling me to stop at the first fast food place I saw. After a few minutes of driving, I pulled into a McDonald's drive-thru. With the exception of telling me his order, my father didn't speak. I grabbed the bags from the window and pulled into a parking spot. We ate in silence. Although, when I finished shoving my wrappers back into the bag from which they came, I noticed he hadn't eaten.

"You okay?" I asked softly. He stayed silent, the back of his head facing me as he stared out the window. "Dad?" No response. "Are you—"

He cut me off with a guttural roar, throwing his fist into the hard plastic above the glove compartment. I jumped in my seat, seatbelt pulling at my chest. I gasped for breath. "Dad—" His fist collided with the panel again. The untouched burger flew from its plastic and burst like a firecracker before it hit the floor. He crushed the patty underfoot, ketchup gushing from beneath his shoe. Strands of shredded lettuce hung from the vents. A slice of tomato lay mutilated in the center console. "Dad—" I choked, reaching for his arm. He knocked my hand away, reeling back to unleash another blow. I shut my eyes and tried not to jump as his fist thudded into the plastic. Then he went quiet.

I opened my eyes. His chest heaved. Hot tears ran down his cheeks as he turned to face me. He let out a shaky breath, "*We're guests.*" I stared back. "*We're guests,*" he repeated. I questioned him with my eyes. My dad's tears spoke before he did, "*Aren't we family?*"

I attempted to console my father as I drove, but I knew nothing I said could assuage his concerns. As he was about most things in my life, he was right about this too.

We were one of the first cars in the Eagle Club's parking lot. The large community building stood glowing righteously against the black December sky. Hand-in-hand, I led him up to the building's large oak doors. I heaved one open, letting my father step inside. The wind pushed the door

shut behind me, shoving my body into the center of the lobby. My father moved toward a set of stairs going down, but first reached back for my hand. Again, I laced my fingers through his, letting his cool and moist palm press against mine.

“But are you cool enough to have snacks?” Roy questioned, his focus returning from my father, who was making his way back from the bar.

“What?” I said, giving Roy a confused look.

“You got that mom-bag there,” he replied, directing his eyes to my tote bag on the chair next to me. “You got any snacks? I don’t feel like getting up for food.” I decided to continue to surprise my new acquaintance and dumped the contents of the bag out on the table. Everything clattered against the thick plastic, drawing annoyed eyes. I rooted through the pile and offered Roy a small square of decorative plastic. “The hell is this?” he questioned with an air of alarm.

With a smile parting my lips I responded, “*I believe the technical term is menstrual pad.*” He stared blankly at the plastic square. “What? *Not appetizing enough?*” For the first time all night, Roy was without words. “Nevermind, looks like I’ve got something else,” I said, handing him a half-eaten pack of almonds. Roy cautiously accepted my offering with a look of what I can only describe as respect.

He tore into the snack like a rogue squirrel as my father returned, with not one but several drinks for him and his best friend to share. Roy quickly forgot the almonds.

They reminisced as they drank. “God do you remember twenty-four hour track night?”

“Holy shit,” My father responded, now three drinks deep, “I do. That shit was insane.”

“Tell her, tell her what we fuckin’ did John!”

My father began with slightly slurred words, “It was a fundraiser at the high school—”

“Good ‘ole Blackhawk fuckin’ High!” Roy interjected.

“Yea, *Blackhawk fuckin’ High* was making a bunch of us kids run—someone had to be running at all times, I don’t fuckin’ know!” My father busted out laughing as he finished another drink. I stared at him and Roy,

refusing to react. My father never cursed.

“Yea, yea,” Roy picked up, “but we wanted to fuck it up. We wanted to say we kept ‘em from running the whole time!” Roy let out a monstrous laugh, clearly overcome by whatever had happened next. “Tell her, tell her, John, tell your wife— a girlfriend— fuck, your daughter, whoever the fuck you are— just tell her what you did John!”

My father couldn’t stop laughing either. “We— we dropped lighters into all the trash cans or something,” he trailed off, taking another swig.

“Or something?” Roy gasped, “*It was ‘Operation Blackhawk,’ mother-fucker, how do you not remember?*”

“It’s been awhile, *motherfucker.*” The two friends roared, drawing the room’s attention.

“One thing we didn’t fuckin’ expect though—”

“Oh my God,” my father cut in, “They started fuckin’ running after us! I forgot!” Roy slammed the table as he laughed, my father following suit. Eyes from other tables burned into the back of my skull.

“You know,” Roy proclaimed, raising his plastic cup so that amber liquid jumped over the rim, “your dad is my *everything*, he’s my everything, I’m telling you.” I squinted as he spoke. My father hadn’t seen Roy for nearly ten years before that. They barely talked anymore.

Roy made note of my expression. His smile disappeared and his laughter dropped. “Your daughter don’t like me.” My eyes widened. I definitely didn’t approve of Roy, but that didn’t necessarily mean I disliked him. “She thinks I’m fuckin’ stupid,” he looked to my father, who was distracted by a hole forming in the cheap tablecloth. “*She doesn’t like me,*” Roy protested, his volume elevating. His eyes welled with tears as he looked to my father for support. My father tore at the tablecloth. I tried to respond, but I couldn’t before he snapped. “SHE DOESNT FUCKIN’ LIKE ME JOHN! WHAT THE FUCK?”

My father’s head shot up, eyes wide, but said nothing. A man I didn’t know strode across the room with a bitter scowl. He had to have been family. The man approached the table with anger oozing from his skin, and addressed my father with terse but quiet words. My father nodded after each reprimand like a child getting scolded by his mother.

“You always had great taste in friends,” said the man, turning to

stalk off, “I mean it, get him out, John.”

Roy was consoling himself with my almonds when my father suggested he get some real food to calm down. As Roy stumbled off, I turned to my father. “I think it’s time to leave, okay?”

“Yea, okay,” he agreed, slowly rubbing his head. “I just have to piss real quick.” I nodded in response. He staggered off as I collected my things and made my way to the bottom of the staircase. With folded arms I scrolled through my phone, only looking up to flash a few quick smiles at those who offered their goodbyes. I didn’t know a single one of their names, and falsely promised my family would come visit soon.

I watched Roy from across the room. He had a white styrofoam plate in hand, piled high with pieces of gray-tinted ham and shriveled green beans. He caught my gaze and turned to head toward me.

Nearly tripping as he approached, Roy sharply asked where my father was. I wordlessly nodded toward the bathroom. He turned and confidently sauntered past the men’s bathroom and into the women’s. I rolled my eyes and returned to my phone, trying to look less alone.

Finally my father returned, with Roy not far behind, evidently having finished his slimy ham in the women’s bathroom. I pushed my father toward the exit while his best friend slurped up the remaining limp green beans.

Halfway up the stairs, Roy started to follow, tripping as he called up to us, “Yo, wait up! You never fuckin’ told me what hotel you guys are staying at!” I looked to my father. He simply shook his head, signaling that I shouldn’t respond. He seemed to be sobering up.

Roy was not. He tailed us up the stairs and stumbled into the parking lot, quickly overcome by laughter as he slipped on the blacktop’s fresh coat of snow. I pushed my father on, refusing to put up with this bullshit any longer. Yet after I shut him in the passenger side and walked back to my side of the car, I felt Roy grab tight to my arm.

I whipped around, yanking my arm back from the drunk. He shrunk back. “Sorry kid,” Roy whispered, losing his boisterous air for a moment. “I— I just had a question,” he stammered.

I let out an exasperated sigh, “Yea?”

“Your dad said you write, right?” I nodded in response. “Fuck yea,”

a relieved grin spread across his face, “You gotta tell our story, okay kid?”

I couldn’t help but humor him with a small smile and playful, sarcastic esteem. “*I’d be honored,*” I replied, not quite sure which of their outlandish tales he was referring to.

“Perfect!” Roy cried, clapping me on the shoulder. My body jolted. He stared, smiling at the flurry-covered pavement as he lit a cigarette. Then he looked me in the eye for the first time all night. His voice dropped.

“You just gotta use my title, alright?”

“Sure,” my voice suddenly a whisper, “What do you want me to call it?”

He exhaled a cloud of smoke, and with watering eyes he spoke, “Blackhawk Down.”

“*Blackhawk Down?*”

“Blackhawk Down,” he affirmed. He dropped his cigarette and pulled out a new one from his jacket pocket. He lit it. After a single puff he dropped it to the ground and crushed it with his shoe, ash mixing with the snow. “Thanks, kid,” he said, brushing a worn hand across his eyes. “See you guys later.”

I smiled dryly and tried to speak. No sound came out. “See you,” I mouthed, but Roy was already halfway across the parking lot, wandering back toward the Eagle Club.

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The Other



Esprit Submission Information

Deadline for Fall 2022: October 28th at 11:59 p.m.

Esprit, a review of arts and letters, features work by students of The University of Scranton and is published each fall and spring as a co-curricular activity of the English department.

We will consider a maximum of five visual art submissions and five literary submissions (poetry and/or prose) per author/artist. *Esprit* does not accept resubmissions, works currently under consideration elsewhere, previously published works, or works published to social media accounts.

Manuscripts (Electronic Submission)

Original stories, poems, essays, translations, features, sketches, humor, satire, interviews, reviews, and short plays must be typed and saved in Microsoft Word file format (.docx). All manuscripts, except poetry and short plays, must be double-spaced. Every page of the manuscript must list the title and page number in the upper right corner. It is recommended that all manuscripts be submitted in 12-point Times New Roman font. The author's name must NOT appear at any point in the manuscript to ensure that all submissions are judged anonymously. Each submission is to be saved as a separate Word file, and all submissions are to be attached to a single email and sent to esprit submissions@scranton.edu from the author's University email account.

The body of the email must contain the following information:

Writer's name
Royal ID number
Year in school and enrollment status (full-time or part-time)
Major(s) and honors program(s) (Business Honors, Business Leadership, Honors, Magis, or SJLA)
Genre(s) of submissions emailed (poetry or prose)
Title of each work submitted in the listed genre(s)

If you are submitting a work of translation, please include a copy of the original text along with your translation.

Submissions received late, mislabeled, or emailed without all of the above information will NOT be considered.

Graphics (Electronic Submission)

Black and white/color photographs and pen and ink drawings work best in this format, but pencil drawings, collages, and paintings will be considered. Your name must NOT appear anywhere on the submission(s). Upload your submission(s) to

OneDrive through your my.scranton email account in the *highest possible quality*, and share that OneDrive file in an email to espritsubmissions@scranton.edu. The body of the email must contain the following information:

Artist's name

Royal ID number

Year in school and enrollment status (full-time or part-time)

Major(s) and honors program(s) (Business Honors, Business Leadership, Honors, Magis, or SJLA)

Title of each work submitted

Medium of each work submitted (photography, painting, charcoal, etc.)

When the work submitted is a study of, or is otherwise dependent upon, another artist's work, please supply the other artist's name and that work's title.

Submissions received late, mislabeled, or without all of the above information will NOT be considered.

All submissions are reviewed anonymously. All accepted submissions to *Esprit* that are the work of currently enrolled full-time undergraduates at The University of Scranton will be considered, according to genre, for The Berrier Prose Award (\$100), The Berrier Poetry Award (\$100), and The *Esprit* Graphics Award (\$100).

Please do NOT address questions regarding submission policy to espritsubmissions@scranton.edu; this email address is expressly for receiving submissions and will not be accessed until the *Esprit* submission deadline has passed. Questions should instead be addressed to the Senior Editors for the Fall 2022 semester: Bodo Johnson (elisabeth.johnson@scranton.edu), Molly Neeson (molly.neeson@scranton.edu), and Sofia Zingone (sofia.zingone@scranton.edu).



Esprit Staff Spring 2022 ♥



Esprit Production Team Spring 2022 ♥

