# E S P R I T

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#### **ESPRIT**

#### The University of Scranton Review of Arts and Letters

#### Fall 2023

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# Fall 2023 Awards:

#### The Berrier Poetry Award

Bethany Belkowski "The Word"

#### The Berrier Prose Award

Audrey Phillips "Nail Salon Scream of Consciousness"

#### The Esprit Graphics Award

Cayman Webber "Spiderweb"

# Spring 2023 Award Judges:

#### Poetry:

**Molly Neeson** graduated from the University of Scranton in May 2023 with a B.S. in Environmental Science and Philosophy. A previous member of SJLA and past Editor-in-Chief of *Esprit*, Molly now works in conservation and outdoor education. Having recently returned from a conservation position in the High Peaks Wilderness, she looks forward to tackling the next adventure that arises.

#### **Prose:**

**Bodo Johnson** graduated from the U in May 2023 with degrees in Philosophy and Political Science. She was a member of the SJLA program and served as production manager for *Esprit*. She is currently completing a year of service with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest in Spokane, Washington where she acts as the Project Coordinator for a brand new youth center and community garden.

#### Graphics:

**Sofia Zingone** graduated from The University of Scranton in May 2023 with a double major in Physiology and Philosophy. She was a member of the SJLA program and a past Technology Manager of *Esprit*. Since graduating, she has moved to Philadelphia and works at The University of Pennsylvania as a Research Tech studying immunotherapies and Pancreatic cancer.

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## The Fitting Room

Megan Zabrouski

The color matches my morning: a singular strawberry eaten, spandex on the fitness instructor's body for her 58:38 cardio video, my face after burning 421 calories: 70.1667 strawberries.

I wear the color of the night: shots of Aperol and vodka mixed with Advil to numb the blood and bile that washed down the drain after I swallowed six slices of tomatostyle pie and inhaled a bag of Takis.

The dress looked pretty on the mannequin, but I am too big for it and too small for this fitting room.



Leahy Views - John Cardiges

## Billy Bottle and the Baby Boomers

Zane Price

Scranton's own *The Times Tribune* was down to its two finalists for the naming of the city's Triple-A minor league baseball team. Roger Szmodis Jr., a security guard for a meat packing plant in Jessup, submitted the name 'Breaker Boys.' He explained in an article prefacing the final decision that he chose the name "to honor the history of work by young men in Lackawanna County." Aidan MacGowan, an analyst for Angelos Investments, endorsed the name 'Baby Boomers' with the rationale that "these young guns hit bombs over any wall they come across! Boom, boom!" During the competition, *The Times Tribune* got sold to MediaNews Group, a subsidiary of the Angelos Preferred Fund; Aidan MacGowan forfeited the prize money on account of his new job as staff salary manager within the, newly minted, Baby Boomers' organization; Roger Szmodis Jr. disappeared somewhere into the Atlantic.

The Scranton Baby Boomers play at Angelos Memorial Field: its well-kept playing surface, its ten thousand hand-polished seats, its concrete concourse surrounding the field, its picnic area in right field. The park nestles into the base of a rocky cliffside with a retirement home and a movie theater looking down on it, though the stadium itself looks down on the back nine of Glenmaura National Golf Club. On Friday nights, swarms of Scrantonians, with no intention for film watching, pack the theater parking lot to get eye level seats to the Baby Boomers' fireworks display. Never existed a purer slice of Americana.

The namesake of the field is one Salvadore Amedeo Angelos, a financial magnate in Wilkes-Barre whose actions were chronicled by *The Times Tribune* for some years since his move to the greater Scranton area in 2007. Through summer 2010, Angelos' alleged actions with Judge Mark Ciavarella flooded the daily paper and the minds of Luzerne and Lackawanna County citizens, as well as Pennsylvanians at large. Angelos maintained, as if by design, a level of deniability throughout the processing of Ciavarella and his associates. Even then the public and its paper continued to wrap the net around Angelos until an overcast afternoon in September 2010. The story, as written by reporter Ciaran Branagh, tells that as Angelos was finishing the eighth hole at Lake Winola Country Club he heard a cry for help from the water. Angelos sprints off the green, down a residential driveway with putter in tow to the lakeside where he sees a young boy, four-year-old Minooka resident Billy Bottle, fighting to keep his life-jacketless body above the wake. As the earnest article "Cash Man There for Kid" relates, Angelos reels in drowning Billy by stretching his Scotty Cameron into the water and shepherding him onto the dock. The goodwill garnered from this action, the older generation saving the new, propelled Angelos into the Northeastern Pennsylvania elite though never beyond it. His purchasing of Scranton's Triple-A organization in 2013, his changing of the team name before the 2023 season, and his continuation of throwing the ceremonial first pitch of every season met little to no criticism.

Take these people, their affiliations as an ocean does its waves; names don't matter here in Triple-A baseball. Major League Baseball, where the name-making owners hand out more nine-figure contracts than any other vocation in the world, is where the names matter: Shohei Ohtani, Aaron Judge, Bryce Harper. With the media explosion of the last decade, these owners depend on these 'face of the franchise' types to make America's pastime a profitable venture by selling tickets to sell parking passes to sell hot dogs and beer to support whatever high blood pressure medication they have majority stake in. Where is the springboard for these players, these essential names to get into the majors? More now than ever, Double-A and Single-A baseball, the levels technically below Triple-A, have the neophytes who dive directly into the majors. If you have the fielding, the bat speed, the hand-eye coordination, the 98-mph sinker that the name-makers at the top can put on the backs of \$149 jerseys, then into the deep end you go regardless of age. Why make the kids wade in the pool when they can already swim?

The proverbial shallow end, Triple-A baseball takes all and

judges none: the failed prospect, the speedster coming off his fourth Achilles surgery, the aging former name now forgotten, the pitcher whose fastball neither sinks nor swims. Perhaps the cruelest fate is for so-called "Quad-A" players: those whose skills excel in Triple-A baseball but fail to compete in the majors. "Baseball limbo," once said Andreas Hassman or Adrian Lamas or was it Marvin Aardema? The reasoning for these modern mercenaries playing baseball onehundred-fifty times a year is, at best, murky. Perhaps a series of injuries on their Major League parent club's roster create a crisis large enough to get a Triple-A lifer a weekend trip in a major city as a Cub or a Tiger. A more plausible theory is that Triple-A baseball exists to support the owners' outreach to the smaller cities in America. Placing Triple-A teams in Omaha, in Norfolk, in Round Rock is a symbolic gesture to these regions in exchange for their baseball fealty to each city's parent Major League team; "We here for you," as Tom Wambsgans once said. Each earning less than a AAA car mechanic, the Baby Boomers, the affiliate club of the Yankees, come to Angelos Memorial Field every week for nine straight months and play in the most thankless league of the most humdrum sport in the world... and in Scranton nonetheless.

Scranton loves baseball and likes the Baby Boomers. When their cousin's tickets to see the Phils fall through, and the Astros game isn't on cable, and their daughter is performing the national anthem with her school choir behind home plate, a Scrantonian will be aptly whelmed to attend a Baby Boomers home game. Through extensive promotional efforts, run the bases after the game or get a photo with mascot Baby Billy, Angelos Memorial Field fills up with a few hundred visitors a night. The sun beats down against alarmingly low SPFs slathered on damaged, middle-aged skin. Dandruff flies off the scalps of tanned kids racing in and out of vacant seats collecting foul balls. Korean war vet grandfathers scratch their dry skin into flakes on their scorecard while grumbling about Whitey Ford and Ted Williams. From a cliffside view, afforded to few, one can see it true: Scranton and its funnel cake fans.

Tickets are the way to get into Angelos Memorial Field but are also the guarantee that you can leave when the game is over; this is a luxury not afforded to all. At the outmost edges of Baby Boomers' personnel are the parking employees, a smattering of teens earning some play money during their senior year before heading off to Penn State Main on their parents' dollar. Closer to the park, guest attendants wish the visitors a safe drive home. The strain of standing all shift taxes their arthritic knees, burns the soles of their gout-ridden feet. From their vantage point by the park's main gateway, they can see the flagpole of Glenmaura Senior Living; they dismiss this vision in favor of the young couples carrying their sugar-crashed children out of the ballpark. Each of their grins, each goodbye to the pedestrians resonates the same message: "I was here." The innermost staff, the concessions workers and maintenance employees, are the dregs of Scranton. A votech dropout admonishes the drunkard PA announcer for spilling his Old Fashioned all over the new equipment. The laughing lawn care team tends to their grass and also waters the field. A disgraced former teacher fixes the grammar of the writings inside the women's stalls. There is no commonality among them other than being the chaff of the area that Angelos piles up at \$7.25 an hour: misfits for cash.

"You can't fire me, I quit!" said Annamarie L. May to her manager as they moved away from an overflowing deep fryer. "You tell me to cool this shit down, but no, no, not with coldest thing anyone would think of, headass. You're stupid! You're small! Don't call me for a," she said the following word with air quotes, "shift, when Angelina is high off her ass and you need a woman's touch, you bum." Annamarie swung her hips as she walked away, each step leaving footprints of hot oil on the concourse. Manager Rian Donahue looked off his chuckling coworkers with the quasi-stern look he learned before his dishonorable discharge. He peered up at the Chickie's & Pete's sign a good five feet above his head; he stood on his tippy toes then relaxed back down with a scoff. He texted Aidan MacGowan a simple message: "Need a new body."

Liam stretched out of the back of his mom's Honda Odyssey, a recipient of a 2023 IIHS Top Safety Pick+ nomination. He arched his stork-like neck above the gas fumes to breathe in his new environment: burnt canola oil, the industrial aroma of freshly opened bobble-head boxes, the stale air of a ballgame. He bent every limb he had down to the passenger seat window to wish his mother, tearyeyed behind the wheel, a goodbye. She exerted her small frame over to him to kiss the last of the baby fat on Liam's cheeks; her faint pink lips left a trace on his otherwise unblemished white skin. With one knee buckling and the other stiff as a board, Liam doddered his sixand-three-quarter foot self into Angelos Memorial Field.

Liam treaded his way through his first month of concessions work. His apparent fretfulness around the fry table, where the chicken and potatoes bobbed in a bath of fat, led the scrawny skyscraper to work as a cashier. The speed and slurring of Scranton dialectic created miscommunication on both ends for Liam, acting as translator between consumers and cooks. The elocution and syntax of proper English diligently taught by his mother over the years were irrelevant to Liam when the person in front of him wanted a "Roas'ed Salm'n San'wich." To circumvent the dialect, Liam created tools. Is the person between twenty-one and eighty-five? Beer. Below that? Sugar and salt. Above that? "The bathrooms are that way, sir." In the most demanding of these confrontations, usually a high school girl his age inquiring about where he goes to school or if he's from the area, Liam defaulted to an unconscious action: scratching at the letter "B." at the end of his nametag. The lavender lotions his mother applied at night reacted poorly to the making of Scranton delicacies behind him causing his first acne outbreak. The pimples now scattering around and on his lips deterred some of the extracurricular frivolity from girls, but not all of it. Seemingly as a countermeasure, Liam would pop his pustules into bloody, lumpy messes on his break. The prior interested parties dallied no longer than they needed to then, refilling their "Moun'n Dew" and leaving with little more than a cordial grin. Liam's mother bought ointments and wipes by the bulk in efforts to refurbish her son. Lying with his head on her lap as she applied BlemishBeGone, a product of Sofia Beauty a subsidiary of the Angelos Preferred Fund, to his face, Liam wiped his thumb slowly across his nametag feeling the spot where a "B." to used to be.

The Yankees, despite having since spent nearly three billion

dollars, have not gotten a ring since 2009; Annamarie L. May got a ring from her former manager Rian Donahue following a late-night session behind a Waffle House on Davis Street; tell me, who's doing better business? The betrothed couple trotted around behind the bar, placed sizzling onion rings on every workers' finger, and risked OSHA violations with each mock "Will you marry me?" The separation of work and love was not in the cards. As Annamarie showed her ring to her soon to be ex-ex-co-workers, manager Rian Donahue stepped up on top of a box of Baby Billy sippy cups to get an inventory of his staff and to select the candidate for re-location. After Rian saw his new cashier was still taller than his elevated self, the decision made itself.

Minor league baseball scouting is an attempt at alchemy. The very concept of scouting Triple-A specifically, that is to look at each Baby Boomer's performance and determine if it indicates any readiness for the Major Leagues, is futile; these are baseball eugenicists poking around the morgue. And yet, Angelos packs this department tight with his old Beta Theta Pi brothers and young econ majors whose parents he golfs with at Glenmaura. "Tight leashes, tight lips," once explained Angelos to his caddy, Kevin Bottle, as he used the ball washer. Liam's new job involved running coffee into and empty cups out of the Baby Boomers' conference room: twenty feet by eight, dimly lit, a table too big for it, and a white board stuffed in for good measure. Like clowns to their car, the Baby Boomers' scouts pile into the room every day, sit across from a man either forty years their elder or younger, and yell about how to predict the future of a sport predominantly loved by weirdos like them. Rarely if ever is there a disconnect between the two groups on loving or hating a player, but round-and-round wages the battle every day between the two factions on explaining why they feel the way they do: tastes great, less filling. The scouts of the older generation read the tea leaves of basic count stats to determine if a player is and will be valuable: Wins, Home Runs, Strikeouts. To accomplish the same prophesying goal, the newer generation turns to the tarot cards of sabermetric algorithms: Field Independent Pitching, Weighted Runs Created Plus, Launch

Angle. Each of these stats, be it intricate or simple, has its own acronym. Liam's ears became an echo chamber of SBs, BAbip, Ls, cWPA, AVG, rOBA.

Liam mentioned this abbreviated shorthand to his mom one night as she applied lotions to his broadening shoulders. Quickly, as if of the top of one's head, Liam's mom gave the input:

"That sounds just like your father." The maternal hands pinched on Liam's collarbone. She pursed her lips. She shut her eyes tight then released them slowly back to a relaxed state. After some breaths, she began the massage again with the lightest of touches. Liam remained stoic as he looked off into his thoughts; his hands fiddled with the big red apple his mother told him to eat before bed.

The sweat of the constant errand running for the country club oracles created a new set of acne that canvassed Liam's cheeks all the way to particularly festering ones near his ears. The men in Liam's life rattled away like they always have: ERA, ERA+, DJIA, ABs, RE24, NDX, SVs, OBP, S&P 500. After generations of discourse, there is a stat that almost always preludes success. All generations agree on its effectiveness. This is a stat that takes the totality of a young man's talent, effort, performance and condenses it into a singular number. If the number is higher, so too is that young man's chance to get his shot at the big time. The name-makers at the top seek it out ravenously; most casuals don't even know what it is or how to produce it. It is the precursor to profit: WAR.

Bob Bois needed a new pencil man. His previous pencil man, a young mother named Alana Cann, had asked him if he wanted to "hit this pen with him," an offering that both visibly confused and affronted the lead abiding citizen. Liam grimaced upon shaking his new boss' hand, caked in graphite and moles, though Liam's white knuckles after Bob let go gave a different rationale for the scowl. Bob Bois wore his decades, perhaps centuries, of baseball score keeping on his body: reading glasses he can flip shaded lenses over, navy rain attire head to foot, seven packs of Ranch sunflower seeds taped to the inside of his Hanes. Bob had survived Y2K, a brief stay in Jonestown, and possibly the Storming of the Bastille in the same apocalypticcore fashion. Bob brought his own official scorecard down to the front row for each Baby Boomers' home game, but always had another worker there to handle his pencils to initiate the scorekeeping process, in the same way Hollywood portrays our government's handling of nuclear launch codes: a two man burden. A pencil man is not a job one will find on Indeed but rather one of the many vocational niches that even the vertically gifted can crawl into. This is how it began for Liam and for Bob Bois during the summer of 2023.

In June, Liam idlily did his job: providing a pencil for Bob at the start of the game, taking it back at the end. Bob's low voice clogged with innumerable seeds mimicked the humming techniques Liam's anger counselor taught him to do in stressful situations. Though Bob spoke, it was often into that same void Liam blankly stared into; one wonders if this is where they first met. Liam had never played baseball. To the unaffiliated, baseball is boring. Even with pace of play changes, it will never have the speed of hockey or the spectacle of football or the slams of basketball that draws broad viewership. Even when a Joe Carter or Luis Gonzalez walkoff comes around, their watercolors get washed away by the tides of thousands of Pittsburgh Pirates games. Baseball is a marriage. The price is steep: games, seasons, years of unadulterated commitment to viewing drivel. Eventually, enough dog days watching sparks a familiarity, a steadiness; everyone else may be gone, but they're still here hitting into weak 6-4-3s and celebrating the anniversary of some catch only ever found in the archives of men like Bob Bois. They will frustrate you, knock you down, break your heart; they will come back next year to try it all over again. Baseball comes out to the world everyday yelling, "Here I am: flawed. Love me or don't." Liam had never witnessed such a marriage.

On July Fourth, Bob Bois burped out, "F1," as the Baby Boomers pitcher caught a lazy fly ball. Something about it, whether it brought Liam back to the racing his mom and him used to watch or the Hasbro game they used to play, turned Liam's eyes for the first time toward the spreadsheet Bob was diligently completing. Liam looked at the row designating the player, and the columns designating the inning, and finally to each individual square correlating every

#### 14 Billy Bottle and the Baby Boomers

at-bat of a baseball game. He waited until the same play, a pop-out to the pitcher, occurred again three days later; upon seeing Bob write down "F1" in the correct square, Liam chuckled. Perhaps Bob noticed; he didn't respond to the boy an indefinite amount his younger, but he did change the writing on his scorecard: bigger, bolder.

Through July, Liam learned from a master. First were the fundamentals. Each fielder has a number: from the pitcher at "1" to the right-fielder at "9". Each outcome has an acronym: from the common "F" to the humiliating "E." These are your tools to record the history of countless, meaningless ballgames. Bob Bois' style was dot-centric, one for every pitch of the ball game. He wrote his letters and numbers with fine strokes. Like most, he completed the basepath journey of each runner in lines and diamonds. The apprentice watched, number two at the ready, and steadied his control of the moving landscape in front of him. On August 1st, upon finding an extra scorecard in his usual seat, Liam began his artistic voyage. He opted to forgo the speck riddled ways of Bob, deciding instead to tally the number of pitches per at-bat in the top right corner. He too used fine strokes as Bob was now the second person in Liam's life to show the benefits of such a practice. Contrary to Bob, and most every other scorer Bob'd ever met, Liam drew the baserunners journey not in sharp lines and pointed diamonds, but in semi-circles and revolutions. For these August nights out of time, the impressionists painted the scenes of games that otherwise would never have been captured.

The greasy seeds and the pencil soot would cover Liam's hands which wiped away the forehead sweat of steamy Scranton sunsets. The acne grew like hives, with a pronounced zit centralizing on Liam's brow.

An overcast drifted over Scranton on September 1st.

"I knew your old man," said Bob Bois. Liam swallowed the thirteen seeds he'd been chomping on before first pitch. Bob continued writing down the starting line-ups for each team on his scorecard. "He'd be around here, with Mr. Angelos and the press, answering questions and all that." Bob stretched his cramping left hand. "He was well to do, y'know." Liam's irritated pustules seemed flowery pink compared to the rose red flush of the rest of his skin. Bob stared at the steep cliffside, or at the American flag, or at the movie theater above and said, "I know how hard it must be on you." Liam wore the face of a young man tasked with making bubbles not pop for too long. "At first, I didn't recognize it... your nameta-"

"Please," said Liam curtly. He looked away then pursed his lips then scoffed.

Bob looked at mascot Baby Billy, dancing on the dugout overhang. Its head is too big to exist; its diaper is perpetually waterlogged; its cartoonish bottle is hollow.

Bob looked to the placard running across that very dugout overhang reading 'Angelos Memorial Field.' He then looked to his left and caught a dual vision: in the background, Salvatore Amedeo Angelos in his press box laughing, sharing a drink with Ciaran Branagh, and in the foreground, Liam, humming like a dragonfly, with head on lap and fingers on face. Bob looked back to his scorecard but turned abruptly away when his eye caught sight of the previous night's game, riddled with dots. He looked up just as the game started.

Pitch one: ball, just outside.

"Liam... sometimes a... sometimes a guy oversteps his bounds. I know nothing about nothing and baseball, and-"

Pitch two: ball, way up.

"Well. Well, when it all... well. Well, look at this guy here," said Bob as Liam continued to hunch, but discontinued his humming. Batter Yoenis Saldana returned to the batter's box after calling for time to go put more pine tar on his bat. "He's here in Scranton trying to make the Yankees; may as well be a woman trying to make partner with Angelos, for fuck's sake-"

Pitch three: ball, wild pitch. Catcher Jamichael Thomas trotted out to pitcher Brayan Savarino for a long visit to calm the nerves of performing in-front of six hundred people.

Bob Bois' obituary, listed on the back of the 'Sports' page of *The Times Tribune* for Sunday, November 2nd, 2025, will not have a birth date. There will be no progeny listed, no well wishes. Salvadore Amedeo Angelos will have commissioned Ciaran Branagh to write the obituary in exchange for Branagh's losing a coin flip bet where

he stood to gain nothing by winning. Branagh, drunk on mojitos served by bartender Anna L. Donahue in the Angelos Memorial Field luxury suite, will email, minutes before the deadline, the following brief, errored obituary: "Bob Bois was a loyal worker to Mr. Salvatore Amedeo Angelos and his endeavors in the sport he loves. Will he be missed." *The Times Tribune,* after months of systematic layoffs, will have no editor competent enough to catch the disgrace. It will be published.

Bob Bois stared at umpire Alexander Callahan, dressed headto-toe in black walk out to end the two Baby Boomers' conversation at the mound. "No one will remember me," said Bob, though his dry inflection created some gray as to if it were directly addressed to anybody.

Baby Billy amused the sparse crowd during the delay by doing the limbo with its bottle.

Bob stared into his pile of sunflower seed shells, not only the ones of today but the dried ones of yesteryear. Bob erased the gray and stated, "No one will remember you either, Liam."

A breeze particular to baseball games, of men and their rubber and of dirt then of grass, passed through the first row of Angelos Memorial Field.

Bob looked to Liam, already back upright. The zit square on his forehead shone red: pinched, abused, bleeding, fatigued, pulsating. Though not a crystalline cerulean as Baby Billy's are, Liam's bluegrays stared into Bob Bois. A cleansing that did not need the overcast to break out into a downpour or even a subsequent conversation seemed to wash over the young man and the man out of time.

Pitch four: ball, not even close.

Bob looked down at his pencil tip: broken. Liam handed Bob his spare. The history chronicling between the old generation and the new began again as both Liam and Bob went to their scorecard. Watching batter Yoenis Saldana walk over to first, the two men chronicled parallel boxes with the same signature: "BB."

## Summer Harvest

Skye Rutkowski

Rotted, infested, spindly hands reach, spine stretched, searching for the blessed fruit.

Hands and lips searching, I grab and gnaw– unaware and unconcerned with what enters my mouth.

Curiosity and hunger burn; perhaps this can satisfy my growing need to devour.

Swollen neck sticky with the juice of decaying fruit I secede and rot with the rest.

## A Slit in my Book

Janvi Patel

When I left the ink running, *It stayed*, Cried for hours Before it dried itself out. *I hadn't asked for it to bleed*. Page by page, a slow fade out. A last run through and it said it all. Dear Ink,.. Should've stayed a while long.



Marjorie Glacier - Cayman Webber

# Preparatory Course for the Unemancipated (Revised Syllabus)

Lauren Kraemer

## <u>Week 1</u> Topic: Introduction to Discontent

**Tuesday, Dec. 27:** Unwrap the rest of your toys; aren't you too old for those?; scatter paper to insulate the cold floor; talk about "Working Through It"; that's all you hear through the pillow pressed up to your ears; hug Dad before he's gone.

Homework: Home...works? It used to.

Thursday, Dec. 29: Fight of the Day; narrative vs narrative; fear and anxiety; it hurts to listen.

Homework: Press your ear against the door.

## <u>Week 2</u> Topic: Denial Continued – Eternal Sit-In

**Tuesday, Mar. 2:** Cut the cake before mom stops singing; watch him wish on his candles then unfold the futon; Happy Birthday, Dad.

**Thursday, Apr. 17:** "Escape to the Sunshine State," pay attention to details that may indicate an unreliable narrator; ignore those details.

#### Major Assignments: Watch out for gators.

## <u>Week 3</u> Topic: Sudden Brevity

**Tuesday, May. 9:** "Cento Between the Ending and the End," do not annotate, just take it in; play cards in the dining room; dad says peanut butter, call him next time; watch the two of them laugh.

Homework: Try noise-canceling headphones while they watch *Fight Club* for the millionth time before dividing themselves by her floor and his ceiling.

**Thursday, May. 15:** Unzip that sweatshirt he gave you to shield you from the chill, it's his favorite; watch him hug your mother for the first time in a while and the last time ever; say goodbye, before your sobbing inhibits it; let him hand you back the sweatshirt and hold onto his arm as he walks out the door.

#### Major Assignments: Persuasive essay due last December.

#### belladonna

Megan Zabrouski

torn and tattered by thorns, i hold onto my dress, once white, now stained by mud and blood. i thank the silk fabric that still shields my shoulders from the scorching sun.

i stumble through the brush and enter an open field, heading towards a woman haloed by light: my mother. she smiles with open arms and i cry, *i am coming* 

the weeds tangle my ankles and drag me to the earth. it became sacred when i grew a garden with my makers, full of carrots, cabbage, and love. they have long since withered.

my stomach growls as i crawl to her. in the mix of red, brown, and green, i find blue berries scattered along the pathway.

a man now stands beside her, holding her wrist. he tells me to eat the berries, *it will* grant me serenity. i obey

and eat without hesitation, knowing they are *belladonna* and that it's too late to save her.

## dreaming through tokyo skies

- Lyrics from a Phoebe Bridgers song titled 'Kyoto"

Lauren Kraemer

the sky renounces its blues, crying out in the sepia tones of gansai paintings that cover your walls and take you far away from me.

and then you're thirteen hours ahead, or maybe i'm thirteen hours behind. but i still text thirteen hours before you see it and answer me in your mind.

at least that's what i tell myself. i hope you construct such a thoughtful, witty response, so complex that you convince yourself you sent it, you must have.

i hope you've drafted texts in your notes app of words you'd like to say to me, but couldn't before they were perfect, or before you were ready.

just as i write poetry for you in my notes app, until mt. fuji casts you in gold shadow.



The Rarest Form of Beauty - Cecilia Russell

## Heed a Man's Location

Jill Tremblay

If only his nosebleeds were the product of a swift punch to the face. If only his cracked knuckles were a result of a reciprocated blow.

Merely a product of his mother's house, his body had grown accustomed to a tundra. She refused to turn on the heat unless the temperature dropped below 30 degrees, and he had a fifteen-minute walk home from the bus stop every day after school. Whenever he entered the dry, heated air of his high school, his sinuses never stood a chance.

The nosebleeds were tedious—an inconvenience at most, really. Rolling up a piece of toilet paper—sometimes a tissue, but only if it was on his school's dollar—and stuffing it up the unfavorable nostril was enough of a solution. The resulting white noise from his subsequent heavy mouth breathing, not unlike a TV with no signal, was an added bonus for the nights his mom was working late, and he couldn't bare the total silence of an empty house all to himself. At most, his nosebleeds provided companionship. At least, they were a reminder that his nose was on his face.

It was the cracked knuckles that were the real pain. His mom constantly tried to get him to moisturize, but there was something too effeminate to him about using his mother's pink and flowery moisturizer. His mom characterized this towards the "gender purgatory" he was in, a phrase she would throw around much to his dismay. "Too manly to moisturize, but not manly enough to handle the pain of some dry skin," she would say whenever he complained about the house being too cold. His perpetual purgatory: he was weak, he couldn't handle the cold, and he couldn't handle a challenge to his masculinity. He did not need to ask his mother which gender she associated with heaven and hell, the ones that bracketed this "gender purgatory" she formulated from stereotypes that he detested but nevertheless adhered to. It was pretty evident to him which was which.

Yet, as he is walking home from the bus stop today, he thinks to himself that the weather is a worthy adversary. It's 6:00 PM in the middle of winter, so it might as well be 3:00 AM. No one else is outside, not even to walk their dogs. No one to pass him by, to do a double-take when they notice the bloody tissue lodged up his nose the left nostril, specifically. And even if someone did, they might be weirded out, but they probably wouldn't ask him about it. The only person weirder than the one who walks out in public with a tissue up their nose is the person who asks them what happened.

Hypothetically, if someone did ask him what happened, he could easily tell them he got into a fight. He could pull his hands out of his pockets and show off his bloody knuckles to prove it. A fight with the weather, a fight with nature, a fight with God, a fight with indoor heating systems. All worthy adversaries.

He's been walking for just about seven minutes when the thoughts occur to him, as they usually do, in a series of potentialities. He pictures himself slipping on the ice and breaking his wrist. He would have to get up, and walk the rest of the way home in what he imagines would be excruciating pain, then call an ambulance once he finally gets home.

Alternatively, he could slip on the ice, and fall backwards and break his back. Depending on the severity, he might have to stay down and scream for help. A worsening case but still preferable to the final boss: slipping on the ice, falling backwards, and hitting his head on the pavement. In that case, he could be knocked unconscious. How long would it take for someone to find him? Would it take until his mom comes home from work to an empty house for her to walk his usual route? When she did find him, would he be bleeding? Would he need surgery? How much blood would he have lost in total if he had a cut on his head along with his aforementioned nosebleeds and cracked knuckles? Would he survive?

Steadily walking, albeit at a slower pace now, he pulls the bloody tissue out of his nostril. If he drops dead right in this moment, he does not want to be found down on the pavement with a tissue up his nose. He imagines it might confuse the paramedics. Better for them to attribute any blood on his face to his untimely demise.

He makes it home in one piece with minimal blood loss, only a little getting on the cuff of his sleeve when he absentmindedly rubs his nose before retrieving the keys in his pocket. The first thing he does upon entering the empty house is beeline for the kitchen, where he sets a pot of water on the stove to boil. He has taken to prepping dinners that can also serve as a furnace.

Anticipating that it will take a couple of minutes for the pot to boil, he runs to the bathroom to administer some saline spray up his nose. He glimpses at himself in the mirror while doing this, thinking about how a black eye would accompany a bloody nose and cracked knuckles so well. *If only someone would punch him*.

He fantasizes about a punch doing wonders for his social life. People *might* come up to him and ask him what happened, or if he was in pain. He would not be so noble as to say it did not hurt. But, he would find the middle ground. He would indifferently respond, "Meh." Maybe he would even add a shrug. He could say, "I've felt worse before."

He changes out of his school uniform, electing a black sweatshirt as a precaution to anymore bloodstains, before returning to the kitchen. The water, now boiling, sufficiently warms up the room. He stands close to the stove and puts his hands directly over the steam. When he hears the front door open, he instinctively pulls his hands away, anticipating the comment his mom would make if she walked in and saw him resorting to medieval warming methods as opposed to using her rose-scented hand lotion. But the steam provides such a warmth, he decides to keep his hands in place and instead tries to formulate a quick rebuttal—something about hell being hot—for when his mother walks in.

Only after a minute or two passes without his mother coming into the kitchen does he begin questioning why she would be home so early from work; normally she would not be home for a couple more hours. Potentially: there is an intruder in the home right now. There is someone here to kill him. There is a ghost in the house. There is a demon in the house, and it is going to possess him to teach him a lesson about speaking too flippantly about hell. Does he know any self-defense techniques? Could he perform an exorcism on himself?

He quietly exits the kitchen, leaving the stove on and the water boiling. This being his equivalent to the moment in movies when the man of the house grabs a baseball bat when there's possibly a break-in: he would have to lure the potential invader into the kitchen, but when they got there, he would confront them with his weapon of choice. Surely scalding hot water could inflict some serious burns.

Unfortunately, this is as much as he remembers when he wakes up in the hospital room, his nose hurting more than his hands. He never realized how off-kilter he felt from having, for so long, only one nostril bleeding at a time. Now, with both his nostrils crimson rivers, he felt perfectly in balance.

A robber had targeted their house on the presuption it was empty since there was no car in the driveway. They assume he had confronted the robber in his mother's room, because a good portion of her jewelry had been taken. They surmise that the robber spotted him, punched him with a force that pushed him backwards, such that he hit his head on the doorframe and was knocked out. The robber must have stepped right over his body and walked out the front door.

His boiling pot of water, overflowing and fueling an already high flame, set off the fire alarm and alerted the next-door neighbor. By the time the ambulance arrived, he had only been unconscious for around 45 minutes, indicative of a moderate brain injury. Surgery will not be necessary; he just needs to remain overnight for observation.

As his mother continuously weeps at his bedside, she rarely speaks unless it is to tell off the doctors. She reminds them he does not have amnesia just because he does not respond when they call out the name they see on the files. She mutters under her breath about them being the ones with the brain injury. He laughs, winces, cries. They give him more morphine.

Local news reporters stand outside of his room, asking: "Where's the robber now?" "Is your home next?" "What can *you* do differently?"

He feels like all his questions have been answered.

## Redacted: Kitchen, 2022

Bethany Belkowski

[Kitchen chair scrapes across war-torn floor. Body thrown from a blast so hot and so sweet. Your pupils dilate at the thought of tying me down, tying me up—bagged, gagged—and fingering the pulse. Not quite dead. Cut close and tear near, my love. Forked tongue picks at the pieces, licks clean the bruised skin kneaded so raw, and rips ripe nails from bloodied beds. This is all we know. *Hit me, fucking hit me.* Just do it once so we can both know how good it'll feel. Tell me, my dear, when.]



Spiderweb - Cayman Webber

#### The Word

Bethany Belkowski

Unfaithful eyes look for you in crumbs of men who fill my lips with lily-tipped lies. Lay them flat on my bed, and furnish for me a tomb. A mouth, a wilted well, laid without will, eroded by tongues that scrape clean the flesh -eating stones of this soured sarcophagus. Gag hard on-their silver spoonstaste the rust well-water leaves between loose teeth. A gap filled, then filed-defiled-phile my love away, my dear, whatever their loose names, I know not how to spell. Mistake each for you, my eyes, blinking fast in the dark to see *what's* really there. My hands, a pair of believers, tracing the bodies of prophets, who promise resurrection. Empty like the womb that gives birth in beauty, I speak your name into the mouths of those where you remain a fleeting moment, spectacularly impermanent. Truth lies at the bottom of the well: they should never have stopped drawing Eve and the serpent wound together, rendered one and the same.

32 The Word

## Nail Salon Scream of Consciousness

#### Audrey Phillips

Silent war waged between the manicurist and my hands. My deformed pinkies, middle fingers stiff. She picked off my cuticles just sharply enough that I sensed her disdain for me. I only get my nails done so I don't rip my skin off, I want to tell her. I stay quiet. I want to tell her I am nothing like Lisa who sits next to me. I *am* like Lisa, except maybe Lisa doesn't feel existential guilt about the nail salon. I would rather feel guilt than not. What is the point of anything if you don't regret it on some level? Every choice you make prevents a different choice from being made. She hands me the booklet.

"72 please." She rips off the old tips. Grabs the purple.

Nail salons, god, you undeniably oppress the people painting your nails. Her hands blistered from the tools she uses all day. A twenty year immigrant with the hands of a forty year old. She breathes in the powder over and over, sits next to the UV radiation for hours. I noticed the weird freckle on my middle finger again during the manicure. I tried to pick it off a month ago. I wondered if I got skin cancer on my middle finger would they have to chop it (the whole finger) off? I missed my dermatologist appointment a year ago; now I have lots of strange freckles. I don't think I can go back. My hands are longer, larger, than the hands of most of the men I've dated. They make me feel ugly? Fat? Fat maybe. Ugly definitely. I like my wrists, they don't match my hands. Feels so trivial to care about my ugly hands. She rips my skin off. I wince. Karmic balance restored?

"Sorry."

I mumble in reply. She speaks to the woman next to her in Mandarin. I wonder if they think I'm ugly and my hands are hard to

work with. I'm sorry, I want to say. I hate manicures, even though I love them on some level. I think if you're aware enough, you love and hate almost everything. I drank too much coffee, my hand shakes as she tries to steady it. I hate when my body ignores my mind. I want to say, sorry for my demand, which creates your job, which will lead to a lifetime of physical ailments and deformities, I don't deserve your forgiveness. I say sorry when she fails to straighten my middle fingers, but my apology is not for my finger. I may have early onset arthritis. They swell up sometimes, look fatter than usual. My mother gave me money to get my nails done today. I almost cried and threw up in the car because of it. To be loved is so painful. Maybe my vomit would have tasted of forgiveness.

She adds a second coat.

My mother gave me money, I accepted. I hate money from my parents. I am 20, unemployed for the first time in five years. My self worth comes from my ability to provide for myself and those I love. My mother palmed me cash like a spoiled trust fund baby. I hate when my mother gives me money because there was a time when she couldn't. There was a time when it felt like my fault for wanting money. I remember when my dad lost his job. I went to hug him when he got home from work, he didn't pick me up and spin me around the way he usually did. He turned to my mom while I stood at his feet. They told me to leave while they had an adult conversation. I walked a few feet away and pretended to play with my fairy toys. You never forget the first time you realize: having money makes life easy, and not having money is possibly the hardest thing in the world.

She pushes my hand under the light. I worry about the freckle. We have achieved a rhythm. My achy fingers no longer slow us. She sprays both my fingers, dabs them with a paper towel.

I feel sick to my stomach. I hope I avoid my ex-boyfriend when I leave. He lives down the road from the salon. He's probably 27 now. 20 and 27 seems worse than the difference between 18 and 25. I don't think I would like him now. I don't know if I like men now. I know myself better though, and I never felt like myself around him. God, a lot has changed in the past two years.

"Thank you."

# Untitled

Janvi Patel

The night melts Like hot wax on my body And I can't move As it creeps up on me

I hush as it comes near So I can't yell or shout or hear Myself telling me how much I hate The night that won't let me escape.
### Sunk

Katie Till

Triple-pointed sea moves in and out of states of matter. At turns: a shoving shoulder on the hull here, seething wrath of bubbles on the deck there, salty baited breath of death as the keel tastes freedom for the first time.

When it crashes back down to the surface, your hair stays standing straight up, and you know that unforgiving, up-there going electrons will wipe the I from your eye.

With the surge of electricity, you lunge starboard and meet: a squall bound up in flesh, a churn of limbs and lips, *As two spent swimmers, that do cling together/ And choke their art* 

Crack! Midship splits. You can't float and she won't leave you, so you descend: treasure wrecked and paradise lost. One thrashes. The other knows.

Silent, dark rest follows the brief struggle and you settle: salt to the sea, silt and debris. Something swishing nibbles on your violent wrack of bones.

Become fish vittles and flotsam, finally. No sunlight down there, just deep-sea luminescence. The warmest thing for many miles is a sulfurous vent. So it goes.

## Eight in the Car to Skiing

Anastasia Balis

We were puttering down The endless road

My nostrils were filled with freshly subpar bean soup, I didn't know what was happening.

My breath paused. My mouth sticky.

My head was paper mache. Not connected to anything, not a throat, not a lung, not a noise.

My jaw strained as my fingers stabbed into my mouth trying to remove the bay leaf.

My other hand hit my chest, a perverted Heimlich.

I looked around with bulging eyes. A driver and a passenger talking to each other. The talking subsides but you only look forward. Why don't you look back?

I was in the middle of you with AirPods. Always looking away, you can't stand to talk with me? Why do you ignore me? And with a strained turn I saw the three of you, doing nothing in the back seat, not sleeping,

but not seeing me. Why didn't you see me?

It was so quiet, I remember. Before, my spoon had been scraping soup.

Now, I couldn't make a noise.

I wanted you to kill me.

I wanted my blood on your hands,

I wanted to have you hate yourselves in my honor.

They'll open the door for skiing, say *aren't you coming?* You'll laugh because I'm asleep; then you'll realize I'm not breathing. You'll panic. *How could we not notice!?* 

The adults would lose their jobs and my friends–no– my peers will carry it with you your whole lives. It would be the most I would ever mean to you.

Stop- don't be stupid, I thought. That won't happen. And that's just mean. You'll survive this.

Waving my hands in people's faces was rude and humiliating and I thought of the disgust on your faces if you had to stop the car to fun do the Heimlich.

They'll hate me if I make them save me.

But they'll hate me if I don't. I could hear them asking, well why didn't you ask for help? Why don't I? I'm in the middle of you. I am in a corner.

I hit the back of my seat. Once. Twice. Nobody flinched. The silenced burned my ears, it seemed like you were in conspiracy, and

> as I clawed at my neck and my throat and tried my best to live all I wanted was for someone to see me.

*Fine*. My faith wobbled, my head dizzy, maybe I wouldn't make it.

Yet, I got my finger back and I moved the bay leaf and I was human. And the silence subsided to stillness but nobody noticed my breath returning,

nobody turned and I twisted up my thermos and stared with a hungry and nauseous body.

## A Prayer to the Witty Gods

Patrick DelBalso

You judge all of us Yet how can we trust you're right when you zap those who

## Please Don't Think He's A Christ Figure

Bethany Belkowski

Ex boyfriend breaks no contact, calls to tell me he's seen his dead dad hobbling around our hometown. Weak soles striking in the streets with homemade cane, but it holds steady instead the thinning, tragic shape of our high school theology teacher. We want to see a sign so we seek and find high school's Facebook. Live, wilted man. Who tells students my God is stronger if he knows he can't prove it? The malignant man, who once told me to write, will be ashamed to read my words, consolation offered at the end of a poorly constructed comment. This is it, ex says, I guess growing up is learning to watch people die through Facebook posts.

### did you hear about the girl who lives in delusion?

- Lyrics from a Taylor Swift song titled "right where you left me"

Lauren Kraemer

i like to imagine you text your friends about me, that i occupy the minds of the girls who occupy mine, that they root for us, that they fear me.

#### i like to think you think about me

i imagine the conversations you have. do details spill from the corners of your mouth, dribbling down your chin like the wine from my cup on those nights i text you i miss you?

#### i like to think you talk about me

are you delicate, calculating? do you choose each word carefully, for a lack of precision could reveal something about you that you don't want others to know, even the friends whose calls spring you from my couch?

#### i like to think you're like me

we are the same person after all, making a mess of our thoughts but cleaning them up before anyone gets the chance to see them, dust collecting on the words we couldn't fix and left in corners of rooms no one else can unlock.

i like to think you like me

even though the spaces between your words said otherwise, and so did the words between your spaces. and apologies never hurt so much, so we swore to never speak of it again.

i think you like me

## Saturday Visits

#### Grace Stallman

[This is a short scene excerpt from a longer manuscript.]

For a ward whose sole job was trying to make people want to live, it was awfully...depressing. The psychiatric floor looked the same as any other part of the hospital. That is to say, it looked like something out of a nightmare. Fluorescent lights blared down on Josephine like God himself was pointing at her and judging from the heavens. Her sneakers squeaked against the freshly varnished linoleum floor as she made her way to check-in at the nurse's station.

For the past few weeks, this had been her routine.

Go to school. Make it through the day on hands and knees. Go to bed. Repeat. Monday through Friday.

Saturdays, though. Saturdays had their own routine.

Visiting hours at Denham General Hospital were every day from 2-4 p.m., but this floor had different rules. It was a miracle she even got to visit, honestly, but the attending psychiatrist gave her special access. It helped, he said, for Archie to have something to look forward to. Especially in this beige-tinted twilight zone. For both of them, really.

"Hey sweetie," the nurse on duty greeted Jo when she went to sign the visitor book and get her sticker.

"Hi Joan," Jo replied, not really in the mood for conversation. This week had drained her. After getting coffee with Luc, she lay awake most of the night going over every single word she said, reversing and replaying the entire conversation loop after loop until she didn't recognize the words as words anymore.

But it was either spiral herself into an existential crisis or open her side table drawer and engage in a very different kind of spiral, so she took a win wherever she could find one. Eventually she passed out from pure exhaustion, but not before propelling herself far enough that she felt sick to her stomach over the way she somehow managed to completely screw up everything she has ever done, ever. But what else was new?

"How's school going?" Joan was a sweet lady, with bright red and blonde striped hair, aggressive blush, and a smile that felt like a warm hug. Seeing her every Saturday before seeing him made it that much easier to actually make it into the room.

"Oh, you know. It's going," Jo shrugged.

"Yeah, I'm sure. You can head on in, hon. Oh," Joan stopped Jo, "and will you tell Archer he owes me a rematch when I'm on break!"

"I told you not to play him in chess," Jo sighed, "he's ruth-less."

Joan waved her off. "Yeah, yeah. I know, but it was just too tempting. He's very persuasive."

"Okay Joan," Jo smirked, walking backwards toward room 210. "I'll let him know."

The private room was engulfed in flowers and cards, all displayed neatly over every available surface, tables and windowsills, even empty meal trays. Most people kept their "get well soon" cards up because they loved them. They were grateful that someone in their lives had thought of them and made the effort to go out and buy a card then write a sweet note in it before dropping it off or mailing it.

Archie's cards were displayed for...different reasons. These cards, though only a select few knew this, were up out of pure spite. They were up as a reminder—a reminder that just because you fail in your first attempt, that doesn't mean you can't get revenge in other ways. They are an incentive, and the fire of hatred inside Jo burns brighter every time she sees them.

The ones from the teachers who stood by and never reported the cruelness they witnessed.

The ones from classmates who laughed and upvoted and commented on—and likely posted—the *BabbleBox* chat space posts.

The ones who threw out slurs like they were nothing.

Each and every signature just furthered his resolve, just as they did hers.

Jo's eyes made their way to the bed before practically bulging out of their sockets. "Jesus! You look like Doc Ock! What the hell happened?"

"Nice to see you too, Phi," Archie laughed. "Oh, you know. Wanted to see what would happen if I swallowed another bottle of pills while I was still connected to the beepy machine." He paused while Jo pulled over a chair from the corner. "For science, of course."

"Not funny."

"It's just my weekly everything check," Arch shrugged—or tried to. "It goes by quicker if they hook me up all at once."

"...I see. Anyway, heard you crushed Joan's hopes and dreams," Jo changed the subject. Acknowledging the life-support-shaped elephant in the room made her uncomfortable.

"Like taking candy from a baby," he quipped.

"Yeah," Jo grinned. "Well, she wants a rematch. And she's pretty scary when she's determined."

Archie sighed. "Don't I know it." The beeping stopped almost all at once as machine after machine finished each of their tests. They waited in comfortable silence for the on-duty nurse to come in and unplug Archie. At least then he could actually sit up and talk to Jo.

Kris, as it turns out, was the nurse on-duty, which meant disconnecting Arch felt like pulling teeth. Jo didn't believe it was possible for a human's default speed to be turtle until she met Kris. The nurse also, nice as Jo assumed she was, hated any sort of conversation unless it was just *Are you feeling any pain, Archer?* or *Your vitals look great, kid.* 

Jo waited until Archie was cleared and the nurse was gone before plopping the comic book she'd bought him on his legs. "They came out with a new edition. And I managed to sneak these in," she finished before fishing a pack of Whoppers out of her sweater pocket. She thought Whoppers belonged deep in the grimy corners of an industrial trash bin, but for some reason, Archie liked them, so she stayed stocked.

"You spoil me," he beamed.

"Yeah, well, you didn't leave me much choice," Jo replies dryly.

"Fair." He popped a sad excuse for chocolate in his mouth. "Mhm."

Archie began flipping mindlessly through his new Umbrella Academy volume. "How's purgatory?"

"School?" Jo gifted him with a deadpan stare. "Take a wild guess."

"Can't be worse than the psych ward."

"I beg to differ. At least you've got hot nurses," she hummed.

Archie made an indignant noise. "You've got options! What about Noah? Sure, he doesn't have much going for him up top, but he could be worse."

"Are we talking about the Noah who's a whopping 5'5" and has yet to discover deodorant in his old age."

"And what a short king he is."

She rolled her eyes. "I could literally step on him. Look," Jo started, and Archie sighed, "you know as well as I do that Denham doesn't exactly breed 'full packages.""

"What about me?"

Jo just gestured vaguely around them. "Need I remind you of your current situation?"

Archie made an awfully vulgar gesture involving one finger without looking up from his comic. She propped her legs over his and sighed. When he was finished combing through, he nestled himself into the bed and adjusted so he was lying on his side, facing Jo and the window that looked out over the courtyard.

"All right," he started. "Hit me-"

"Don't have to tell me twice."

"----with the updates. Jesus."

"Not much, honestly," Jo lied.

Archie let out a sharp laugh. "I 100% do not believe you for

one second," he smirked.

"Tough shit," Jo snarked.

Archie paused to agitatedly readjust his arm so the IV that had never left the crook of his elbow wasn't poking him in an odd way. Four weeks of stabbing and prodding only served to feed Archie's depression until it was almost all-consuming, although he hid it expertly. Reaching the point where life no longer seems livable and then waking up trapped like an animal in a testing facility with 24-hour observation and no control over your own well-being was incredibly dehumanizing for him, as it would be for anyone, even if it was necessary. Cabin fever was a phenomenon for a reason.

Archie never liked to complain. He hid things almost as well as Jo did from every person in his life; well, almost every person.

She had a sixth sense for him, as he had for her, and no matter how Archie tried to escape her care, he failed every time. You would think he would remember that...that day. That he couldn't trick her like he tricked everyone else, that she knew every weak spot in his armor, every loose brick in his wall.

Arch failed that day, and at the time Jo hadn't felt a lick of remorse for the fact that she was the sole reason for his failure. She should still feel that way, and a major part of her believed—knew that she did; but that other part, tiny and full of haunted whispers, felt his pain. Regretted that Connor had gotten there when he did and not five minutes later. Understood his wish to succeed.

Still Jo was selfish when it came to Archie. She was selfish and mean and she needed him. She needed him to stay, to be there for her and her fucked up mind in this fucked up town she'd be stuck in for the rest of her life.

It didn't matter to her that that those little voices were slowly growing in volume the more she found herself relating to Archie's logic.

"There's something you're not telling me, Josephine." He eyed her up and down like if he stared long enough, he might find a way to see through her skin, past her skull, and into her mind.

"Alexa and Molly are still on the outs? Freddie got caught

smoking in the bathroom because he forgot to open the window and literally hot boxed the place? The football team won again? *Woohoo!*"

"While those are all extremely enticing, I'm thinking about something else..." His words were purposely drawn out, infuriatingly so. "A *little birdy* told me there's a new kid at school." He gifted Jo with a pointed look, one that said *I know you're holding this back for a reason you little shit*.

But Archie would have to pry any information out of her cold, dead hands before she allowed any of her stupid thoughts to see the light of day. "Oh, right."

"Oh, right," he mocked in a way that absolutely did not sound even close to her voice. "Hop off it. Said *little birdy* also told me that this mysterious newcomer was asking about you."

Jo tried desperately to ignore the flutter that warmed her heart at the thought of Luc asking about her. It could only lead to bad things, very, very bad things. Things she couldn't afford to have to deal with at the moment. "*Connor*," she said instead, "Should learn to keep his mouth shut." Because obviously it was Connor. No one else went behind her back to update Archie on her life, just like she went behind Connor's back to update Archie on his.

Plus, he was the starting pitcher on Denham's baseball team, and Luc had mentioned more than once in their texts that he was looking to join the team if they'd accept him, so of course she had directed him to the Golden Boy. "It's not a big deal," she insisted, even though every part of her screamed that it was, in fact, a really big freaking deal.

A smile was very clearly fighting its way onto Archie's face, although he was working to smother it. "Con's just looking out for you. And clearly *you* weren't going to tell me, so..."

"Stop making it sound like I was hiding a dirty secret. I was going to tell you, eventually, it wasn't exactly a pressing matter," she lied.

"Mhm, right. You want to tell me why—" Archie waved his hand around, a question in his eyes.

"Luc," Jo filled the silence.

"Luc," he continued, "was asking Connor about you? Often?

As in, like, on multiple different occasions."

A burning sensation slowly crept its way up Jo's neck and into her cheeks, leaving a sting that she accepted happily because the pain reminded her of how stupid she was acting. That didn't mean, however, that she didn't turn her head quickly to feign looking at the window before Archie noticed the pink flushing her skin. "I mean, we're friends," she reasoned. "Lia and I met him on his first day because he's in our homeroom."

"Amelia hasn't pounced yet?"

"That's not fair!" Jo argued. Arch had never been entirely fond of Lia, but Jo couldn't imagine her life without her, and he cared about Jo's feelings more than anything, so he usually bit his tongue when the topic of Lia arose in conversation.

He sputtered, "I didn't even say anything mean!"

"I could hear your brain and it says otherwise."

"That's creepy." His hands lifted in surrender. "Peace, my friend."

You need to unplug his monitors and press the emergency button, her intrusive thoughts whispered. If you don't touch five cards before you leave, Archie will try to kill himself again and it'll be all your fault.

Thumb, pointer, thumb, middle, thumb, ring, thumb, pinky.

Jo tried to soothe herself by repeating compulsions. There was no way to shut off her brain, no matter how hard she tried. The only time Jo knew any sort of peace was when her head was on the pillow and her consciousness was locked behind the heavy door of sleep where no one had the key, not even the voices.

She told him everything, save the whole desk fiasco; Jo didn't want to worry Archie with how much his absence really affected her.

She told him how she and Luc had been texting for a few weeks and about the café. She told him how Larsson's class was that much more bearable now that the black-haired boy sat in front of her. She left out the good morning texts and her meeting his mom. How sometimes, when she was desperate enough to allow her delusions to take over, sometimes she could have sworn she felt Luc staring at her when she wasn't looking. Yet, however she might think otherwise, Jo wasn't so completely delusional as to think a boy like Luc might find someone like her attractive, because she wasn't attractive. It was an objective, undeniable fact.

There was no part of Jo that was anything more than ordinary, if one could even call her that. Acne covered her face like a splatter of constellations, only accented by the fact that the skin underneath was a permanent shade of rose. Her face might not be so bad if she didn't spend ten minutes in the mirror every morning and every night picking it raw, but she could only do so much.

Her eyes were sunken and heavy-lidded, small pinpricks compared to the near-perfect roundness of her cheeks and chin.

It was only when Jo saw pictures of herself, usually caught in the moment with little time to prepare, did she feel like she had a real idea of her outside appearance.

And she despised it more than she despised anything else in her life, this town, or this entire fucking world.

Luc Rhodes, though... Luc Rhodes was anything but ordinary.

Somehow, with eyes as dark as the blackest coffee and hair a color deeper than midnight in winter, he still shown like the sun, even in the dreary October weather, blanketed by grey clouds and biting winds. Even through all of that, he never dimmed.

He didn't make her feel less than or like she took up too much space in the world because he took up twice as much, and Luc was willing to share. He shared that, though, with the Jo that she allowed him to see. In a few short weeks, she felt like things were easier with him. She wanted to share the parts of her that never saw the light.

But Jo wasn't so naïve as to think Luc wouldn't run away immediately at the first sign of her true self. Arm's length is where he would stay, she decided. But something told her that might be more difficult than she originally thought. She had only known him a couple of weeks, but Jo had a nagging feeling that Luc Rhodes wasn't someone you ever knew just halfway. He was all-consuming, and she was weak enough to allow herself to be taken in, no matter how false her pretenses were.

Those feelings would stay far, far below the surface for as long as Jo could smother them and she would resist his pull until the rope broke. Josephine Bardot was never a girl who allowed herself to be weak, and she was certainly not going to start then.

Plus, these two hours were for Archie and Archie only. Enough about her and Luc and the nosy twin. Jo had bottled up her feelings her entire life, a couple more hours was child's play really.

And so the rest of the two hours went by like two minutes and suddenly Jo was ripping her heart in half and leaving it alone for another week.

"Love you loser," Jo blew Archie a kiss.

He rolled his eyes. "Don't make it weird."

"Nuh-uh. Say it back."

"Fine. Love you too. You whore."

Jo smiled. "Clear your schedule for next Saturday."

"Hmm I'm not sure, I'm super busy but I can try and fit you

in."

Her smile turned sad. "Survive another week babe." "You too," he blew back her kiss.

# Contributors

Anastasia Balis is a first-year sociology major.

Bethany Belkowski is a senior English and public policy double major in the SJLA Program.

John Cardiges is a senior philosophy major in the SJLA Program.

Christopher Conboy is a sophomore neuroscience major in the SJLA Program.

Patrick DelBalso is a junior biochemistry, cell and molecular biology major.

Lauren Kraemer is a senior occupational therapy major.

Janvi Patel is a sophomore English major.

Audrey Phillips is a senior criminal justice and philosophy double major in the SJLA Program.

Zane Price is a junior secondary education for English major.

Cecilia Russell is a first-year in the SJLA Program who has not yet declared a major.

Skyler Rutkowski is a junior English and social media strategies double major.

Grace Stallman is a sophomore English major.

Kathleen Till is a senior neuroscience and philosophy double major in the SJLA Program.

Jillian Tremblay is a senior English major in the SJLA Program.

Cayman Webber is a senior biology and philosophy double major in the SJLA Program.

Megan Zabrouski is a senior English and philosophy double major in SJLA Program.

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Y

#### *Esprit* Submission Information Deadline for Spring 2023: April 5th 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 <u>espritsubmissions@scranton.edu</u> 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.

By submitting to *Esprit* you acknowledge that your work is original and your own.

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 espritsubmission@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.)

If submitting OneDrive files please add both espritsubmissions@scranton. edu and melissa.eckenrode@scranton.edu to file permissions.

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.

By submitting to *Esprit*, you acknowledge that your work is original and your own.

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 <u>espritsubmissions@scranton.edu</u>; 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 Bethany Belkowski (bethany.belkowski@scranton.edu).



Esprit Staff Fall 2023



Esprit Production Team 2023

I'm gonna go to your house and go away your dog!