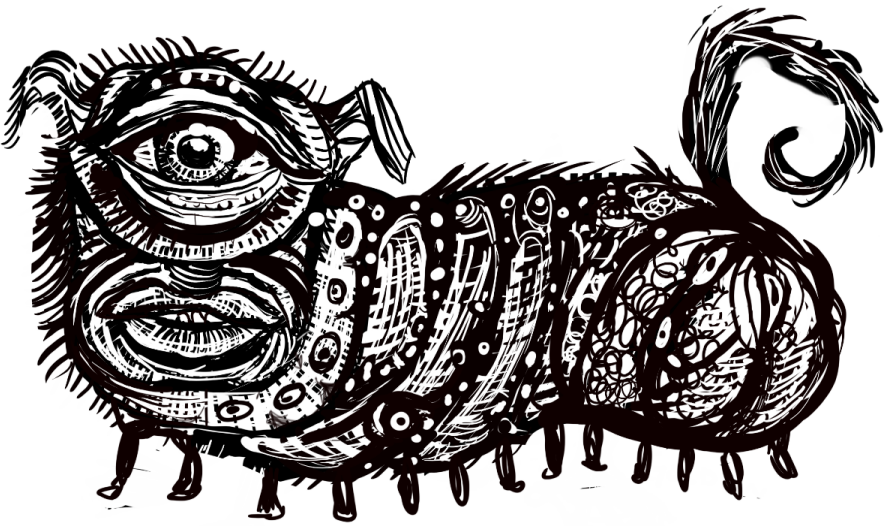


Esprit

Fall 2020



ESPRIT

The University of Scranton Review of Arts and Letters

Fall 2020

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Fall 2020 Awards:

The Berrier Poetry Award

Amanda Tolvaiva
“Bolted”

The Berrier Prose Award

Joshua Rudolph
“Red Flesh”

The *Esprit* Graphics Award

Jack Golden
“Close Self Portrait”

Fall 2020 Award Judges:

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Tatooine
Bodo Johnson

I Am Neither Your Daughter, Nor Son

E. Kerr

When you try to find this
and I know you will try to
find this:

Mother tells me I am delayed
whenever I act
out but I was not taught how to express

“socially appropriate” emotions. And she hates that I dress
like the son she didn’t want;
I was born an orchid but needed to become
the vines I wrapped my throat in
to choke back the words

I wish I spat out instead of pretending to be
delicate for her. I wilted my skin to try to
find peace in that red honey, because blood is the only

thing we all have in common, it doesn’t know “boy”
“girl” or anything in between,
like family, love, all the lies, she tells me I am hers

to bleed “forever”.

Green and Black

Kasidy Leggin

As he shifts engines and our hovercraft descends toward the glistening pavement, Clay smirks at me. I note the way that his skin bunches at his cheek. “You’re in for a scrumptious meal tonight, Eiko.” It takes me a second. “We’ll see about that,” I say, feigning playfulness as he extends the offramps. That is right. Eiko. I forgot which name I told this one. Eiko. If I want a fair chance at a life like his, then no mistakes can be afforded. Every action requires precise calculation. I must remember my name. I must use words like “scrumptious.”

We stroll hand-in-hand down a promenade. Green-black seawater crashes against the serrated sand dunes of an empty beach. I cannot hear what Clay says to me over the static hiss of the waves. All I can do is smile and nod as I focus on the pressure that I exert on his hand. I try hard not to crush it. Too many calculations at once. I attempt to lose myself in the world around me, staring upwards toward the infinite, starless sky.

The surrounding atmosphere fades to a ruddy orange as we near our destination. Just outside, a holographic projection of the restaurant’s name scrolls by in bold neon. “Gorgeous!” I exclaim, mimicking wonderment. “The lights are a bit gaudy,” he replies. “What’s really charming is what’s inside.” He beckons me to enter ahead of him through the automatic door. I glance at his face as I pass. In this moment, I realize how fitting of a name “Clay” truly is. Every feature of his is wonderfully soft and imperfect as if it were still-wet terracotta just sculpted by an amateur. I am overcome by the realization that he was all up to chance. Two living blueprints made love and now here he is. It is obvious why they reject the idea of me. I feel something like fear, or perhaps like disgust.

Once seated, I analyze the room and draw a conclusion about its aesthetic value. It acts as an elegy for a bygone era, with recreations of famous paintings hanging on vermilion walls, and plasma lights imitating primitive wax candles. Clay engages me in banal conversation as we await

service. He loosens his tie, and his cheeks are flush with beautiful, warm blood. I smile in an attempt to remedy what I believe may be anxiety in him. I myself feel something comparable to unease. As Clay orders, he refuses to look at the waitress. He must know by her profession that she is synthetic. Yet, he does not avert his gaze from me. The discomfort does not stem from inherent repulsion. It is a learned response, and thus more dangerous. Our waitress stares at me for five seconds after I complete my order.

Our food arrives as Clay finishes relaying an anecdote from his childhood. This is the hardest I have ever pretended to laugh. He can barely speak between fits of giggling. Once he buries his face into his hands, I dip a finger in my glass of water and draw streaks below each of my eyelids. “You’re so hilarious!” I lie. He regains his composure before speaking to me through a mouthful of food. “How about you, Eiko? Any funny vignettes from your childhood?”

This is new. I realize that I never interacted with a person for so long without revealing what I am. My struggle to find the proper words for a false childhood must have manifested physically, because he asks me if I am all right. I apologize and blame my behavior on a negative reaction to the undisturbed “scrumptious” meal resting before me. He appears confused. I am making careless mistakes. I excuse myself, but I stand too quickly and inadvertently brush my arm past my glass of water. In something like a panic, I grab the glass before it falls and it breaks in my hand, shredding my synthetic skin to expose the translucent fiberglass blood vessels within.

I experience an offshoot of embarrassment as green-black coolant fluid rushes out of my wrist. I just wanted to live. Furious shouting is directed at me, but I cannot comprehend the words. The chance to be alive, like him. A child sobs at a nearby table. But again, it slips away like shattered glass between my fingertips. I feel something almost like pain. Too many calculations. I feel nothing. Our server calls the police. I wanted a chance to be, but now I see that all of the bytes decode the same string: “Life isn’t meant to be fair.”

Ravishment of the Perennial Bloom

Nia Long

I smell the growing mold on the walls of my laundry room
where I played as a child.

The soft skin of my blood-flushed cheek reads the stippled walls
like braille on raw fingertips.

Roughly forced to acknowledge

my truth.

Your truth.

I can almost see where my brother and I ran our
sticky, paint-dipped fingers over our eggshell wall.

Composing a vibrant microcosm of our innocent minds—

Bitter hypocrisy as I lose mine.

Your hand reminds me of the fly in the corner of the room,
tangled in a delicate arachnid silk,

struggling to break free.

The coils of my hair forcing your fingers deeper
with each recoil.

I try to focus on that pitiful fly losing its battle with the trembles of
its ruined body.

I watch its wings crimp and bend and its legs deform
until it freezes in time.

I freeze too.

I close my eyes instead and think of when we drifted through
the botanical gardens on our first trip outside
of our small town.

I entangled myself in the drifting wisps of a willow
as I chased the golden rays that pierced
the branches and thin leaves.

You followed me into the fairylike web and entered
into this fey land of our own making.
Your arms entwined around my waist as
your soft breath teased the vellus hairs on
the back of my neck.

The same feeling as now,

but this time it's perverted.

Your breath is ice traveling up my spine,
tensing my nerves,
freezing my soul.

Your hand crushes my vertebrae and stifles my breath.
The pressure of your body against mine is quantifiably
the same as the day in the gardens.

Your stomach pushes deeply on my back.
But I'm being crushed now under this weight of disbelief.

The pain creeps in as my cheek is rhythmically
thrust against my rugged, textured wall.

My tachycardic heart is working in opposition to the
overwhelming feeling of detached passivity.

My frozen body defies my
silent
please for deliverance.

I can see my childhood painting clearly
now

through distorting tears.

It is screaming to me now.

I see my brother and I dancing playfully around the room,
streaking bright paints with each
twirl of our slight bodies.

Our concentric streams of colors remind me of
the world I envisioned as a girl.

A world where young women prance through fields
of flowers and are wrapped in warm embraces by
their gentle,
dashing prince.

I think I see my young self-staring at me
from that painted realm.

She sheds a tear for me as my envisioned world is
scrapped away like the tender skin of my cheek.

Mutilated like my throbbing
corpse-like frame.



Rogues
Dominic Finan

Mission Log

Bodo Johnson

The Company

The Captain called together the company on the afternoon of Thursday. The team was composed of a hand-selected crew of only the best and most trusted men and woman. The assembled were as follows: Jeremy “JJ” Jones, 42 inches, 37 pounds, Munitions Expert, 5 ½ years; Louisa “Lou” Miller, 46 inches, 44 pounds, Scout and Strategist, 6 years; Tyrone “Ty” Allen, 44 inches, 45 pounds, Medical, 6 years; Brady “Twinkie” Till, 46 inches, 54 pounds, Culinary Specialist and Negotiator, 5 ½ years; Finn “Cap” Mcgee, 45 inches, 43 pounds, Captain and Camouflage Specialist, 5 ¾ years.

The Mission

On the afternoon of Wednesday, comrade Killian Tristan Anders, 44 inches, 46 pounds, Cartographer, 6 years, was sent on a solo reconnaissance mission. His task: to expand the unit’s maps from Myrtle Lane to the surrounding areas. Records recovered leading up to the time of his disappearance show a mission full of unexpected complications including one mail truck, one street sweeper, and one old, farsighted, and disagreeable Mr. Deleny. Anders failed to return from his mission and neither his equipment nor an updated map were returned to base camp. The Captain, through his own secret channels, came to discover that the cause of his disappearance was the result of a neighborhood complaint and parental intrusion. Due to the personal nature of the situation the complaint was not shared with the company at the time.

Scout and Strategist Lou completed a quick survey of the neighborhood and came to believe that Anders was being held in 871 Myrtle Lane.

The Plan

The Captain and the Strategist devised the plan with the help of the Cartographer’s completed maps, previously completed reconnaissance missions, and the Captain’s extensive knowledge of 871 Myrtle Lane due to his particularly close relationship with the missing member. The Plan was as follows:

Phase 1: Cross the backyards to reach 871 Myrtle Lane. Foreseeable difficulties include Mrs. Duquesne’s wall, and Mary’s mother’s rose bushes.

Phase 2: Enter 871 Myrtle Lane through the ground level window and retrieve Killian Tristan Anders. Foreseeable difficulties include Mr. Anders, volatile teenager Max Anders, and *the Mother*.

Phase 3: Swift return to base camp via Myrtle Lane. Debrief.

Inventory

After the mission brief and half hour recess to gather supplies, the company reassembled to take stock of and evenly distribute the equipment. The Captain retrieved and took responsibility for Anders’ completed maps, Lou brought a coil of knotted jump-ropes crucial for Phase 1, Ty supplied a box of waterproof bandaids and a brand new squeeze tube of neosporin, JJ brought three Nerf rifles with five darts, and Twinkie supplied the tub of *I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter*, crucial for Phase 2 of the operation, as well as the rations for the unit. Along with their own supplies, each company member filled their book bag, their fanny pack, or their Halloween pumpkin with one apple, one Tastykake, and one bag of extra-cheddar Goldfish crackers.

Camouflage

After taking inventory, the Captain camouflaged the face, legs, and arms of each member of his team, using potting soil, water from the rain barrel, and crafting paints in red and blue.

Phase 1

The company began the campaign from base camp and was immediately met with foreseeable difficulty number one, the 6 foot wall separating the Captain's backyard from Mrs. Duquesne's. Naturally, the Captain has made frequent use of the height of this wall to survey the surrounding neighborhood and has constructed, on his side, an elaborate ladder for swift and easy ascent. The company gathered atop the brick wall, tied one end of the knotted jump-ropes around the waist of the smallest member, and moved to lower him slowly over the wall.

Unfortunately, due to the urgent nature of the mission, no time had been set aside to test the strength of the knots.

Insert: From the Medical Logs of Tyrone "Ty" Allen.

The first physical injury was sustained during Phase 1 of the operation in the form of a 5 foot fall. The subject, Jeremy "JJ" Jones, landed on his back and remained motionless for a short time. The team hastened to lower medical staff to the subject. However, as Medical made the descent, JJ sat up, took a deep breath and explained that he was in fact fine. The only visible damage was found in the form of a grass stain on JJ's shorts. **End of Insert.**

Medical recommended the jump-ropes be discarded and suggested instead that each member lower themselves over the wall and drop to the ground, like in gym class. After the team collected at the foot of the wall, the quickly recovered JJ took his post behind a tree and covered each companion as they made the individual dash across the lawn to the safety of Mr. Bradley's woodpile. It was there they were met with foreseeable difficulty number two, Mary's mother's rose bushes, a thick and sprawling field of thorny plants bordering Mary's garden and lying between Mr. Bradley's and The Anders' yards.

It was here that the company encountered their first internal strife. Twinkie, the largest, desiring to avoid the difficult and humiliating task of worming through a small and painful hole in the hedge, suggested

making a detour through the alley, bypassing Mary's mother's garden all together. This suggestion was received favorably on all sides, except by Strategist Lou who had been absolutely forbidden to ever, under any circumstances, play in the alley, ever, period. The Strategist insisted loudly that they continue as planned through the groundhog holes she had discovered during her previous scouting mission.

Insert: From the Medical Logs of Tyrone "Ty" Allen.

The second physical injury sustained during the operation also occurred in Phase 1. Both the Captain and Twinkie sustained scratches to the face and shoulders during their burrow through Mary's mother's rose bushes. The Captain's injuries can be attributed to the haste of his crossing and Twinkie's to his size. Medical treated both subjects with neosporin on a tissue and waterproof bandaids. No blood was drawn. **End of Insert.**

After safely reaching the border of the Anders' garden, Lou was sent ahead through the second groundhog hole to scout. After receiving an all clear, the entire unit moved through the rose bushes. Now, with 871 Myrtle Lane in sight, the team entered Phase 2.

Phase 2

From their covered position behind the garage, the team surveyed foreseeable difficulty three, Mr. Anders, positioned strategically in his lawn chair not 4 feet from the back door. With a hushed voice, the Captain described the layout of the garden and detailed the path that each member must follow to avoid detection. Keeping close to their Captain and crouching low to the ground, the unit moved quickly and silently along the length of the garden, dashing from garage to play house, from playhouse to grill, from grill to mums, and finally from mums to the north-facing side of 871 Myrtle Lane.

The only ground floor window leading to the interior of 871 Myrtle Lane led to the bedroom of Max Anders. Although the window was capable of opening a full 2 feet, the occupant of the basement bedroom kept it locked at about 11 inches.

As previously discussed, JJ, the smallest member of the company, removed his shoes and clothing and waited patiently as Ty and Twinkie covered his exposed skin with fistfuls of *I Can't Believe It's Not Butter*. After assessing the slickness of his own skin, JJ dropped to his stomach and crawled backwards towards the narrow opening. Sticking his feet through the window, he slid skillfully into the darkened room of the volatile teenager. The greased and naked Munitions Expert touched down between the school books and dirty dishes on Max Anders' desk and reached up to unlock the window.

It was exactly at this moment that foreseeable difficulty Max Anders walked into his bedroom. The volatile teenager walked toward his desk, turned on the light, and screamed. JJ, frozen in place, also began to scream.

It is at this point that the Captain's records become less detailed. Twinkie reached through the window and grabbed JJ in an attempt to pull him back outside. This attempt was hampered by the butter substitute on his skin. The volatile teenager, ceasing in his screaming, pulled the Munitions and the Culinary experts through the bedroom window and onto his floor. The Captain called for a retreat but the remainder of the company found their path blocked by the oncoming figure of Mr. Anders, startled from his bird watching by the aforementioned screams.

The five members of the party, including the naked Munitions Expert, were taken into custody and marched to the second floor of 871 Myrtle Lane. It is not specified to what room of the structure they were taken, it is only stated that they were taken to *the Mother*.

The Mother

The small band of men and woman ascended to the second floor to the place that *the Mother* held court. Small, afraid, and covered in mud, butter, and craft paint, the team awaited the wrath. They arrived at the big wooden doors of *the study*, a place of legend and punishment. They entered the room, stood in a huddled group, and waited as *the Mother* turned her gaze slowly toward them.

Here the Records End

Bolted

Amanda Tolvaiva

I'd never seen
a corn maze until two

years ago, and I discovered you
can be born in the wrong place.

My fingers, tongue tickled
by the suckling cow,

pine to pucker. For
years I've wandered

single file through
grocery aisles. Now,

numb to the meat
on meat, when I make it

to the produce and find
piles of severed ears,

my fingers curl,
tickled by memory.



Linus's Fall Festivities
Nia Long

Red Flesh

Joshua Rudolph

Maybe I'll ask, "What is there about me to know?"

I stand 15 cm behind Bernie, who stands 15 cm behind a stranger. These queues dominate their cultural environment. About three years ago, Parliament funded a "National Museum of Queueing and Waiting-Adjacent Activities" from what I understand. The brief I watched included prayer as a WAA. Architect Jules Legrand designed the museum as one massive queue leading to the gift shop. The NMQWAA and projects like it started springing up after it became tradition for the Queen to reject the Sovereign Grant.

The London smog hangs thick over the massive pastel-blue sphere in front of us. It looks like the top of the Vatican, reflecting cool light onto the cracked concrete under the queuers.

Bernie turns his body to me, feet in precisely the same spot as he hits the 180 and says, "I don't smell the vinegar yet."

He stands taller than me, gaunt and too white-haired for 24. His glasses fall off when he speaks in his amalgam of UK accents because he stands at a hunch.

"We're probably too far away. You don't smell vinegar in your kitchen unless you open the bottle, right?"

He laughs. "No, but there's a hell of a lot more vinegar here than my kitchen."

A synthesized bell sounds from the front of the queue. Everyone steps forward, exactly into place. I stumble.

"It's like our national religion, you'll get the hang of it," Bernie says.

I want to have a question prepared before I get there. I don't want to look like an idiot in front of the Baby.

I peer over Bernie's shoulder at other queuers. A couple ahead of us faces each other like Bernie and me. They hold hands over the 15 cm distance, fingers loosely draped together as if reciting vows. He calls her

Sarah and asks her to always keep him in mind. His eyes trace the cracks in the concrete.

Maybe I'd ask something about that. Whether there's someone I'm compatible with. But how to phrase it such that it could be answered on objective data, I don't know.

Bernie's eyes go skyward as he rambles about old memories, breaking my concentration. He passes through memories of IIT acceptance day. Of the blind-design contest we got paired up for. He rambles on, recounting freshman glory. My mind wanders further back. When I first needed a background check with the UN, a long and disastrous process. When Sandy Koufax broke my heart at a middle-school dance. My first Lego-set – a Burger King. Maybe something in my past needed to be answered for.

An advertisement blares over the entrance of the sphere. "KRAFT SINGLES, NOW WITH TRIAL-SIZED KRAFT HANDSOAP AND TRIAL-SIZED STARBUCKS INSTANT –"

Does Kraft own Starbucks? Or do they just do grocer distribution like they do for Taco Bell? Maybe I'd ask, "Why do I know that Kraft distributes Taco Bell grocer products?", or, more empirically, "At what point can it be demonstrated that I could've processed information allowing me to know that Kraft distributes Taco Bell products?"

I realize we're at the front of the line when two security guards with Kraft patches on their jackets wand us over. I see the last four of my UN number flash on the wand. They push us past the gateway and into the sphere.

The queue stretches all the way to a smaller, matte-black sphere inside. Real grass grows everywhere but the concrete slabs confined within velvet ropes. Flying billboards flicker photographs, ads and QR codes atop buzzing drones. People take out their phones and scan codes, deals and discounts for the Kraft vending machines that line the sides of the queue. Maybe I'd ask about expected increases in Kraft's revenue from all these sponsorships.

A woman sounds over the speaker system, "Hello one and all! Welcome to the Pre-Baby Procedural – hosted in the Pre-Baby MegaspHERE and Queue Station by Jules Legrand!"

Legrand built this? The empty space signals style more than a scientific purpose, I guess. “Legrand’s architectural-Copernican revolution,” they called it. He designs to maximize unused space. Critics can’t seem to talk about Legrand without mentioning his “functional artistry”. I remember an interview where he said something like “The failure of 21st century architecture was to make every space with purpose. If you have no wasted space, you have no room for the future.”

School told us that the cities were full enough. If we want jobs, we need to design as compactly as possible. Bernie and I won a couple awards for our “needle-houses”, high-rise apartment buildings with single rooms stacked ad nauseum that can fit in alleyways and still meet fire code.

Maybe I’d ask where all this empty space is suddenly coming from.

The woman on the speakers interrupts my train of thought, “. . . where you will be allowed three minutes for final contemplations. After, please ask your question in your preferred language. Once you have been answered, proceed to the back of the room and into the gift shop. We hope you feel the Baby is compensation for your continued cooperation with the United Nations.”

The speaker stops before starting again in German.

I guess that’s interesting. Maybe I could ask something about language and culture and data and.

A drone hovers to Bernie and me with a picture of Legrand and four acronyms, the top reading “PBMQSbJL”. The third and fourth have slashes and umlauts, looks like German and GNED.

“Is MegaspHERE one word?” Bernie says, turning back to me.

“Are you asking me or Legrand?”

“I’m asking you about Legrand.”

“You do that a lot.”

“Only because your face gets all cute and twisty.”

Maybe I’d ask something about Legrand, about the process or what he says when he’s designing, or something like that, something that cues me into his.

The ad on the drone flickers to a QR code next to text that reads “Scan for a sample of UN-Generated LifeStats, sponsored by Kraft!” alongside a picture of teenagers marveling at their phones in their Kraft hoodies.

I hear the speech start in GNED.

Bernie holds his phone to the code.

“Apparently, I’ve pissed 594 times since I turned 24. My most texted non-article non-pronoun non-common word is ‘design’ which is nice. I’ve eaten. . . too much Kraft Dinner. I guess I like it more than I thought.”

The UNSA gathered all that with pre-existing tools? Maybe I’d ask about that, but it seems like a faux pas.

“Scan yours.”

“My phone battery is low.”

“Just put your UN number on mine, I wanna compare our pisstatistics”.

Bernie and I drop silent for a moment before giggling. “Bernie, I trust you, but I don’t want any of my sensitive info on your phone.”

“I’d give you mine. 4-7-3-”

I cut him off, laughing, “Knock it off, man.”

“I’m not scared if you have it. What could you do with it anyways?”

I didn’t know actually. Maybe I’d ask for a list of places where my UN number is stored, to see what people do with it. What do.

“The UNSA hopes that you feel compensated for the collection of your data. We want you to not only feel more secure, but freer, and more fulfilled.”

“Feels like a lot of fuss,” Bernie says, his tone stark, “for something that’s worked out pretty well. Crime is down, medicine is better. I dunno, what do you think?”

I take a deep breath and a step back. “I mean, I guess there’s a lot to it, there’s like.”

An advertisement screeching atop one of the drones catches my attention and draws my eyes away from Bernie’s. My head flashes to him and he stares at it too. It’s barely decipherable, just flashing lights and a Kraft box and.

The last person separating Bernie and me from the black sphere enters the slide-up door. Bernie stands completely still, his head pointed toward the top of the building.

“Bernie. . .”

“Yeah?”

“What are you going to ask?”

He lets silence hang for a moment. “I want to ask if there’s any interest left in cathedrals. I have this idea – the ‘Neo-Aletheic Cathedral’. We make a needle, but with as much stained-glass as the construction allows. All the light comes in, you don’t see out. There’s comfortable carpet leading to the top. A priest gives a mass to one person at the top, all the others take in the light. It cuts off all cellular connection. But yanno, that’s like, if anyone cares.”

“I care.” I did. A silent place sounded wonderful right now.

“But you’re broke.”

We smile at each other before the voice calls, “Next queuer please.” Bernie nods and winks at me before walking through the doorway.

I still don’t have a question. I have access to all information collected from my entire life. My past, statistics about futures people like me have, old and new loves, everyone and everything sits in front of me in some sort of data-driven whirlpool with a Baby –

“KRAFT DOT GRID NOTEBOOKS 4 FOR \$10 –” I bat the drone away, wait, I might need those, wait, no I need to think, I –

Whirlpool. Baby. Vinegar. Lovers. It’s coming to me. I notice the smaller sphere emits a hum like a washing machine downstairs. Maybe I’d ask about the number of scientists that believe in –

A drone screeching something about Kraft products hovers over me before the door shoots up and the people in line step forward so I have to step forward and I

step into the room. My eyes water from the sudden sour shock of vinegar. My throat coils.

The synthesized bell dings. “Your three minutes begins now. Happy contemplation.”

I breathe in the thick darkness of the room. A checkerboard floor lays wherever the maroon carpet I’m on doesn’t. The velvet queue ropes lead me to the tank like pews to a tabernacle. I’m reminded of award ceremonies. I’m reminded of MRI’s. I’m reminded of my middle-school dance, waiting for Sandy Koufax to lunge out of the darkness and grab my arm – her parents brought her and mine brought me, we were going to-

gether without going together – but Tony Costello sweeps her off her feet and I’m devastated.

My eyes trace the carpet to the only source of light. A giant glass tube seven times my size shines like a highway billboard. The liquid inside bubbles around a mass of red flesh like beer on your tongue. The exposed muscle inside pulses and pumps like a powered piston. Whatever holds muscles together – that white stuff, not fat, sinew? Connective tissue? – glows from the dim lights in the tank. The rigid fetal figure in the tank looks odd against its own smooth gestation.

Bell. “Two minutes left for contemplation.”

The Baby’s eyelids squeeze, wrinkles taking shape beside its eyes. The facial muscles pulse in time with the body. The Baby’s head looks like it’s held together by a chrome headband. Multicolored wires connect the headband to the ceiling.

I hate looking at it. It marinates in marketing data and surreptitious observation. Every internet purchase, every hour wasted, every moment I wish never happened, every second of pornography is in its head.

I find it sublime. Here stands an exposition of the world’s best psychology, the most accomplished data mining, the best statistics, the best biology. They all inform the development of a new demented form that gives to everyone what it takes in exchange. This is the recapitulation of the Enlightenment.

Another bell. “One minute left for contemplation. Please prepare your question with the best grammar you can.”

I step toward the Baby, my heart drops with every step. My chest, my diaphragm, the pit of my stomach, my crotch, until it falls out of my pant leg. I stand a few feet in front of it, my toes atop the fringe of the carpet surrounding the tube.

Fragments of questions run through my head. What is it – who is it – where does, is? – how does God wait? Am?

The bell again. The Baby opens its eyes. Blood flows through the sclerae. The skin around its eyes looks recessed and damaged. I see Legrand in one and Bernie in another.

I know it’s talking, I know what it’s saying, but I don’t feel it in my ears. “Relax, now, please ask your question.”

Sphere. Needle. Whirlpool. Kraft. I stare at the Baby.

Silence.

“Is that really vinegar in the tank?”

“No.”

The bell dings.

“Thank you for coming. We hope you are satisfied, and we hope you feel reciprocated for your continuous cooperation with the United Nations.”

The lights in the tank fade as a door opens on the opposite of the room.

I walk around it, peering into the tank’s darkness. The muscles still pulse, still pump.

The gift shop bustles around me. People buy Baby merchandise: T-shirts, hats, mugs that read “The Baby told me this mug was worth it based on available data,” Kraft ice cube trays and more. Most Baby patrons line up to buy their transcript, which shows in TVs overhead like rollercoaster pictures. The questions are almost all like mine – barely intelligible, fragmented. Some read like real questions, “Is Sarah Gutzberg cheating on her boyfriend, uh, me Lenny Kravitz but uh, not the famous one, the guy from Southampton?” Responses are mostly asking for more empirical formulations or simple affirmatives and negatives. The transcriptions are all priced differently, ranging from a few pounds to well over a hundred, seeming somehow market-based. Some people look mortified at their question displayed in public. Some look down, hands pressed together, solemn and repentant in the transcription queue.

My head spins from the commotion in the PBGSTDbJL so I push my way outside and see Bernie, turned toward a city obscured by fog.

“Hey, Bernie, what do you think? Cathedral gonna go off?”

“I don’t know.”

Next page...

Close Self Portrait
Jack Golden



Dances in the Achromatic

Nia Long

They ask her “What does it feel like?”
With her eyes closed,

all she sees is a cliché photo of a beach at dusk as
soft light glimmers on the white sand.
Slow rolling waves bathe the shoreline while
in the corner, a dark log protrudes from the ocean’s edge.

The protuberance an unpalatable
addition to the homogenous unity
and
She is that log.

She says “It feels like nothing. I don’t even notice it.”
She does. She does?
Does she?

An onyx swaddle teases her skin with its warmth.
Less of a tease than the warmth lying beside her while
moonlight streams in with the glisten of her cocoa skin,
her darkened eyes reflecting the light off his ivory

Hands, clasped. Head pressed against his chest that
catches the few tears that trickle in the dark.
The cool wetness reminds her of

dark, salted concrete with shimmering glass-like slicks
where her
face pressed against the rough pebbles of
broken cement and shattered dignity.

The bitterness bites, rubble depresses, but ignorant insolence slices.
Searing eyes:

pain trickles down with every
Wish she could melt.
Skin intermixing with the black ground:
hidden and protected.

She melts into him instead – but no.
She can’t. She can’t?
But can she?

Moonlight captures their souls in a dance projected across
the eggshell walls
of her mind
expanding with each sway and bend of
the shadow of her curly locks – the only giveaway of something
awry.

Liquid puddles in the cavity of his chest,
her heartbeat calls to her in painful comprehension as
shadows waltz around them.
Not giving away the complexion that betrays her.

They melt together in pigmented homogeneity.



Breaking Glass

Sofia Zingone

Untitled

Sarah Liskowicz

only in pressed eyes
exists a breathtaking sky
why can I not stare

Locked in winter nights

Nicholas Brown

you cycle through folds of picture books
in them you
find love

in scarves your grandma sewed
with kisses and hugs and
your mother's teddy given to you

and together you care
for you are hers
and he is yours

lo! what is it to adore?

the warmth of fuzzy mittens and snugly socks
pressed on toes and fingers
tender and soft

Breaking Skin

Amanda Tolva

When I was seven, my brother showed me a skeleton, a frail bird no bigger than my palm. The sidewalk singed my legs as I knelt over the thing, the warm scent of rot not bothering me as much as it should have. After an hour of heated speculation (Had it been murdered by a cat? Was it pushed from the nest too young?) my brother returned to the house, unable to bear the stench and sweat any longer. I stayed, tracing the connection from bone to bone with my eyes, then my hands. Eventually, I worked up the nerve to hold it.

I slid my right hand beneath it, and with the other nudged it onto my palm. A few careful minutes later I cradled the bird. My nerves had little to react to, it was so light. I could barely feel the bones resting against my skin, but that made me even more fascinated.

I stroked its tiny head over and over. Each pass of my fingers removed a layer of decay, until the spot over its eye socket gleamed. It looked so beautiful, I knew I had to polish the rest of the bones, to reveal the brightness of this bird to the world.

In my peace, I had failed to notice sundown, so when my mother tapped my shoulder to bring me inside, I startled and dropped my treasure. I bent to grab the broken bones but my mother yanked me back, yelling about how I would get a disease and how could I be so idiotic as to touch that disgusting carcass. I yelled right back, a wordless shriek that intensified as she drew me away from the bird.

“Shut up, Camila!” she cried.

I shrieked. I tried to run, but she pulled me against her. She dragged me into the house and locked the door before I could wriggle free, and my tiny hands balled into the fabric of her skirt. My tears burned a path down my cheeks. I kicked at her legs but kept tangling my foot in the skirt. Enraged, I pulled on it. A satisfying tear resounded through the hall. We both froze. She pushed me off of her, looking down at her ruined skirt.

Except it looked perfectly fine. There was no great tear, not even a minor rip. We both glanced at my hands. They held nothing. I noticed it first; the top joint of my pinky finger lay almost completely sideways, pointing towards my other hand.

I cried a little, of course, but I could not stop staring. The trip to the hospital passed in a blur. I nearly tripped in the waiting room because I couldn't tear my eyes away. Mother made up for it by not looking in my direction at all. While we waited to see the doctor, her eyes flicked over a few times, until she excused herself to go to the bathroom. When a nurse finally emerged for me, they had to fetch her.

Two days later, I got pins shoved in the joint. They looked like mini nails, and I imagined the doctor grabbing a fairy-sized hammer to pound them into me. He gave me a blue cast to place over it, told my mother that I could take it off to shower and sleep, but only then. Naturally, as soon as we got home I showed my brother.

“Woah,” he breathed, poking the pins. “This is wicked. I wish I had some, too.”

“You can,” I said. “Make sure Mom's still in the kitchen.”

He pushed open the door and peeped inside, thrusting his head out after a few seconds. He nodded, and we tiptoed upstairs. Once in our mother's bedroom, we shut ourselves in the closet.

“We need to find the pink skirt,” I said. “That's the one that broke my finger.”

“Okay,” he said. “Is it this one?”

“No, too bright.”

“This one?”

“Too long.”

“How about this?”

“That's a shirt.”

He threw it behind him. “This is dumb! Why can't I just use a different one?”

I shook my head. “It won't work.”

“Why not?” he asked, his voice nasty.

“It just won't,” I insisted.

With a stomp, he said, “You just don't want me to get pins because

they'll look way cooler on me."

"Don't be such a baby."

"You're the baby!" he cried, face red as an apple. "I'm the older one, and I get to say what we'll do. And we're using another skirt!" With that, he turned back to the clothes and began ripping them from their hangers. He threw aside multiple skirts, finally settling on a gauzy light blue one.

"This'll do," he said. "Hold it."

I grabbed the skirt, holding it up by the waist. It was as tall as me, consuming my view. For a second, I pretended to search for clouds in the empty sky. Then my brother coughed and jerked me from the daydream.

"You just have to grab a fistful and yank," I instructed.

"Duh."

I bit back a response, wanting to get this over with already. I was hungry.

I watched the delicate fabric crumple into his fist. Then, he yanked with such force he nearly dislocated my arms. I heard the rip of fabric or bone, but I didn't care. The pins got caught in the fabric and they tore through my bone. I sobbed, the pain far exceeding that of the actual breaking. My finger throbbed in hot agony, and I noticed that I'd fallen onto the ground. My brother loomed above me, saying, "I'm sorry, sorry, I didn't mean it. You're okay, stop crying, Mom will hear. We'll get in trouble if she finds us."

The painful heat washed over me, and I jerked upright, clipping his chin with my skull.

"Ouch! Camila!"

He was fine though. His chin didn't even look pink, while my skin flushed red all over. "You're the one who should get into trouble! This is your fault. You're just jealous something cool happened to me."

"Am not!"

"Are so!"

"Am! Not!" He shoved me, but I reached for his shirt with my good hand on the way down. We grappled, scratched, kicked. We could've fought there forever, until I managed to knock him off balance with a punch to the throat.

Moaning, he crawled onto the discarded clothes. I noticed his tears, saw the tiny cuts on his arm where I'd broken skin. Looking down, I saw matching scratches on my arms and blooming bruises on my legs. My gaze landed on my broken finger. It was vomit yellow, but somehow the pins were still stuck inside me. Wet, heavy sobs overtook me but every cry brought jolts of pain.

"Stop crying, you big baby," my brother panted.

My body burned. I crawled to him. I took his neck and slammed his head to the ground. His chin hit the floorboards with a sharp crack, the sound I used to think a breaking bone would make.

His cry echoed through the closet. Blood coated his chin, the floor, the jacket he knelt on. Our mother opened the door to the two of us huddled together, a red, sweaty mess.



Schüchtern
Bodo Johnson

A letter to my fellow insomniac

Sarah Stec

Dear E,

I don't remember the last thing you said to me, only the fact that there was, in fact, a last thing. Of course, we've talked a lot since that time, whenever that time was, but I don't remember the last words, the feelings that came with them that marked the end of it all. I guess it's hard to find the words anymore. It's no one's fault, I don't think. Dr. L would quote his own long, thought-out, philosophical assertion that, "human beings are shit communicators." I dropped out of pre-med today. I couldn't take the strain of it. I knew that it would never be enough. For some reason, I thought it might be, but I've found that a person's title says little about their soul, their ability to touch another. Remember when I told you how the slender fingers lifted the blade, slicing the silvery ligament that rolled back into ribboning pieces, like the one I wore in my hair, the one you held between your fingers. I told you the act of it was beautiful. That surely, one could never be so intimate, as to be, physically, in another's flesh, without affecting that person at their core. I never told you that I went back to that place, to the bodies moving mechanically through mastered motions, to the eyes that saw only the raw anatomy, to the acrid smell of fresh blood that poured over the gloved hands. I never told you how I realized there was no meaning here. How I came to focus on the wrinkled hand, draped, in a lifeless fashion, over the table, the palms ruddy and scraped, the fingernails outlined with dirt. I couldn't stop staring at the dirt, the dust accumulating in the nail ridges. Where was it from? How had it gotten there? And didn't the owner of these fingers know they should be washed before going into a doctor's office, or had they been deprived of that nurturing figure, chasing them out the door with a wet rag with which to give a good scrubbing to the face, neck and fingernails. I always wondered why the hands? You wanted your life to be meaningful, you thought if you could only find hap-

piness. But you told me once that happiness exists only in moments, minutes, seconds. Ephemeral was the word you used. I think, for a moment I was happy. There was a night, was it a morning? I can never tell but you'll have to trust that my inconsistency in story is merely a mind slipping in and out of a fluid-like state and not evidence of my lack of commitment to be an honest person. There was a time when the words fell easily from our breath like the warm air the engine forced out of your car's vents and I listened as the cold sounds crowded the alleyway outside. The radio channel failed and the air around us was warmed by the resonating fuzz, my mind sank into it. Your hair fell over your glasses frames and I thought about never moving it. I thought it felt happy. Zoe came home. Do you know her? I don't think you do, except from what I told you. I told you she worried me, she'd been gone so long, lost all touch; they wondered why I kept reaching out. I didn't tell them that she was the only one who understood, the importance of the hands. You lifted your eyes and rolled your wrist as the ladybug moved out of your palm and came to rest on your thumbnail. I thought about what mark it might leave there, or whether it would leave a mark at all. I thought about the draped hand, the dirt. There was a night you called me, it was 3 a.m., I'm staying away from labeling the hours now. When I answered I wanted to tell you about the hands, the blood, the dirty fingers, but we let the silence fill the concealed line that connected us and my mind relaxed, knowing it could rest here.

With love,

M



Wild Dog
Jack Golden

Near The House My Papa Built

E. Kerr

He drowned.

Embraced by the water, *an accident*,
She told me, and breathless
Death, the first time he felt
Truly free from the pipes
And wires.

He was becoming
The house he built, waves
Decaying and eroding his foundation;
Every year we reinforced again, didn't want
It to collapse.

Found him floating, Nana thought
He was a boat, the *Never Sail* had
A hole in it, only saw the water once
When my father was a kid, until it retired
Below the ramp my uncle installed
So Papa could wheel
Himself onto the porch.

Lost his battle with ALS
Is all we were told.
Prior to, it was a miracle he was still
Standing, four strokes later and tired
He knew the exact moment
His body would hit
The cold water and go limp.

Contributors

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Esprit Submission Information

Deadline for Spring 2021: April 9 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 espritsubmissions@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.

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 Editor-in-Chief for the Spring 2021 semester, Amanda Tolvaisha (amanda.tolvaisha@scranton.edu).



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