Are you Ready?

Andrew C. Nosti
Gettysburg College, nostan01@gettysburg.edu
Class of 2018

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury

Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Creative Writing Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.
Are you Ready?

**Author Bio**
Andrew is a senior studying history and English with a writing concentration.

This fiction is available in The Mercury: [https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2018/iss1/48](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2018/iss1/48)
Are You Ready?

A space emerges before you. First, a crack, a sliver, and then it swells. Light pours through the opening. The light hurts. You squint your eyes against it and hope it will dissipate.

You wish to remain where you are, but a hand is on you, and it ushers you toward the light.

Droplets that kaleidoscopically interact with the light plaster your skin. Your palms especially, curled into little balls, are moist.

“Come on,” a voice says. “A little more.”

The light has swallowed everything. You can see nothing in it. All noises, including the voice, sound thunderous and hollow, as if echoed down a well. A strange pounding reverberates all around you, thumping intensely and rhythmically.

Shadowed outlines surface from the light and slowly materialize into shiny blurs. An arm extends outward from you, pale and bristled with thin, flat hairs. It turns blue above the elbow, rippling like the ocean at twilight. More pale appears past the blue. An edge, like a cliff face, juts out with sprinkles of dirt irregularly patterned across it. Two thin, pink lines protrude above that, a brown bush above those.

“Come on,” the voice repeats. The pink lines tectonically divide and recombine.

You move into the lighted space.

“Not much further now.” This is a man. His voice doesn’t rumble anymore, no longer sounds like it roars from the clouds. It comes out throaty.

“Right in here.” This time it’s a new voice, adenoidal and slightly screechy, and it comes from behind and to your left. You see eyelids painted a bruised color. This is a woman. Her arm, thinner and with less coating than the man’s, touches your other shoulder. Her fingers form more of a caress than the grip of the man’s. Both, in their own ways, feel reassuring.

Glasses slip down the man’s nose and he takes his arm off you to push them back up. Images move in the lenses. As you blink, a figure blinks back. You realize that is you staring back.

The woman also removes her hand, and your legs feel like they can’t possibly hold you. You teeter in place. Knowing you must move, you drive your knee upward and push your foot out. You sway dextrally. Without thinking, your arms extend laterally. You bring your left leg forward and discover balance anew.

There is a straight-backed chair in the middle of the square room. A fluorescent rectangle blazes directly above the chair, and a few specks of dust play in the air beneath it. All the walls are steriley white and have a vaguely reflective quality that makes them seem like they move. On the wall to your left, facing the back of the chair, a clock hangs. The wall across from that, the one the chair faces, has a single, long mirror running across it, several feet high. Over in the corner across from you and to the left is a panel with a series of switches and dials.

Your feet no longer feel unsteady. Your body groans.
A man in a white smock stands a few feet behind the chair and watches you closely. His coal eyes move up and down your body and penetrate it, seeing the muscles and tendons and bones underneath. Another man in a navy button-up lingers near the back of the room, shifting his weight and causing the light to bounce off his smooth head at different angles. He stares straight ahead in a way that says he isn’t looking at anything in particular, one hand on a black belt, displaying no sign he has noticed you. A five-pointed star glints from the left side of his chest, and to the right of it is a tag that reads Juris. A woman in a teal blouse lingers between the man behind the chair and Juris at the back of the room. Her hair perches in a tight bun, and her eyelids are a droopy, fleshy pink. Her eyes also penetrate you, but this penetration feels different, as if she sees things inside you that you don’t want to see. She smiles at you with tight lips.

Your body has stopped groaning, and the smooth, glossy slate floor looks lower than before.

“Are we almost ready?” the white-smocked man asks.

The bruise-eyed woman and the man with the glasses leave. With the finality of a tomb slab slid into place, the door closes behind them. You glance at it, also white and with a worn-bronze knob on its left side, and you know there is no returning, no heading back through that door, and you can already feel the memory of the space beyond it seeping away. The light buzzes.

You stand alone and hesitate.

Juris turns and now all eyes in the room look at you.

The woman with the tight lips walks over towards where you stand. Her heels clack like heartbeats. She still smiles at you as she reaches your side. “My name is Dr. Potestas, and I’ll be supervising today.” She puts her matching-teal-nailed fingers gently around your arm. “Come on,” she says as she takes a step forward. “I’ll go with you.” You mimic her step beside her.

She keeps going and leads you towards the chair. With each step your soles clap against the floor. As they bounce around the room, they combine into an applause that you find both exhilarating and menacing.

Juris checks his watch.

You reach the edge of the chair and something in your stomach distends. Dr. Potestas takes her hand off your arm. The air against the skin where her fingers lingered feels cold.

Your knees have begun to throb dully. Hand shakily extended, you feel the arm of the chair. Cold, slick wood greets your skin.

“Okay, sit down, and we’ll secure you.” The white-smocked man, who has not moved, pats the back of the chair. He has a gold cap on his first right bicuspid.

You stare at him, and he stares back. You try to swallow away the thing that feels lodged in your throat, but your mouth has dried and your neck contracts uselessly. “I don’t want to sit,” you say. His face doesn’t change.

Juris moves toward you with both hands on his belt. “Just do as he tells you.”

Dr. Potestas now stands with her back facing you. You yearn for her warm hand again, but know you cannot have it.

You look down at the chair, your hand still pressed against its hard arm, and then back up at the man. “But why should I sit? Why should I sit and you
The Mercury

shouldn’t?”

“That’s why you’re here. That’s why I’m here, why they’re here” the white-smocked man gestures around the room. “For you to sit.” He peers straight at you as he says this, and his voice carries something final.

By now, the ache in your knees has spread and reached your hips and the lower region of your back.

“They were wrong about me, you know,” you say. “They were wrong.”

“Everyone says that.” Juris takes another step towards you, puts his hand on your shoulder, and gives you a slight push. “Now do as he tells you and sit.” Your hold on the chair keeps you from stumbling.

With another attempt at a swallow, you acquiesce and move around to the front of the chair. As you lower yourself as slowly as you can, the exertion burning in your thighs, something inside tells you that it’s not time yet. You are unsure what it’s not time for. A moaning issues from the chair as more weight than you expected presses down into it. The chair feels rigid and, somehow, relaxing.

“Oh, the white-smocked man says. He steps from behind the chair and moves to your right arm. He grabs the black strands dangling from the chair and straps you in so tightly you can feel your heart beat in the crease of your elbow. After your arm, he moves to the front of the chair and straps in one leg and then the other, attaching something you can’t see that feels cool to your left leg, and then he stands and reaches over to your left arm. One final strap stretches across your torso and squeezes in your diaphragm so that it becomes difficult to breathe. As he loops this last strap, you can smell something chemical about him. He looks at you studiously again before he steps away.

The man no longer in front of you, you now look back at yourself in the mirror. The clock on the opposite side of the room indicates it is three minutes from twelve. Its red hand ticks in a blur. Juris has reassumed his stoic-sentry position below the clock, staring at nothing with an air of dignified purpose. Dr. Potestas still hasn’t faced back around, and her head hangs towards the floor.

You hope and fear that people are on the other side of the mirror and see the clock racing, too. Mostly, you fear that they look at you.

“Are you ready?” asks the white-smocked man.

“The clock,” you say. “Why is it moving so fast?”

“Are you ready?” he asks again. The way he peers at you tells you that it doesn’t matter whether you are ready or not, and you don’t know anyway, so you don’t answer.

A thin, black cloth slides down your face. It slips over your nose and settles around your jaw. Each breath pulls the material toward your mouth and your exhalations feel warm against the cloth. It smells like salt. If you squint, you can see vague outlines through the black layer. The silhouette of what you presume is still the white-smocked man walks over to the dials in the corner of the room and grabs something circular from atop the machinery that has a tail slithering from its back which connects to the panel. He returns to the chair and slides this thing onto your head like a crown, pushing and pulling on the shroud. You had no idea a crown could be so uncomfortable. Wrapped from temple to temple, it squeezes your head in places hair once sprouted. A single bar rests across the top of your skull.

The silhouette behind you moves away. “Okay. I think it’s time.” The voice
sounds quietly indistinct, as if not meant to be heard, and the acoustics of the room mask its tonal source, so you don’t know who speaks. From behind the shroud you can’t see the clock hands and don’t know what time it is. You imagine the hands spinning so quickly that they hypnotize those who look upon them.

The figure behind you moves back over to the corner and raises an appendage to the panel.

The light above you flickers, goes out, and then brightens into a shimmering halo. The air smells hot. Someone screams from a distance, and the voice sounds familiar, but you cannot place it. Your body irregularly and painfully tenses and jolts but you don’t tell it to. Pinpricks have begun in the tips of your fingers. The halo has swelled into a sun, and you see other stars appearing around its edges. These stars are not like the one on the man’s chest. A song you have never heard before but which originates from inside you sizzles through your head and reminds you of the quiet hum of dusk. The sun has gotten closer and closer, and you can feel its heat tingle your nose while the other stars swirl around you in a dance perfectly attuned to the throbbing cadence of your song. Something inside your chest desperately wants out, and you want to ask it why, why does it want out of you, but you no longer have a voice. Is it time and are you ready? Do the people on the other side of the mirror see the clock now, or can they only look at you? All shapes have disintegrated, even the layer of the veil. You can no longer feel the straps pinching your forearms or the pressure of your lungs or the stiff set of the chair. Are you really innocent? You aren’t in any one position, like liquid released from its container. The tingling of your nose spreads and immerses every particle of you in celestial droplets, and you feel them slowly moving inside of you and making you glow, but you feel this from afar. Lights have become light as the dancing stars and sun conjoin into a descending, encompassing wave that pumps bursts of heat you swear you can see and taste and hear. The prickly sensation has now spread to more regions than you knew you had. The song reaches a pitch and blares like a musical siren. It no longer matters if you’re ready or guilty. The light quivers, collapses, explodes, and then recedes into a crack, a sliver across the black space that emerges before you.