

Writing | Symposium 2022

By Sophi Scarnewman

Scalpel, Please

The School of Medicine ran a special program where they made a second copy of my body. I stood in a ring of students encircling my fresh corpse where it lay on the autopsy table. I felt nervous. What if it didn't go well? I was preemptively ashamed. I wanted to be smaller. I wanted to be so small that I would become imperceptible. Recede into empty space. I woke up before we made the first cut. What a way to start the morning, but at least I escaped, Before I had to dig out lukewarm blood clots lodged in veins, the vessels of compliance. Veins can contain more volume without an increase in pressure, a quality known as *compliance*. At any point, the largest quantity of blood is found in the systemic veins of the body. I always imagine it in my heart or arteries, but it lingers longer where the pressures are more stable. It takes energy to flow against a gradient. The natural order is to go from bigger to smaller. To even out the concentrations, salt followed by water. Plasma membrane, extracellular space. There's an armament of transporters and channels through which molecules escape. To tell the truth, my whole life there's a voice I've been trying to escape, "You talk too much, you think too much, you're so entitled, find some compliance, You're not exempt from normal rules. You're nobody special. Just another wet brain in its body." But I've never been able to be quiet, not in class, not on dates, not at the dinner table. I'm just desperate to know things and be known. I want to tell my jokes! I don't want to be smaller. I have a lot of questions. I like hearing the answers. But I want there to be enough space. There's only so much time and it goes in one direction only, expanding outward into space. What a wild daydream to rail against that impulse, how I might feel if I actually made that escape, All the time and peace I'd have if I didn't try to force myself into compliance, If I weren't always trying to hold myself in against this pressure of my soul against my body. So concerned with having good and ready answers, forever sweet and stable. Scalpel, please. I want to cut this part out. I want to hack it to pieces, smaller and smaller. I want to send them to a pathologist who can prepare slides to see it even smaller. At 400x power with an H&E stain I might make out the outline in the bright field space Of a miniature editor, infinitesimal and obsessive, forever plotting an impossible escape From a body that just absolutely, cannot, will not, ever be a vessel only of compliance. This wet brain owes it all and more to this neuropathic, higher-pressure body That wants to be appreciated but when applauded always hides under the table. Literally, I hide under the table. Maybe it looks disingenuous. Quite possibly unstable. But it's consistent; I've always been like this. At seventeen, at seven, even younger, even smaller. An attempt to craft a perfect version of who I might be if I occupied no more space Than was absolutely necessary to create the output that people expect and I can't escape. The perfect results I assume I have to deliver, some crazy measurement of compliance Take on everything and then some and do it all--well--and put no pressure on the body. I'll sit at the microscope table, beholden to whatever part of myself escaped The searching blade of scalpel in that gory space, maybe smaller

But still begging for compliance, for a soul I could confine inside my body.