

Runner
by Dan Bray

[Title Indecipherable]

“Run!”

I must confess: it is not a passion for regional watercolours that compels me to scream this at my young nephew. I'm not even shouting this because it's raining, which I'll admit I'm a bit bummed about. This is my third time coming to Guysborough to select a piece for the Ekphrasis Project, and every other year it's been sunny and carefree, complete with top-heavy ice cream cones and kids highland-dancing on the waterfront. No, this year it is dismal: a wetness that I imagine permeates the manes of Sable Island ponies, or something equally evocative.

“Run!”

I am shouting this because little Beecher needs to use the bathroom. I recently became aware of the situation after he had piped up from the back seat for the first time in over forty minutes to ask, “Are we almost there?” It didn't take a linguistics professor to deduce why he was asking. Luckily, we made it to the gallery, which is good news for my friend, Justin, who apparently also really needs to pee. But Justin lets Beecher go ahead, in part because he is a gentleman and in part because he is wearing a clunky medical boot after injuring - of all things - his achilles heel.

Run!

I scurry after Beecher, recalling the series of events that's led us here. Last week, I asked Beecher and his older sister Juniper if they wanted to help me choose a painting.¹
We all

came to Guysborough last year for this reason and, I seem to recall, had a jolly old time. This year, however, Juniper replied in a wavering, pre-teen tone that I have come to dread: “*MaaAAAAybe???*” To which Beecher had duly echoed his own, slightly softer version: “Maybe...”

Look, I get it. Personally, I think a trip to rural Nova Scotia to look at some paintings is an action thrillride one can usually only find on the underground drag racing circuit, but I understand that it’s not for everyone. So I asked Justin if he’d like to make the trek with me instead. But then, the day before he and I planned to go, innocent little Beecher came back and asked me if we were still going to Guysborough.

“Buddy,” I squealed, “I didn’t think you wanted to go! You said, ‘*MaaAAAAybe?*’”

“No,” Beecher replied, in his steady little way. “I said, ‘Maybe.’”

“Sorry, pal. When you’re a grown-up and you ask another grown-up to do something they don’t want to do, sometimes they say ‘maybe’ instead of ‘no.’”

“Oh,” Beecher said, sadly, “I didn’t know that.”

“Do you still want to come?”

“Maybe.”

Run!

I meander around the empty gallery, staring at driftwood sculptures, comic strips, and portraits of chic witches. I've only been here a few minutes but already I'm feeling anxious: what if I can't find a piece to write about? Picking artwork for the Ekphrasis Project has always felt a bit like speed dating (not that I ever did that). My eyes scream at these pieces to *stir something in me*, which I have heard is a famously useful way of kickstarting one's creative process.

Beecher clomps out of the bathroom and joins me. I'm keen to make sure he has fun; he's taken a real swing travelling without his sister, and the least I can do is show him some art that will change his life forever. With his messy hair and dirty hands, Beecher may look out of place but the lad is no philistine: he's grown up surrounded by artists and it has given him a keen critical eye. He is especially drawn to an acrylic pour by Debbi Fitzgerald entitled "Wander I." I'm not surprised: Beecher loves the ocean, a passion that is only tantamount to his love for candy (an affair that's left him with more metal teeth than a conventional zipper), and to me the piece he's chosen looks like a jellyfish using a gumball machine whilst experimenting with psilocybin mushrooms. I love him for it.

At length, however, my eye lands on a different piece: an abstract painting by Eva Schulz. I cannot explain the connection, but if Ekphrasis has taught me anything, it's not to question the spark. *This is the painting I shall write about.* The piece looks like it started as a hot yellow rectangle before being rolled over with black paint. Indigo orange shapes stand out, and bleeding through here and there are shafts of blue-green. What is it, I wonder?

I look at the title card for clues, straining to decipher the artist's cursive, but the best I can hazard is "Rúllllier," complete with looping L's and unexpected accents. In retrospect, I don't know why I thought an artist who makes Jackson Pollock look like a Scandinavian minimalist would have legible handwriting, but now I'm dedicated to solving the mystery.

Justin is similarly baffled by the penmanship so - while the attendants search their records for a title - he brings in an expert: his wife, Rake. Originally from the Netherlands, Ranke is the head of Gaelic Studies at St FX and a bonafide genius when it comes to languages. The three of us travelled to Italy together earlier this year, and such was her fluency with foreign tongues that she was basically able to reverse-engineer Italian in time to serve as our interpreter. On top of that, she is a palaeographer: someone who specializes in decrypting handwritten manuscripts, finding order amongst inkblots and lacunas, palimpsests and typos.

While she and Justin discuss the title via text, Beecher and I focus on the painting. There is an ink-blot quality to this painting, but what does it say about your brain when you can see fifty different things? It's urban, yet derelict. Full of movement but also danger. Like dancers waltzing through an apocalypse, or a flower shop on fire. The more I look at it, the more I see, and the more I see, the less I understand.

Meanwhile, Ranke has made some impressive linguistic deductions, but she is no closer to solving this puzzle. One of the gallery attendants - a woman with a German accent - offers to call the artist, which I'll admit is the break this case needs.

My eyes scramble to solve the mystery first. In the acrylic tumult, I see dawn breaking in a back alley, nails scraping paint from charred walls to reveal the scars of forgotten lives underneath. When I squint, I can almost see a skull; at other times, a satanic playing card. The visceral strokes of the roller (or possibly palate knife) evoke paper blinds blocking out the light of an explosion beyond. It's vibrant and vigorous, done by somebody with nothing to prove. Possibly someone who realizes that life is short.

Eva Schulz picks up and the attendant greets her in German. Now, not to brag, but there was a time when I had an unbroken German Duolingo streak that spanned more than two years. I hone in on the conversation with the intensity of a CIA analyst. My ears pick up *Kunst* (for "art") and one of my favourite German words: *orange* (or "orange"). Finally, the attendant begins shouting as though the elusive Frau Schulz is driving through a tunnel: "*Wie heißt es? Wie heißt es?*"

"What is it called? What is it called?"

At last, she utters a professional "*Danke*" and hangs up. She looks at us: Beecher in his rain boots, Justin in his cast, and me somewhere in the middle. At length, she says only one word, the title.

"Runner."

I look at Beecher. He looks at me. I didn't know that.