

2012

## Treading Water

Natalie Olivo  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Olivo, Natalie (2012) "Treading Water," *Exile*: Vol. 58 : No. 1 , Article 21.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol58/iss1/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

# Treading Water

By Natalie Olivo

Eric took a deep breath and prepared to plunge into the cold waters of room 113. He slowly opened the door and ventured inside. His hand lingered on the handle in case he needed to surge back up for air. Room 113 was just like any other Luxury Suite in Evergreen Pines. The resident, one Lester Schuman, was just like any other wrinkled patient. Except this patient withheld Eric's allowance when he was cut from the baseball team. He had also been the coach. Lester could no longer pitch a curveball, but he could still interrogate better than a CIA specialist, even on his deathbed. Eric avoided eye contact with his father as he explained that Viv was in the Hamptons snagging a summer home and the boys were hitting the books at prep school.

"Everyone wishes they could've been here, Dad," Eric began, "but you know how it is."

"Suppose there's no point," Lester said. "Not much money in my will anyway."

The guilt seed was planted. Before it sprouted roots, Eric looked around the room that drained his income. Clear fluid dripped and collected at the bottom of an IV bag. Eric watched it trickle through the tiny tube and into Lester's veins. A typical nephropathy case, Lester's kidneys had stopped responding to dialysis. After increased renal failure, his kidneys would shut down completely. Then the rest of his organs would dim into darkness. He was given less than twenty-four hours. All they could do now was medicate him for the pain.

"Hey Shark, you just gonna stand there like an idiot or what?" Lester asked. His snarled expression matched his crumpled bed sheets. The old man would die with his arms crossed.

"I wish I could've gotten here sooner, Dad," Eric said, perching on the edge of an overstuffed couch.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... At least you popped by once before I finally croaked."

"Dad, you know Viv and I wanted you to live closer to us. They have better homes in New York anyway."

"Well you still beat Turtle here."

"Big surprise," Eric said.

There was nothing else to say. After a few minutes, Eric sighed to fill the silence. Even though his father no longer towered over him, Eric still couldn't make eye contact with Lester. In fact, it was even harder to look at the old man now that he was hooked up to all those IV cords.

"Looks like they take good care of you here," Eric said. He pretended to study a bucolic painting.

"Why, because they think I still want to look at farms after living near them for seventy years?"

Smacking flip flops shuffled into the room, followed by the heaving sag of a duffel bag. This sound usually made Eric's stomach sink, but this time he welcomed the distraction. Jesse was here. Eric tried not to stare at the metal piercings clamped into Jesse's cartilage. The kid probably already got his rebel validation from an entire airport of friendly Midwesterners gawking at his edgy L.A. aesthetic.

"Well I guess I *have* to die now," Lester sighed, throwing his arms up. "I know you can't plunk down money on a plane ticket for nothing, son."

"Nice to see you too, Dad."

Jesse closed his eyes. Eric guessed his brother wished he was back on the plane, soaring over the rocky red earth of the sunny Southwest. Their mother happily frolicked there with her replacement family. Somehow she'd managed to escape.

"Dad has a point, you know," Eric said, turning to his brother. "A career as a *performance artist* is so....unreliable. What if you didn't have the money to fly out and see Dad before he...you know..."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Jesse sighed, running his hands through his mopyy bleached hair.

Eric still expected some sort of parental discipline, but when he glanced at his father, he just saw newly formed bruises in his eyes. Lester couldn't chase Jesse up those stairs any longer, up that orange shag carpet of their childhood home. Lester couldn't even stand.

"You're seriously still doing that performance art crap?" said Lester. "Painting your entire body in silver and then rolling around on the sidewalk will land you in the psychiatric ward."

"It's more than that," muttered Jesse, crossing his arms like a pouting child. "Actually, I just finished up a performance that criticized corporate greed. We all dressed up in suits and then tied nooses around our necks and then ---"

"--- and then took the bus home and clipped coupons," Eric finished.

"Nothing wrong with clipping coupons," Lester shrugged. "In fact, you're a dumbass not to. You guys think the Chef Boyardee fairy placed dinner in front of you every night?"

Eric wanted to say something about the Evergreen Pines fairy placing Lester in the Luxury Suite, but he needed to be careful. Even though Jesse was an apathetic asshole most of the time, Lester always seemed to defend him at the last second, as if he were too clueless for his own good. Lester probably did this out of spite.

"What I meant, Dad, was that Jesse's over forty years old and he makes a living – well, tries to – by prancing around on subway benches."

"I know. It's almost as embarrassing as having a corporate whore for a son."

Eric remembered why he never visited. It was partly to maintain the equilibrium of apathy. Lester was also exhausting. He spent most of Eric's childhood lamenting those who dined from the silver platter. Jesse joined in on Lester's bitterness towards elitists, but Eric had to go ahead and become one. But why should Eric have to suffer for that? He saw his father's tired eyes every night when he came home from the can factory. Eric spent countless nights throwing a tennis ball against his wall to drown out the sound of his parents arguing about the mortgage.

So why should Lester get to make him feel so god damn bad for achieving everything society deprived their family of? Thanks to Eric, Lester finally had his chance to swagger around Evergreen Pines. And what did he do? He isolated himself in that room and waited to die. Eric wanted to rattle Lester's shoulders and shout "See! We finally made it, Dad! I worked hard so you could live your final years in a really nice place! Doesn't that count for *anything*?"

Eric watched the old man take jagged breaths. Did he withhold his approval of Evergreen Pines out of spite? Could he really be that stubborn?

"Well hello, Mr. Schuman! I see you have visitors!"

A tiny blonde nurse burst through the doorway. She was so pale; it was hard to tell where her white scrubs ended and her skin began.

"I've never seen them before in my life," Lester said. "You should probably call security."

The nurse forced an awkward chuckle, nervously glancing between Eric and Jesse. She seemed to be waiting for a sign that Lester was kidding.

"So you're the lucky one assigned to my father," Jesse grinned.

The nurse nodded, but her eyes stayed fixed on Jesse's flip flops as he sauntered up to her. Well, his footwear wasn't exactly hygienic.

"It's too bad," Jesse sighed. "What with his beguiling charm, I don't stand a chance..."

The nurse laughed, letting a few yellow wisps fall out of her tightly wound bun. Eric felt like an unwanted chaperone as the two giggled. Jesse changed women more often than he changed shirts, but did he really need to hit on the nurse assigned to his dying father? Although, Eric couldn't really blame him. The nurse looked like a delicate little bird as she fluttered around Lester, hurriedly fluffing his pillow and impatiently deflecting his snarky remarks.

"Um, miss?" Eric asked. "You might want to monitor my father's analgesic doses."

"You're a doctor?"

"No...stock broker."

"Well I can assure he's in good care here, sir."

Weren't women supposed to go for the powerful suits instead of the smug bohemians? Somehow Jesse had always managed to just drift through life like a candy wrapper caught in the wind. He was either very immune to Lester's pressure or very damaged by it. When they were kids, Lester always pitted his

sons against each other in competitions; who could chug his milk faster, comb his hair neater, tuck his sheets in tighter, jump higher, hold his breath longer. Eric suspected this was Lester's small way of feeling like he was still in the Navy. It didn't matter if they were brushing their teeth or racing in the Pinewood derby. Everything was competition. The more Eric won, the less Jesse cared, and the more Eric needed to win until the gap between them was so large, there was no way Jesse, or Lester, could ignore it.

"Shark!" Lester said. "Go to the vending machine and get me some real food. I'd ask Mr. Performance Artist here to do it, but I'm afraid he'd strike a pose and then just stand there for hours."

This sounded like a Jesse task. He was probably looking for an excuse to keep harassing that poor nurse anyway. Still, Eric was eager to take a break. As soon as he stepped outside, he felt like he had just surfaced after a long time under water. Eric was about halfway down the hall when suspicion made him pivot and turn around. He found himself slowly pushing open the door to Lester's room and peeking inside. This wasn't considered spying, since he did foot the entire bill for this place. Lester and Jesse were both turned away from him, but Eric could still hear their conversation. He couldn't ignore their voices even when he wanted to.

"Come here, Turtle." Lester beckoned.

Jesse's flip flops smacked on the tiles as they shuffled toward Lester's bed. "Yeah?" He asked, jamming his hands in his pockets. Was this a heart to heart? To Jesse?

"I don't want to die here. I want to die at Mason Field." Lester smoothed his sheets as if he had just commented on the weather.

"What?"

"You know, that meadow that overlooks Diamond Lake on the outskirts of town. Jesus, I know you haven't been home in twenty years, but you did grow up here."

"I know where the field is, Dad. I just don't get why you want to...die there..."

"What's it matter to you? Why can't you just grant a dying man his last wish? So even though you're the clueless one, I'm asking you," explained Lester. "Shark wouldn't go for it, so don't tell him. Now make yourself useful and bring over a wheelchair." Lester started to scoot out of the hospital bed. When Jesse didn't move, Lester yanked out all of his IV cords and slung two nearly transparent legs over the edge of the bed. Despite squeaks of protest, Jesse scrambled over and rolled a wheelchair up to the nightstand. Eric was afraid that if he said something now, Lester would slip and shatter on the floor. He could only watch as Jesse eased his father into the chair as if he weighed less than a rag doll.

This had gone too far. "What are you doing?" Eric asked, barging into the room.

"God damn," muttered Lester, collapsing his shoulders in defeat. "I knew you'd screw this up."

"Screw what up?!" Eric asked. He was afraid his calculated surprise gave him away, but Jesse explained the botched escape plans as if he actually had a chance of sneaking the old man out.

"I need to speak to you outside," Eric muttered, dragging his brother into the hallway.

"I know you live in your own little hippie world," he hissed, slamming the door to room 113. "But the rest of us follow *rules*. Rules that say you can't wheel gravely ill patients out of their rooms for one last joyride!"

A few Evergreen Pines residents drifted towards their doorways to catch the show, dragging their oxygen tanks with them.

"You've always been allergic to structure," Eric continued to rant. "Why bother fitting in when you can just hold a giant middle finger up to the world, right?"

Jesse slowly raised a hand from his crossed arms and tugged at his piercings. He seemed determined to pull at one silver gear until it ripped out of his ear, as if this was a more appealing sensation than Eric's lecture. Jesse was truly a perpetual teenager. Eric almost felt sorry for him.

"Listen," Jesse snapped, un-crossing his arms and standing to reveal his full height. Eric forgot how tall Jesse was when he didn't slump. And how skinny. "Don't make this about me and my lifestyle."

"You made it about you when trugged in here wearing god damn flip flops. When are you gonna grow up, Jesse? You can't push a shopping cart through a forest and call it art."

"You just hate what I do because it's something you can't easily judge. You thrive on other people's perceptions. If the man rotting in this place doesn't give you his approval, at least everyone else should, right? Is that why you care so much about the arbitrary rules of god damn Evergreen Pines? God forbid you get in trouble for wheeling around your own father."

"I am paying for this place," Eric pointed out.

"That doesn't mean you know what's best for Dad."

"And you do? Wheeling him outta here is probably just avant-garde 'performance art' for you. And don't get started with your 'Don't Judge My Lifestyle' speech. You *enjoy* being the unappreciated, victimized bohemian while I'm the mean corporate bully."

The crowd that had gathered started to lose interest and to retreat to their rooms. Their hospital gowns swayed as they shuffled on their walkers, mumbling about how *The Price Is Right* was on soon.

"What do you want me to say?" Jesse finally asked, re-crossing his arms. "That you're richer than me? Better than me? Dad loves you more than me?"

"Huh," said Eric, placing a hand on his hip and leaning against the wall. "It almost seems like you actually do care what Dad and I think of you." A victorious fist slowly rose in his chest, validating years of mowing the lawn and dismantling the Chevy engine.

Jesse rolled his eyes and heavily shook his head, his shaggy layers fluttering like a kicked pile of leaves. "You don't get it, do you? Just because *you* are on this endless quest for Dad's approval, doesn't mean I am. Of course, if I was, I'd realize that actually visiting him would do a hell of a lot more good than becoming some automaton businessman."

The victorious fist crumbled and Eric felt his own fist shaking. He had to slap his hand against the wall to keep it from coiling around Jesse's throat. His fingers curled against the industrial paint. Suppressing his resentment towards Jesse was like trying to push a beach ball under water.

"Oh, what a convenient set-up!" Eric exclaimed. "Since *you* don't care about Dad's affection, you're allowed to be totally aloof, and at the same time, judge *me* for not visiting! And hey, why not judge me for making money while you're at it? I forgot it was trendy to be poor, man! Down with capitalism, right?!"

"For Crissakes, just tell me what will end this!" Jesse hollered, throwing his arms up. "What will get you to stop reminding me of how much of a failure I am?! Do you want an official certificate that says you're better than me? To hang next to your framed diplomas?"

"Jesse, that's not what this is about..."

"Bullshit!" He said. "Proving that you're better than me and that Dad loves you more is *exactly* what this is about! Here, if that's what it'll take to kill your condescending lectures, I'll write out a certificate right now. Got a pen? I don't have any paper, but maybe we could use the back of Dad's medical charts. Too avant-garde though? Maybe your income check could also double as your official certificate?"

"Kinda like how your clipped coupons are little certificates proving you're a self-righteous starving artist who doesn't need Dad's love!"

A cold hand on Eric's shoulder startled him. He turned around to see a plump woman with a deep frown. "Excuse me, but would you two mind taking your disagreement outside? There are other residents to consider. We like to keep Evergreen Pines a positive environment."

Eric felt like a child as the nurse escorted him and Jesse outside. The two brothers now stood in courtyard groomed to resemble a Zen garden, part of the Luxury Suite package. A babbling creek with a stone bridge and patches of raked pebbles made the garden look like a movie set dropped in the middle of a nursing home – in the Midwest, no less. A few residents muddled along arbitrarily placed bonsai trees. The artificial serenity of the place made it feel faker than a theme park's attempt to mimic the Far East. Eric started to understand why Lester hated Evergreen Pines, why he wanted to die at Mason Field instead. Zen gardens didn't even have evergreens.

"I can't believe we're wasting Dad's final hours bitching like this," Eric found himself saying, apparently having decompressed a bit.

"I'm sure if we got along he'd think he was already dead," Jesse half-laughed.

An old man in a bathrobe appeared to be lost as he wandered into a sand garden. He dragged his oxygen tank behind him, oblivious to how it smudged the neatly raked lines. The tank bumped against a rock and jerked the man backward.

"Except this place sure isn't Heaven," Eric sighed.

"Not really," agreed Jesse. "Although, you're still trying to act like a saint."

There was no wall to slap out here. Eric squeezed his fists and let his nails dig into his palms. "How is that?" He asked through clenched teeth.

"You're just going on about how we can't wheel Dad out; now we're wasting his final hours, blah blah blah."

"And that's me trying to be a saint and not just genuinely caring about Dad?"

Jesse shrugged, avoiding eye contact with Eric. "I just feel like if he'd asked *you* to take him to Mason Field, if *you* got to be the hero, you'd be pushing Dad towards Diamond Lake right now."

"Well I have to say, I'm a bit surprised he asked you," Eric admitted, rubbing the back of his neck while twisting his head away from Jesse.

"Which you found out through *spying*."

"That really is just like you though," Eric said, almost laughing with frustration. "You don't do shit for the old man, then you swoop in and try to grant his dying wish. Now he'll die thinking you're the Good Son, despite the last forty years. In the end, all you had to do for his affection was try to sneak him out to a god damn field."

In the back of Eric's brain, the guilt seed cracked open. This time it sprung roots that twisted around all of his neurons. He could no longer ignore the fact that Lester was just another sword to parlay at Jesse. Lester was their father, for better or worse, and he was dying. The roots loosened their grip on Eric, but they didn't let go. They wouldn't let go until Eric went back into Room 113 and said good-bye to his father. But he didn't know how to do that. He didn't even know how to talk to Jesse in the Zen garden.

Jesse planted himself on one of the simple stone benches. He slipped his feet out of his flip flops and pressed them against the cold path. "I thought you were on his side," he said. "But I guess not. He spent all of our childhood hating The Man, and then you became The Man. Not like I'm doing much better by dangling upside down from a barn rafter in a giant plastic light bulb." Jesse paused and slid his feet back in his flip flops. "I guess we'll never get his approval, whether we wheel him out to the fucking field or not."

Eric slowly stepped towards the bench. Jesse scooted over to make room for him. After Eric joined him, the two brothers sat in silence for a while. Eric knew that even though they had temporarily ducked out of the ring, they would never stop fighting. But maybe, for now, they could rest together on this barren plateau of emotional drought.

"You know," Eric finally said. "Maybe we did get his approval in a way. I mean, if he knew..."

"Knew what?" Jesse asked, abruptly standing up.

"You know what I'm talking about." Eric paused. "Do you think he knew?"

Jesse sighed and twisted one of the metal spikes in his cartilage. "Yeah," he finally said. "I think the old man knew all along that we were matches." He paused and jammed his hands into his empty pockets.

"He would," Eric scoffed. "He *would* find a way to make us not hate him after all the hell he put us through." He paused, trying to interpret Jesse's stoic slump. Perhaps some guilt roots were coiling around him as well.

"I dunno," said Jesse. "Maybe he refused our kidneys out of spite. Or maybe he didn't want to appear vulnerable. Didn't want us to have a card to hold over him. Honestly, I always thought if he took one of our kidneys, it would've been mine." Jesse furrowed his brow, preparing to imitate Lester's crusty grumblings. "At least you're good for something, son."

Eric shook his head. "You don't get it, Jess. I was always the one who he pushed, and I was still never good enough. But you....he just let you be free."

Jesse said nothing, but just turned around so his back was facing Eric. After a few moments, Eric rose from the bench and once again joined his brother. As Eric watched the sun sink below a red pagoda, he realized Lester wouldn't get to see his last sunset. Of course, he had missed so many when he worked at the

factory, one more wouldn't really make a difference. Missing the twinkling evening, or more minor things like his family, was never what seemed to bother Lester. Bills and bosses were what kept him pacing in the basement late at night.

"Mason Field..." Jesse sighed, placing a hand on Eric's shoulder. Eric tried not to flinch under Jesse's stiff grip. He wondered how long they would have to stand like this. "You know, it wouldn't be the end of the world if we just took him."

"I know."

"For him. Not for us, I mean."

Lester's pain meds seemed to be kicking in. Spoonfuls of opiates had to be the only explanation for his sleepy Buddha grin and general lack of insults. Something had to bother Lester again so that he could go as Lester, not as some serene, doped up goon. Surely the boys would do something to irritate him as they transported him to Mason Field.

Eric crept towards the bed and Jesse quickly followed. The men hoisted Lester into the wheelchair, along with all the times they didn't visit, all the days they didn't call. Despite all their excuses for ignoring Lester, the burden of neglect weighed down on their shoulders. The smell of stale peppermint and hand sanitizer clung to the walls as they navigated past gurneys and biohazard waste bins. Sunlight tumbled through the windows and coated Lester in a hesitant halo, but he didn't seem to notice.

"You actually taking me to Mason Field?" Lester coughed, fighting through the painkiller fog.

"Shh!" hissed Eric. "No one can know."

"Hey! Where are you going?!"

As if on cue, all natural sunlight evaporated from the hallway. Eric and Jesse spun around to see the nurse padding towards them. Her white scrubs burned against the flickering fluorescents. The men looked at each other, then at Lester, and then started to run. Eric's white knuckles gripped the wheelchair handles as he plowed down the hallway. He struggled to navigate the bulky wheels around a tight corner. Jesse burst a few feet ahead and slung open the lobby doors. They almost made it into fresh air, but the nurse was still trotting after them, calling for security. Jesse ushered Eric and Lester through the doors and then slammed them shut, guarding them like a scrawny shield.

"Open these doors this instant!" She hissed.

"Sorry," shrugged Jesse. "I'd hoped things could've worked out between us."

Mason Field was smaller than Eric remembered. Lester was smaller too. They pushed him through thick knots of grass to the field's edge. True to its name, Diamond Lake glistened under the setting sun that bled swirls of gold and pink into the violet horizon. Eric never imagined Lester would die in a place so poetic. Of course, he never imagined Lester would die at all. They parked the wheelchair in a patch of wildflowers. Swaying stems twisted up into the wheel's spokes.

Staring into the glassy lake, Eric was taken back to that cold Midwestern morning when he and Jesse were just gangly kids, shivering on the dock. Lester always talked about how his own father pushed him in the water to teach him how to swim, and now it was their turn. He stalked behind them like a drill sergeant, and then suddenly hollered "jump!" The boys flung themselves into the lake before Lester could yell at them again. Icy shards of water stabbed at Eric, momentarily distracting him from the fact that he couldn't swim. His throat burned as he flailed his arms, vaguely aware of his father looming on the dock, hollering at him to tread water. He was sinking. As he drifted towards the muddy bottom, Eric was convinced that the last thing he would ever see was the sunlight dappling through the water's surface as it fell further and further away. Eric wanted to surrender, to float and just be free, but he couldn't.

By the end of the day, Lester coached Eric different strokes as he sliced through the water like an Olympian. Jesse gave up after vaguely grasping the doggy paddle. He preferred to dig tiny pools in the mud under the dock. In one of his rare moments of affection, Lester dubbed Eric "Shark" and Jesse "Turtle," and that was that.

"I hate my job," Eric blurted, kicking at a clump of weeds. "Sometimes when I'm sitting at my desk, I just want to pitch myself through the glass window. I just want to soar through the sky like dead weight."

"I actually did jump through a glass window for a performance once," Jesse said. "It wasn't symbolic. It was painful."

"Will you boys quit competing already?" Lester grunted, briefly lapsing into lucidity. "Stop trying to steal my thunder. Your lives *both* suck. There."

Eric and Jesse couldn't help but grin. It was the first time their father had acknowledged them as equals. Perhaps Lester only admitted it now because he was so close to the end. After all, even when he refused both his sons' kidneys, he never said a word about it. As all three of them watched the sky deepen with darkness, Eric knew that it was too late to connect. But maybe just knowing that was enough. Maybe now he could stop treading water and just float.