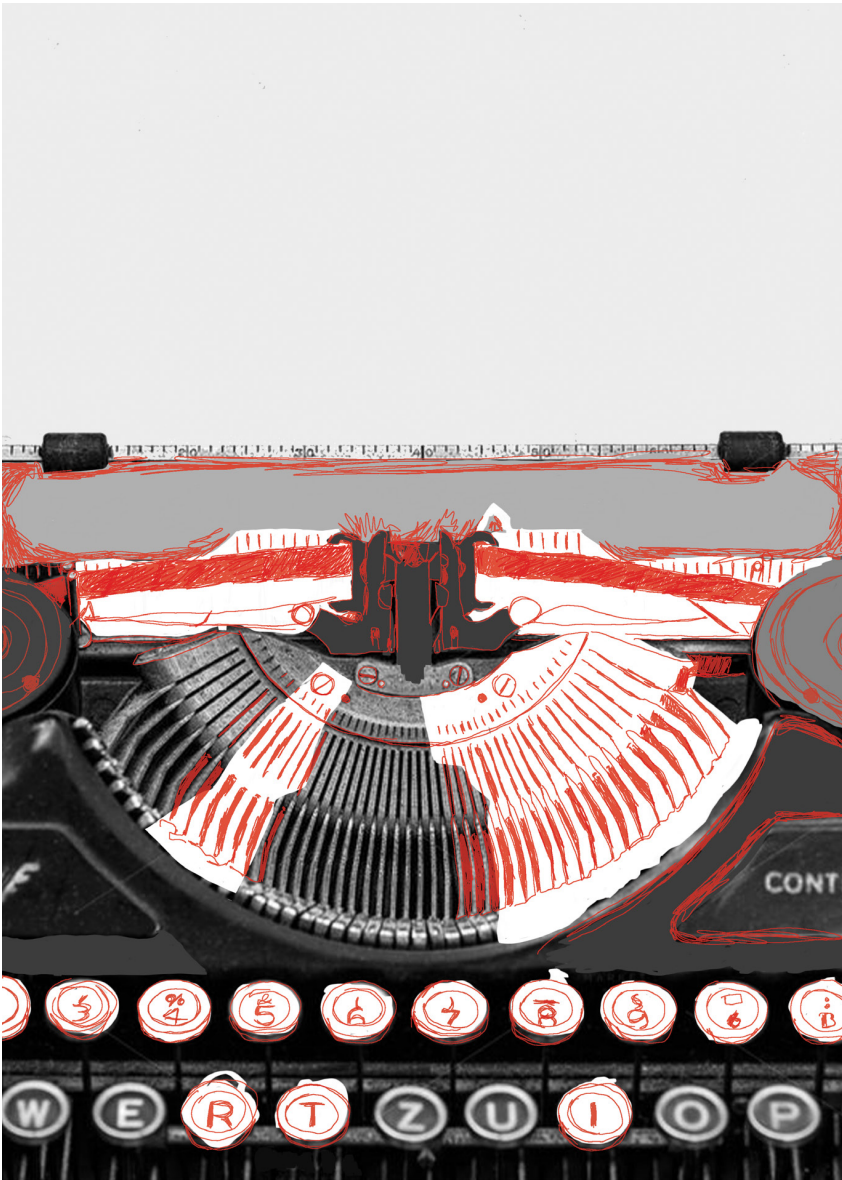


THE ECKLEBURG PROJECT

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY



LITERARY JOURNAL

PROSE | POETRY | ART

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EDITOR NOTE

Dear Reader,

Stories don't stop when a pandemic shuts life down. Artists don't stop painting, photographers don't stop creating, and writers don't stop writing. If anything, the need to express ourselves is more potent, more necessary when we are suffering through a collective crisis. Art, in all forms, has always been a way to connect, to document, to process, to grieve, to endure. In this way, our calling as the official literary journal of Texas A&M University has seemed more urgent than ever before.

While we couldn't celebrate the release of this journal in the way we would want, in a way, this edition is one of the most important we've ever published. Every artist or author in this journal has a story to tell. Stories are respites from the crazy world out there, so I invite you to enjoy them and forget, for just a moment, about pandemics, masks, and vaccines. I hope you'll find, as I do, that stories are gifts that can resonate with us in ways that nothing else can. Stories can bring people together, even if we are forced apart. And that is a pretty wonderful thing.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Roberts', written in a cursive style.

Sarah Roberts
Editor in Chief, The Eckleburg Project

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"AEGEAN SUNSET"

by Cameron Hurta

HORIZON

BY OSAMA

Dusk settles where land meets sky.
Blushing crimson embraces a fresh, blue bruise.

What of the space between the two?
Like the rouge in cheeks, begotten
From both passionate caresses and wrathful slaps;

It matters not what lies in this estuary of tears.
For hands, twilight is the same at dusk or dawn.

Repurposed

BY EMILY CURTIS

I woke simultaneously to the crick in my neck and my portfolio sliding off my lap when I flinched sharply. The sudden rush of shuffling papers fanned out over the tiled floor like a waterfall from a busted dam. My hands sunk into fistfulls of crumpled clothes as I carefully propped myself up on my throne of laundry in the watery moonlight seeping through a crack in the curtains.

Something under my hand felt moist and I found a warm pool of drool deposited on the embroidered “Settlers Shipping” on my uniform. I wiped my mouth with my hand, and it pulled away with a lengthening cobweb between my knuckles and the corner of my mouth. I limply ran the back of my hand over my shorts and rubbed my face on the sleeve of my t-shirt, then picked up the portfolio and swept the papers into their own pile next to the mound of laundry still waiting to be washed.

I yanked open the washer door and the unsealed vault immediately leaked the impertinent, undaunted smell. It was a stench three power cycles, five cups of detergent, and books of dryer sheets hadn’t been able to fix, and I’m sure the itch was still there. The thing itched even when I wasn’t wearing it. The thick damp sleeve of a dark suit jacket flopped forward and hung dramatically out of the agape mouth of the washer like a tragically slain hero. I tugged the cloth a little, and it fell in a heavy, sopping bundle into my hands. The stale smell of that old closet where it had sat steeping nightly for two decades drifted out with it. If I hadn’t had to empty that closet along with the rest of her place before selling, I would have left it there where it belonged.

She had always held out hope she’d see me in it. It’s the suit she wore at the first case she won. She told me it’s the suit I’d be wearing the day I won my first case or signed the first copy of my book or could write the letters *dr* before my name with a neat little dot, but somehow it always looked like it’d be too big for me. I had told her that, but she’d assured me I would grow into it, and the courts always seemed to say she was right.

Holding the wadded ball in my palm, I saw how small it had always been, fitted exactly to her five feet and three inches, not my five feet and eight.

I was right. It was still too big.

Me and forty tons of metal head on, the only two cases she couldn’t win.

I crumpled the suit a little more in my hand like a piece of used paper, the familiar motion of packing frustration into those sheets and tossing them by the hundreds into the wastebin until they spilled out. Like it was summoned by the memory, a sleek black pen suddenly slid out of the inside breast pocket and clattered to the floor. Its thick glossy polish gleamed like jet in the pale light. I stuffed the jacket under one arm and crouched to pick up the pen.

It was as dignified as the day I dropped out and bought it and that cheap notebook to try my hand at writing. Evidently, I always thought I'd toss one long before the other, but it never felt comfortable in my hand. It was too fat, too heavy to hold between fingers that were too used to gripping skinny yellow #2 pencils, too permanent with its inky, knifelike tip and sleek eraserless head that brazenly stared back at you if you caught your reflection in the slivers of silver. It was too confident for a simple tool, I should've known that. Mother's Day the next year I gave it to her. A couple months later, I got a real job.

A job that's uniform now sported my drool and needed to be washed before morning. I tossed it and the jacket back into the wash along with another lazy, hopeless splash of detergent and sent it for another spin. I know suits aren't supposed to be machine washed, but I just wanted it gone. Maybe this time would finally get that smell and that nagging itch out. Maybe I'd have better luck quelling the itch by downing a cup of that thick colorful cough syrup so it could get where the itch really was.

I eased back onto the pile of laundry, pulled the portfolio onto my lap, and held the pen. I needed something to mark spreadsheets anyway since none of the pens in the office worked. Not the grand things it was meant for, but better for it to do what it could rather than just lying around. Still, I knew some of my coworkers might catch sight of it and think such an elegant thing is being wasted counting inventory.

I think I'd agree.





rosy cheeks

BY BRITNEY N. COPPICK

I catch a glimpse of your stare

tiny wings
begin to thump
fill my throat
as they float up
hovering
just below my eyes

then the wings
begin to flutter
the friction burns
my cheeks, I stutter
drowning
in your ocean eyes

but... maybe it's only the icicle air

side note:

as a kid, I sat
in the kitchen
with my dad
and he asked me
for any thoughts I had
about when
I'd fall in love with you

no age or time
came to mind

but I've always had
this feeling like
I'd fall when the leaves do

there's a feeling about
the change of season
when warm air
turns to freezing
like something big
is coming, and
I've always thought
that something was you

I think there might be something here

rosy cheeks
give me away
I fumble for
the words to say
hoping
you'll just read them in my eyes

then the roses
begin to bloom
a smell so sweet
I could consume
inhaling
I kiss you with closed eyes

but.. it's probably just the way your breath colors the air

THE LIGHTS WE SEE IN THE DARK

BY KATE BURCHAM

When I was little,
The Bayou lived in my backyard.
I could see it from my bedroom window.
Really, I could only see the crest of the hill
Damming in the muddy water.
Mostly it was an innocuous piece of landscape,
Covered with bluebonnets in the spring
And low yellow grass the rest of the year.
And yet, the Bayou was a magical place.
It was filled with
Mysterious half built tree houses
And alligators that only showed up to the right people
And hilltops that felt like the top of the world.

But, at night,
It was more magical than ever.
I would look out my bedroom window
And notice the fireflies buzzing around,
Blinking their coded messages in a brilliant display.
They swarmed over the hill,
Lighting it not as the sun does,
With equality for all who step out into the day,
But with emphasis on the small things,
The unimportant things that start to matter
When you don't have the day looming over them.
I wanted to chase them,
My impromptu night lights,
To rush out of bed and run off into the night
To discover things I never knew.
But I was six
And already tucked in.
I went to sleep and never chased the fireflies.

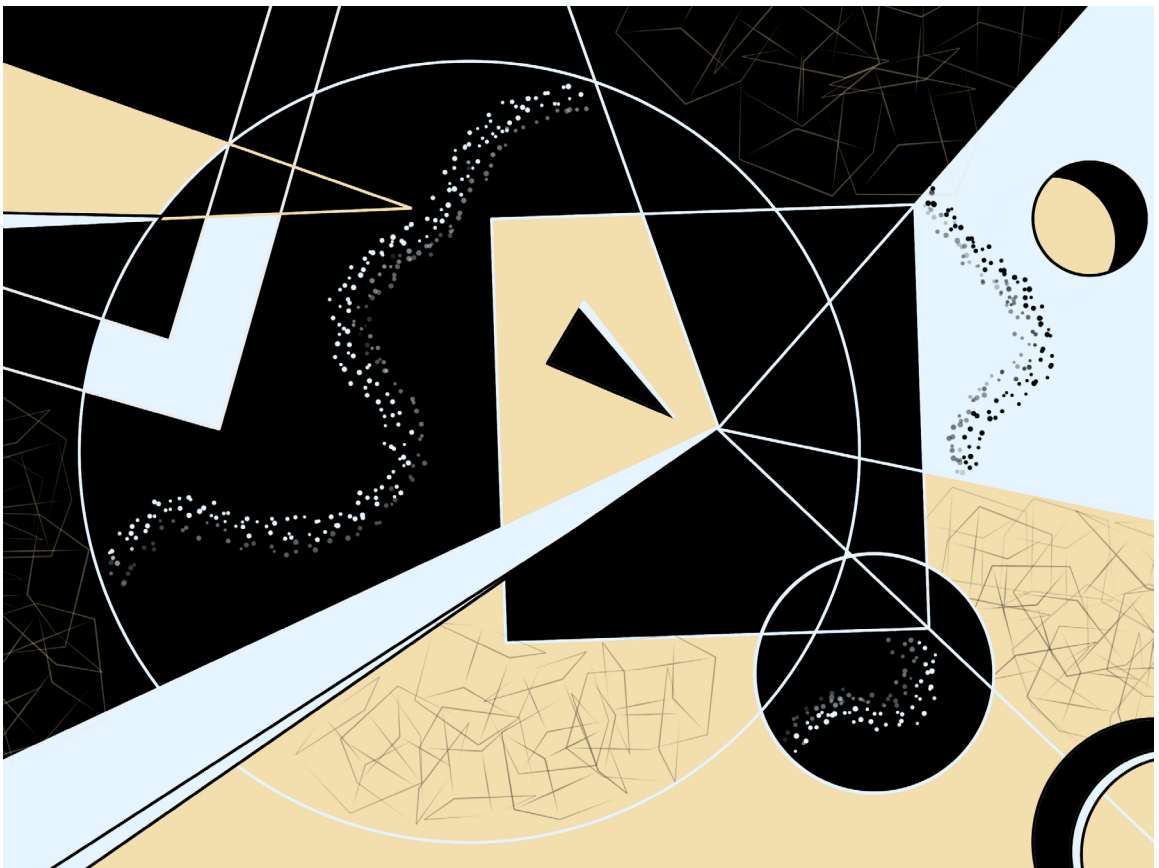
I no longer live on that Bayou.
The bayou I live on now is more concrete than mud
And an alligator wouldn't be caught dead in it.
But I have changed too.

I would no longer climb a mysterious half finished tree house
For fear I'd step on a nail and get tetanus.
I wouldn't hop along the muddy bank of the Bayou
Because who knows what would happen if I fell in?

I would, however, still chase the fireflies
Because the lights we see in the dark
Shine on the unimportant things,
So I know they would shine on me.

"COSMOS"

by Austin Biehle



“PEERING THROUGH A HAZE”

by Jacob Savage



time itches

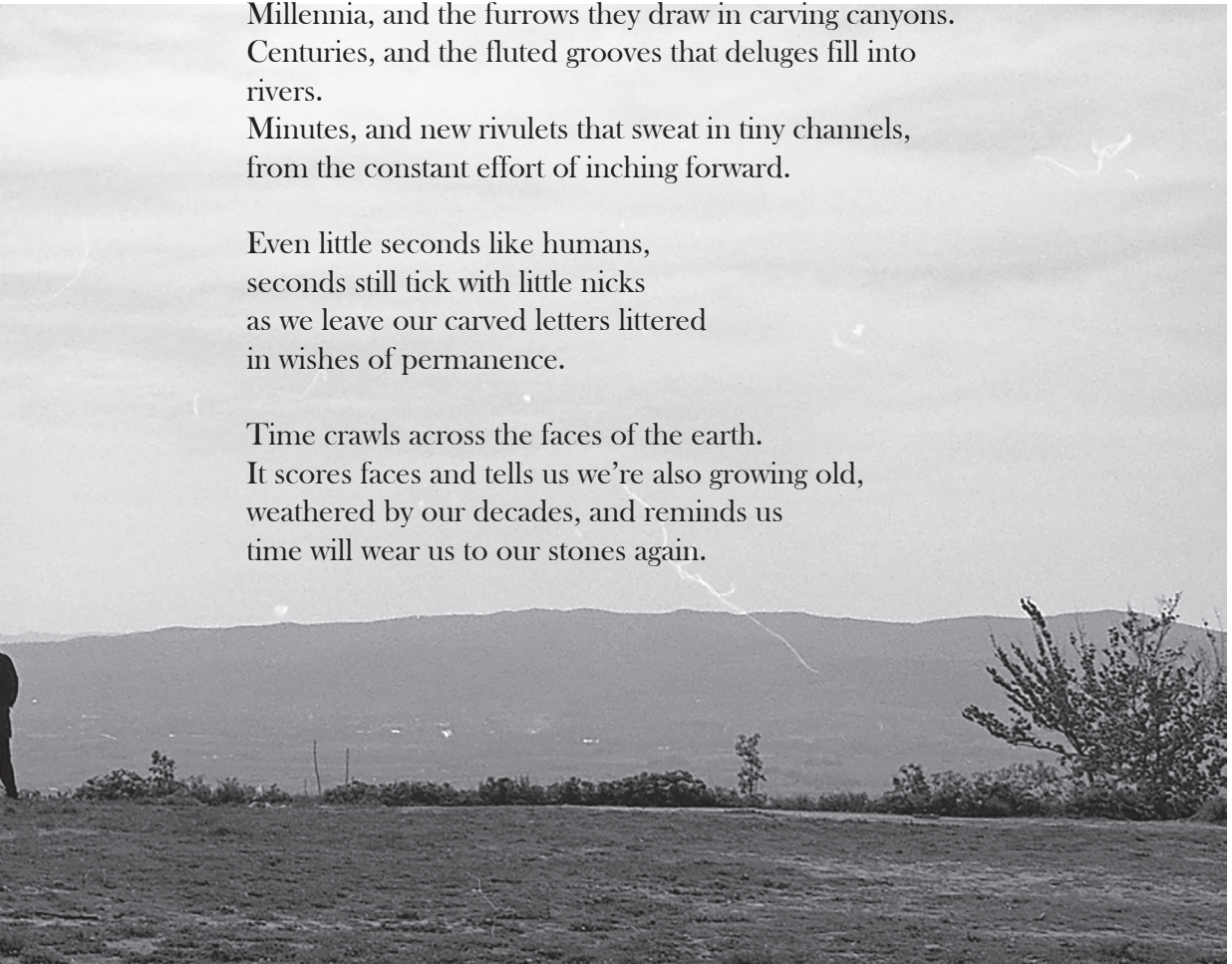
BY EMILY CURTIS

Time itches, etches, sketches,
it scratches,
as it draws its two pointed hands
over land and faces, over and over.

Millennia, and the furrows they draw in carving canyons.
Centuries, and the fluted grooves that deluges fill into
rivers.
Minutes, and new rivulets that sweat in tiny channels,
from the constant effort of inching forward.

Even little seconds like humans,
seconds still tick with little nicks
as we leave our carved letters littered
in wishes of permanence.

Time crawls across the faces of the earth.
It scores faces and tells us we're also growing old,
weathered by our decades, and reminds us
time will wear us to our stones again.





“PERNICIOUS”

by Cameron Hurta

WAKING UP

BY J.D. GUNTER

Fatigue settles into my bones like an old friend,
a heaviness I thought I had escaped.

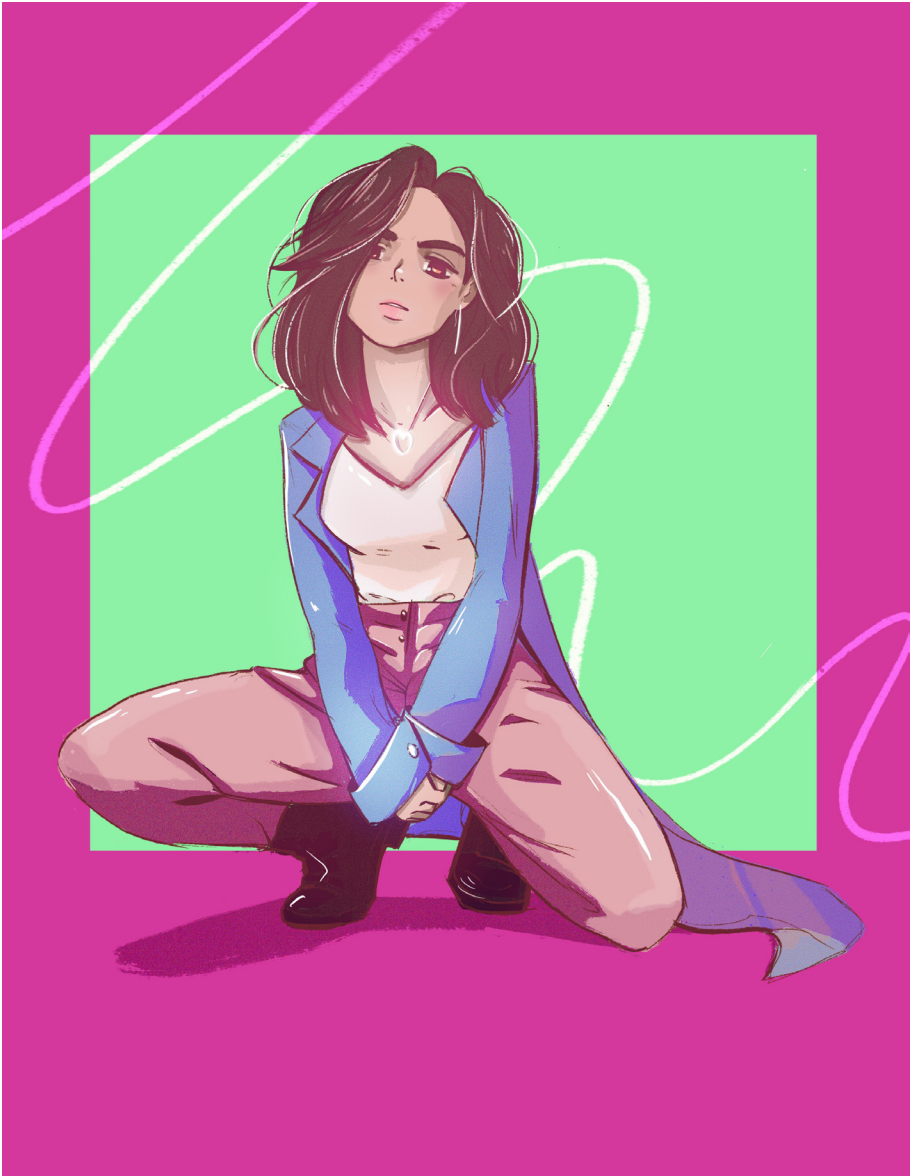
How quickly I forgot these gray mornings
when the sun broke through the clouds
for a few glorious days.

But now, turning over, I remember
that the sunny weather cannot stay.

You see, my mother has lightning in her veins,
and my father exhales thunder.
I was even born on a stormy May day.
My newborn skin as ashen
as the sky glimpsed through the hospital window.

This sickness, I know it's in my DNA.
That today's clouds are part of a legacy
beautiful in its own way.

I have rain boots now,
and I even carry an umbrella.
but some mornings
generations later
I'm still surprised by the rain.



"SLAY!"

by Crystal Torres



"LONE CURIOSITY"

by Ashley Zbylot

How to Rest

DISASSEMBLY FOR THE MODERN HUMAN

BY EMILY CURTIS



From your bellows,
empty the last of the trapped gusts
saved for running over cords, words.
Just rest the raw pipes.

Peel off your face,
fall into a natural neutral, whatever that may be.
Pulling it for other people,
especially at the corners all day like that,
will stretch it too thin after a while.

Wring out the pump--
Careful! Handling the limp
soggy, faltering thing.
Hang it and its worn strings out to dry
in a safe, warm place where it can steady itself.

Slip out of your skin,
gazes scrawled their impressions on it all day.
Toss it in the wash for a rinse,
save mending for the morning.

Take time to tend the pipes and pistons
running on water and sugar.
Siphon in a couple cups.
Shovel carbohydrate coals
into the acid furnace.

Last of all, pop open the top,
pry out the most troublesome, ceaseless of pieces.
Let the loud little terror blow off some steam,
playing puzzle with the thoughts it didn't finish digesting,
run to the head's content for the night.

Reassemble your pieces in the morning. For now,
Rest.

YOU, THE DRAGON

BY SALLY OSTH

You, the anxious, facing away in the dark, confess what has been simmering in the back of your throat for weeks and there is no reply, even though you counted only thirty seconds from the time the lights went out.

You feel a slight rush of heat beneath your skin, just enough to make it hard to fall asleep.

You, the sea, trying to make sense to the shallow end of the pool who cannot feel anything deeper than three and a half feet while you plunge miles below the surface.

Pins and needles surge through you, and for the first time you notice how the feeling burns your belly.

You, the princess, barely breathing in the dress you chose for him, while Prince Charming's eyes have turned chilly and *you just don't do it for me right now* tears your gown to shreds before he turns back to the ball where the other maidens sway to pulsing music. And now you're swallowing the flames down before you say something you might regret.

You, the accused, ask about the birds and the bees and the flowers with petals missing and the answer changes every time: one, five, seven, *I don't even remember*. You, the accused, the *annoying*, the *insecure*.

This time the fire roils hot and fast and you don't bother trying to quell it and finally finally white heat bursts from your throat, the goodbye sears your tongue as it passes your lips and you're crying and burning and leaving.

You, the dragon, awoken to see that shapes in the dark, shallow pools, and royal fools are nothing but ash; memories that gently float away in the breeze of a sun-drenched morning.

"YOUR FISH IS ON THE FIRE"

by Christine Yeh



THE BEGINNING OF THE STRANGE AND WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF RIBS AGWA

BY SAMANTHA CHAPMAN

Ribs waited, shielded below the rocky outcrop, hanging by his fingers and toes. He kept his head bent back as far as it could go, watching the sky, because he knew he'd get the knobble-knees if he looked down. Ribs was on the underside of the wharf of Kilimanjaro, one of the tallest cities in the world. Behind him, the rock of the wharf sloped back and away dropping down, down, down, down, down, down...

Down until the grey-black rock disappeared into the very clouds themselves. It was make it or break it time... quite literally. Ribs knew he'd have one shot at this. He became conscious once again of the homemade grapple gun attached to his belt, swaying in the mountain breeze. One might wonder what a boy was doing, hanging from the underside of

a wharf by the nails on his fingers and toes. Well that's Ribs' business. So shove off.

After he had hung there for what felt like forever and a day, Ribs' fingers and toes began to cramp and ache and he started to wonder if today was the day he would descend to the Below, the afterlife shielded by the clouds from peering mortal eyes. He was so deep in his worry that he almost didn't notice the faint rumbling in the rocks his numbing digits were clinging to. When one of his hands was almost jiggled straight out of the crack he had wedged it in, he stopped worrying and started listening real hard. He had to time this just right.

When the rumbling turned to whirring, he clambered quickly forward towards the edge of the overhang like a demonic spider.

When the whirring took on a distinct whump whump whump quality, he let go of the rocks with his feet and swung forward, letting go with his hands at the apex of his swing.

Before he saw the bow of the airship block out the sun, he had his grapple gun in his hands and was aiming as he fell. Down down down.

But Ribs wasn't thinking about falling. He wasn't thinking about how his body would ripple the clouds as he passed into the Below, how he would scream and wet himself as he fell. Terminal velocity, the sailors called it, the fastest a man could fall. Terminal. As in, you died at the end of that fall, swallowed up by the Below.

No, his mind was solely focused on the anchor he knew would still be reeling in as the airship cleared the overhang. He fired before he saw it, stretching out his arms just as far as they could go to get that extra foot and a half.

The hook arched upwards, sparkling in sharp contrast to the aging hull of the airship. The heavy iron anchor, red with rust, crashed over the edge of the wharf, sending rock chips flying in every direction. It swung towards the grapple hook, gigantic in comparison, and the two met like lovers in the air: gently, perfectly. And then Ribs' arms were almost jerked out of his shoulders.

He yelled as his hands slipped off the handle of his grapple gun and the rope around his waist jerked him to a halt. No, Ribs would not find out what it was like to fall at terminal velocity today. Thankfully his yell was absorbed by the beating of the sheet oars that kept up their steady whump whump whump as if nothing was out of the ordinary. As if the vessel didn't have a stowaway hanging from

the anchor.

Ribs rested for only a few more whump whump's before he started climbing. His arms and hands were tired from hanging onto the wharf, but he knew he was running on adrenaline, that magic spice that the warriors said spiked your blood with courage or fear, depending on the man. Ribs almost whooped as the adrenaline filled him with courage: he had been tested and proven worthy.

Hand over hand he climbed the thin rope attached to his grappling hook. They were hauling the anchor up faster now, he needed to hurry or else be discovered. The chain of the anchor passed by a hatch in the side of the ship, barely big enough for the head of the ballista he knew was right behind it. If he could just reach that hatch.

The anchor was getting close to the top. He went faster, the muscles in his arms burning with the fire of exhaustion.

Almost...

There...

"Stowaway on the anchor!"

Ribs didn't stop. He knew that if the head of the anchor reached the deck, the crew would cut his line and he would be hurled ruthlessly towards the Below.

"Archers!"

Ribs kept going. He knew it would be nigh on impossible to hit him in this wind.

Five feet away, the first arrow whistled harmlessly past him.

At four feet, the archer was reloading.

Three feet and the archer fired again, this time scraping along the hull where Ribs had been pushed by the wind only a second before. Ribs went even faster.

Two feet.

One foot. The archer was aiming

more carefully this time. He knew that this was his last shot, pun intended, to stop the stowaway.

Ribs pushed the hatch open and the arrow thudded into it. He entered the ship tired and more than a little dizzy, but in one piece.

Not waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the weapons deck, he immediately started feeling around for a place to hide. He'd need somewhere small and

--
Boots on the stairs. They were faster than he had expected. Time to improvise. His eyes had adjusted enough for him to see the outlines of everything around him. He quickly untied himself from his grapple gun and moved to the other side of the deck. Reaching up, he grabbed a beam and lifted himself bodily into the space between two rafters in the ceiling.

This feels familiar, he thought as he pushed his arms and legs against the wood on either side of him to hold himself in place.

Lantern light made jagged, flickering shadows beneath him as the crew converged at the hatch he had used to enter the ship.

"Drat," a coarse voice rasped, "He's up and disappeared."

"Find him." This new voice was deep and heavily accented. Ribs shivered, half from the menace in the voice and half from his exhausted muscles. The lantern light started spreading out through the deck. "Gronwynn, guard the stairs." Ribs could almost feel his window of opportunity slipping shut. Once that Gronwynn guy was in front of the stairs, it would become extremely unlikely that he would be able to get out of here... in one piece, that is.

He took a deep breath and dropped from the rafters. By some turn of luck,

not one of the scruffy crew members was facing his direction. That changed when he thumped lightly onto the wood, landing on his fingertips and the balls of his feet like a monkey.

"There!" But Ribs was already gone. He knew how to shift with the shadows thrown by the flickering lantern light, and he made sure to throw small objects to either side as he ran to distract his pursuers. In front of him, the blade of a sabre whipped around the side of a support beam, almost taking Ribs in the ribs, but he dodged low, bending backwards almost in half, and continued his mad dash.

Only one man -- this must be Gronwynn -- stood between Ribs and the stairs. Gronwynn was large, but carried most of his weight in his pronounced beer belly. He would be too slow to stop Ribs. Gronwynn had turned and bent, clearly trying to use his massive bulk to block the way to the stairs. Ribs came up with a plan on the move and then jumped to the right. Gronwynn lunged to the side, mirroring the boy, but Ribs had only jumped to use the top of a crate as a springboard to dive over Gronwynn's head, horizontal to the floor. He rolled as he landed, and then he was at the stairs.

"Stop him!" the deep voice cried, trying to summon help from above.

Ribs cleared the top of the stairs before anyone else could get in his way. Fast. Ribs had always been very fast.

At the top of the stairs, Ribs stopped briefly and glanced around. Where was it? He had emerged in the middle of the ship with the wheel to his left and the bow to his right. He was about to dash towards the wheel when something stabbed into his right arm, throwing him off balance. Ribs screamed, but kept moving. He'd forgotten about the archer. He ran, hot blood streaming down his arm

and off his fingers. As he moved he could feel the arrow jarring up and down, tearing up his muscle and who knew what else. The pain was almost unbearable, slowing his thoughts. The adrenaline had worn off by now.

But he kept running. He had come too far to stop now.

He jumped, ducked and weaved around crew members as he dashed towards the wheel and his goal. His prize. Arrows whistled by him, thankfully missing him by inches and feet as the wind gusted across the deck.

So close, so close.

As he darted up the stairs towards the ship's wheel, an arrow grazed his leg and thunked into the wood. Ribs yelled in pain and stumbled, landing halfway on the stairs and halfway on the wheel deck. He heard the archer whoop in triumph from the bow.

"Get him! He's down!"

Ribs gritted his teeth and scrambled onto the wheel deck, rough hands clawing at his ankles. The adrenaline was back, spiking his blood with superhuman strength. He leapt, landing on top of the wheel, his hand outstretched. An arrow thudded into his shoulder, just above the first arrow, but it came too late. Ribs' hand collided with the ship's bell, making it clang loudly.

In his triumph, he didn't notice the wheel shift beneath him, and before he knew it he was crashing to the wooden decking, arrows jarring painfully in his arm and shoulder. He lay there with his eyes closed, breathing to dismiss the pain. The adrenaline was fading again, and he knew he wasn't long for consciousness.

Something sharp pricked the underside of his chin.

"Stand." Ribs vaguely recognized

the deep voice from the weapons deck. He opened his eyes. Dark leather boots filled his vision, along with the very sharp blade of a sabre. Wincing, Ribs forced himself to his feet, the tip of the sabre staying with him the whole way.

The man with the deep voice was tall and dark, a pale scar underlining his right eye. Ribs remembered the adrenaline and looked the man in the eyes. They were black as the Below and just as heartless.

"So what?" the man's voice was heavily accented, but elegant, "Your mates dare you to come and ring my ship's bell?"

"Are you Captain Nzube?" The man seemed surprised by his assertiveness. His black eyes narrowed.

"I am."

Ribs raised his chin a fraction and puffed out his chest. "Then by the Code of the Sky Brothers you must accept me as part of your crew."

Silence. This was the real test, Ribs knew.

"He did ring the bell, Captain," a timid voice called from the main deck. Probably the first mate.

Nzube stared hard at Ribs as if weighing him. The boy wished he would hurry. The black spots were thickening in his vision.

"Name." The captain's voice was devoid of emotion.

Ribs tried to blink away the spots, swaying a little. "My mates call me Ribs." Suddenly the sharp point at his throat was removed. "Crew of the Kadilagwa, welcome your new mate, Ribs!"

The boy in question didn't hear the crew cheer, as he had fainted before the captain was finished speaking.



**Staff
WRITING**



peaches.
BY CHARLES WOMBLE

He thinks peaches are beautiful and sweet.
He likes to rub the fuzzy part against his
lips and then his cheek. Then he takes a
deep bite into the flesh.
Leaves him with a nasty seed.
But a man's got to eat.

ON ART

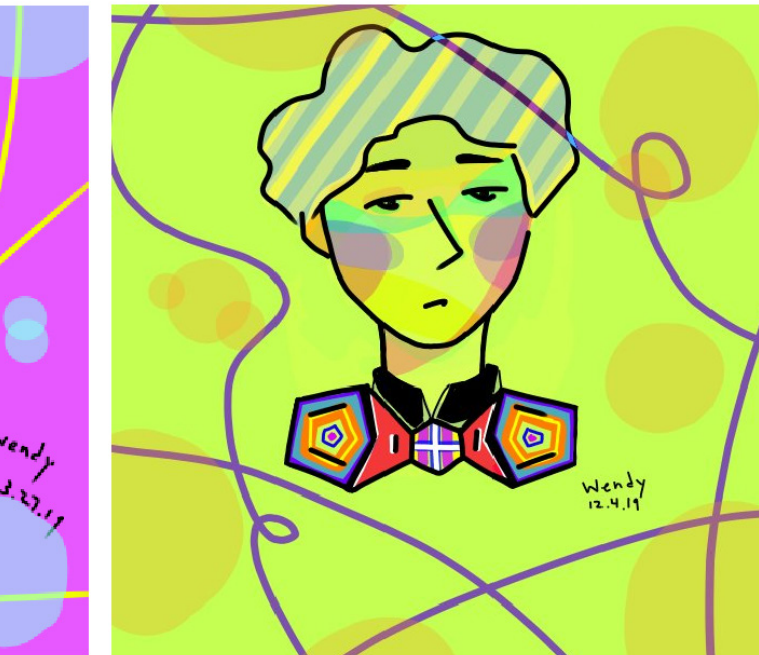
BY RACHEL RAABE



It's important to take note -
trptychs take time to traipse
down thought's rambling staircase to analytical eyes.

Athena, an idea, achieved in an instant -
arriving with alacrity,
ultimately unattainable.

The artist ascends to the altar in three parts:
an ardent flame, a drawn out agony, a kind of afterlife.
Thoughts coalesce, triumphant, tremendous.



"AESTHETIC EGOS"

by Hanwen Cui

another end

BY RAE SEGUIN

“Help,” I said, “I am slowly losing my mind.”
and my mother’s friend replied,
“Think of all the stories you will get to tell your grandchildren
one day, about the pandemic of 2020”,
and I want to tell her that doesn’t make it better
and I don’t want to have to tell stories about this, ever.
But if I did, undeniably, any narrative will be lacking in characters and setting
— a story in exposition.

I would tell them that I felt I had seen
and read far too many post-apocalyptic stories
— with a great hero or heroine who
against all odds survived or saved others
Suddenly all I wanted
was a story about the regular people who had to live through it

How it felt the safest at night to
traverse the sidewalks of my complex, and in the dark easy
to imagine that I was the only human
alive. At least here — in the rainstorms of March
I wanted nothing more than to steep my
bare feet in the only water whose cleanliness I trusted. It came from the sky
and rested on the earth — these two things only I could commit to my body.

Is this a vaccine — if it creates
fortitude in my cells, strength in my lungs.
What’s more, the rain running off the

of the world

roof into a clear pool, I can hear the running creek
behind my childhood home — smell the
wet forest and feel the dirt turning to mud
— the ruts I dug with my toes — it is
all underfoot. And a train whistle blows
but I am the only one left to hear it.
The night is destitute; my feet are cold.

Will the story I tell be the one where
I look over my shoulder, around the corner
but this time it is not people I fear.
It is something unseen that takes us all.
Will it have taken us all?

Each venture is a movie scene. The
shelves in stores are empty —
I know it could be much worse.
There is a creeping idea that far
greater the threat of the virus is the threat of going hungry
but mother says it will not come to that.

There is a dog barking in one of the
nearby apartments— flashes in my mind of the owner splayed out on the floor —
dead or dying — the world is — blank.

The story I may tell is how, when the
world ended this time around, I was alone.



“ETERNAL PAIN”

by Abdullah Abu Aljamal

THE MOUNTAIN TOP

BY ASHLEY ZBYLOT

I
will
reach
the mountain
top. In spite of the
avalanche of words you
use to crush my spirit and
break my heart, I won't let you
end my journey. I will climb onward -
through the ache - because I know that
there's no growth without pain, even if it means
we're growing apart. I will climb on, until I reach the top.

Paxil

BY JOAN J. BELL

I clean out my inbox every morning.
I get dozens of emails each day,
and I absolutely despise letting them rack up.
It makes my own personal cyberspace feel dirty and cluttered
and I hate dirtiness and clutter
I like everything to be organized
I like my letters in a neat line when I put them on the page
and I like every pair of shoes solidly upright and pressed against the next pair like train cars linked
up, one behind the other behind the other.
I need my forks and spoons and knives separated into different sides of the drawer and the big
spoons can never under any circumstances
ever
be placed in the section for the little spoons.
I like my thoughts like I like my spoons.
Each pressed perfectly into its own little space where it cannot escape
where it has a sense of purpose, and a reason for being.

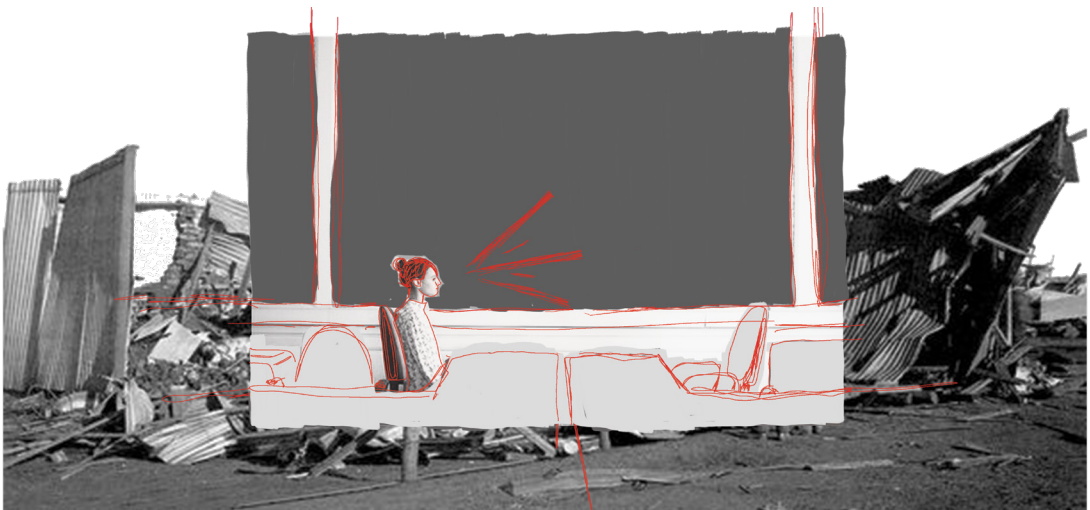
My inbox is piling up.
I have not cleaned it out for days.
My shoes are falling over, several pairs strewn about the room
Like stray dogs running loose
I just can't seem to catch them
I am performing below average
Less than ideal
Like day-old-donuts or
the taste of tap water.

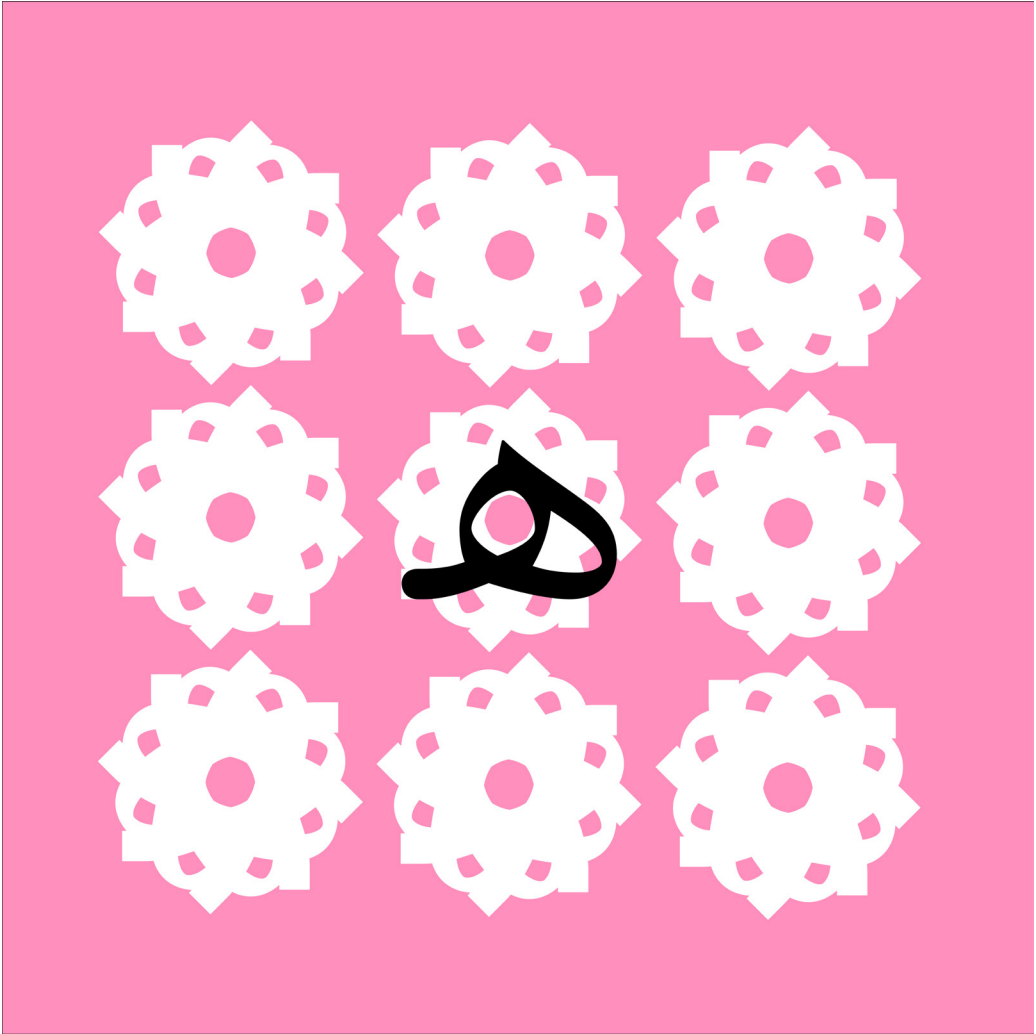
I am carrying pills in my pocket
Hoping that if I take enough they will do more than cause ulcers to open up in my stomach
The way I sometimes think the ground will
Crack open and swallow me whole

My body is reminiscing about the days
When I would move from armchair to sofa to floor to bed back to armchair again all in the
course of one sleepless night
Hoping
Praying
That in the morning
There would still be a sun in the sky.

My heart is swelling up
In this -
An allergic reaction to life
An ode to living
My throat closing as it sings its last nightmare melody
its siren song for peace
Crying "come to me! Come to me."
And I am drowning in an ocean of carbon dioxide and paroxetine
With no strength left to call out

And no voice left to scream





"HA"

by Abdullah Abu Aljamal

get lost

BY BAILEY GRAMS

There was a gazebo on their fairy circle.

The group of young fair folk, following a sudden whim of memory, had gone North at the bubbling brook, went straight for two miles until they hit the oldest tree in the forest, and then turned left just like they used to do. And yet, instead of a vast field, flowing with wildflowers and buzzing with insects as they expected, there stood a faded yellow house and a crooked fence.

And there was a gazebo on their fairy circle.

Now, fairies are known to be many things. Beautiful. Mischievous. Proud. But more than anything else, fairies are territorial. So they, of course, did not take lightly to this affront on their proprietorship. The fact that they had nearly forgotten the spot even existed seemed to hold no merit in their sudden machinations for revenge.

It took them all night, but by the time the sun rose over the horizon and lit the dirty picket

fence with its warm glow, they had pulled from the dirt a new fairy circle that surrounded the gazebo in three thick rows of colorful fungi. They might have done it in half that time if they hadn't regularly paused in their efforts to seethe about the audacity of it all. Mortals should know better than to encroach on fairy territory. Mortals feared fairies once. Maybe they should again.

The fairies' plan to punish the human interlopers started and ended with plants. They're the strongest weapon in a fairy's arsenal, after all. With their circle reinstated, it became a conduit for their powers, like sunlight through a magnifying glass, and they used that to their advantage. The fairies twisted and twirled in the dawn-lit morning dew, weaving their magic through the soft dirt. They giggled as they worked, but it was a bitter sound - as sharp as the teeth that shone from their smirks and as harsh as the gleam in their eyes. The day was still fresh when they looked up at their finished work. Six fully grown mulberry trees towered

above them, thirty feet tall, as if they'd been there for a decade. Satisfied, the fae regrouped under the shade of their fairy circle and piled together for a well earned nap. Surely, with the amount of bugs and pollen that would rain down on the house, the trees would be a clear message that the humans were not welcome, and the fairies would wake up to find that the lot was once again theirs alone.

Hours later, the fairies were pleased to be startled awake by a shriek. They tumbled over each other in their haste to break the sight line of their fungi hideaway and see the looks of shock and disgust that surely covered the humans' faces.

What they saw instead horrified them.

"Harold!! How on earth did you pull this off? Look at those gorgeous trees! This is the best anniversary present ever."

It had been a shriek of delight.

A gray haired woman stood on the back porch next to a similarly gray old man, presumably Harold, who was lounging in a worn down adirondack chair with chipping red paint. As the old woman smiled and clapped her hands together in a haphazard rhythm, Most-Likely Harold simply grunted without looking up from his newspaper. One of the watching fairies reached out an unbelieving hand and grasped her sister's arm for support as the sickening truth of the situation was revealed.

"Keep an eye on the trees, hon, I'm going to grab the bird seed and the binoculars. Oh, this

is so exciting!"

They were bird watchers. The absolute worst type of human to interact with. They're the epitome of unruffleable, believing any inconvenience to be a mere trifle if it's in the pursuit of catching even a glimpse of a colorful tail feather. This was going to be harder than the fae originally thought.

The next few weeks for the fairies could easily be described as frustrating. Annoying. Insufferable. Nothing they did rattled that horrid old couple.

First, they tried the creeping vines. The plan was to have them grow thick and hungry, allowing them to strangle the supports on the porch's railing until it started to decay and fall apart. But the couple adored the vines and said they gave the porch "character." Even when the moss they enticed to grow on the underside of the baseboards rotted under Harold's feet one sunny morning, the couple's only reaction was to clear space on the porch for Harold's wheelchair while his broken hip and ankle healed and to plant a tree in the hole that remained in the porch. Apparently the tree had "been getting much too large for its pot inside the house anyway".

Next the fairies tried strangling the woman's flourishing rose bushes. Instead of getting upset, she simply cleared out the roots, muttering softly about how it "must have just been their time," and began a vegetable garden in their place. The fairies even tried encouraging their mulberry trees to grow faster and wilder, until

the branches were long and weighed down enough to touch the ground in some places and to scrape across the roof of the couple's disgusting little cottage home in others. They hoped wickedly and wildly that the branches would settle down heavy upon the warping shingles and collapse the roof.

None of it mattered. Harold merely rolled his wheelchair out on the nature-lined porch and called a landscaping company to trim the branches. They came once a week and worked for long hours solely on the mulberry trees. It seemed a bit strange to the workers how these trees grew so fast, but they got a good tip and the old woman always made fresh lemonade, so they didn't complain. Even when, after a few weeks of the same pattern, some of the workers began to hear an incessant buzzing and others swore they had been stung by something, they never stopped coming to the house like clockwork. After all, they never did find a beehive, and the lady of the house was quick to administer plenty of first aid and give extra snacks to any who found themselves on the bad side of the mysterious insects.

The fairies were getting desperate. They grumbled along day to day, some with a cocktail taste of bug spray and sweat still in their mouths from the landscapers' skin, and continued to scheme. It finally came in a midnight dream. The perfect plan. They moved into action at once.

It took weeks and weeks for the fairies to get it right, because in order for the plot to work, it had to be subtle. The humans were as unsuspecting as ever. While the fairies danced

through the grass, the old woman simply fertilized her garden around them. And when the fae called upon the light of the sun to lend her gifts, Harold took out his binoculars and watched a blue jay land in his mulberry trees, unaware of the magic pulsing just off the porch. The fairies continued to toil tirelessly in their trickery as the humans trudged along in banality. The day that the woman declared it was finally time to harvest the parsnips in her garden was the very same day that the fairies declared their plan was complete. Now all they had to do was wait.

It didn't take long. Which was good, since, though it might not be well known, fairies are also quite impatient.

That very night, as the fairies were preparing to go to sleep, they were interrupted by a sharp, keening melody. It advanced down the lane escorted by flashing lights that exploded the yard in blues and reds. When the partying lights stopped in front of that sickly yellow building, the fairies were nothing less than overjoyed. Sending up delighted shrieks and twisting together through, around, and under their toadstool forest, they danced to their success song until the sound and color disappeared back down the lane. Then the fae continued dancing, uninterrupted, into the next day. And then the next. And the next. Until finally, tired and proud, they turned their backs on the fading yellow house for good.

Because the little folk knew something important. But if fairies are the only ones who can identify with ease the subtle differences between parsnips and hemlock, well...whose fault is that, really?



“TOUCH”

by Ashley Zbylot

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from
all of
us

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Cheers all around.

It truly takes a village to raise a creative project.

- The Eckleburg Project Staff

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