

THE ECKLEBURG PROJECT

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	ART & PHOTOGRAPHY	

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I think the plight of the artist can be described as looking into a broken mirror and using its reflection to draw a self portrait. For, the fragmented reflection of a broken mirror is similar to the unordered and inconsistent storage of memories. Some shards may offer relatively intact and protruding images while others are so shattered and atomized that they struggle to offer anything more than proof of damage. The struggle of the artist is then to craft a new, cohesive, and representative image out of this disproportionate array of images that are not even the originals, but broken reflections of what once was.

This is why I think the purpose of the artist exceeds imitation. Either intentionally or unintentionally, the artist, whilst attempting to craft a perfect representation of life, begins to heal and reform what once was broken. As the artist puts the broken shards of the mirror back together they do not fit the pieces into their original placement. Instead, they form them into something new. They form them into a shape that offers more than the mere reconstruction of what once was. They form them into a shape that offers a fortune of what the past can create, and how memories can offer inspiration for the future if they are looked upon carefully by the eyes of someone who understands their potential.

Reader, you must know that every piece of poetry and prose, every illustration and photograph within this journal has not only been crafted and formed from the broken mirror reflections of student artists here at Texas A&M University, but carefully, gently, yet intensely examined by those who strive to understand their form and the fortune that it carries. Ultimately, I must convince you that there is both a broken mirror and a means of reconstructing it within yourself, and to gaze upon these pages is to feel your own fortune in relation to their cohesive image. I beg you, to take that feeling and look everywhere you can.

Best,

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read "B. Womble", followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Charles L. Womble

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VOID AND NULL

BY JOSHUA T.

A contract was made between the tongue and the ear,
An assurance that the legs would never quake in fear,
A promise to oneself that the arms would never tire,
A promise that has turned the soul into a liar.

The body followed the path set forth by the tongue.
Blindly it danced to a sad song left unsung,
For the eyes were drawn and sewn to the sky,
The same sky created by a beautiful lie.

So much pain was hidden inside bleeding fists,
So much weight held by both broken wrists;
All for the hope of healing at the end,
But a liar's wound deserves no mend.

Burning skin filled the cracked nose with such fear,
That it cried warnings of the end drawing near;
But nothing happened and the fire burned on,
The seared flesh forced to move like a pawn.

The path has since faded; there's nowhere to go.
The deceived ear goes deaf and gives into woe.
The tongue writhes with laughter inside the skull,
For the contract has since been made void and null.



“NIGHT SWIM”

BY LAUREN HEAD



“THE ADULTS ARE TALKING”

BY ZOE BAO

GRAY'S END

BY DARBY L. JOHNSON

The days are t
i
p
p
i
n
g

I cannot see my step
I only know that all is dark
And my candle lowly marked

My sister says its normal
I wonder if that's so
Or if her hushed tones
and darting eyes
Confesses what she knows

This reality is crowning
our brilliance is withering h
the crypt is showing
s e

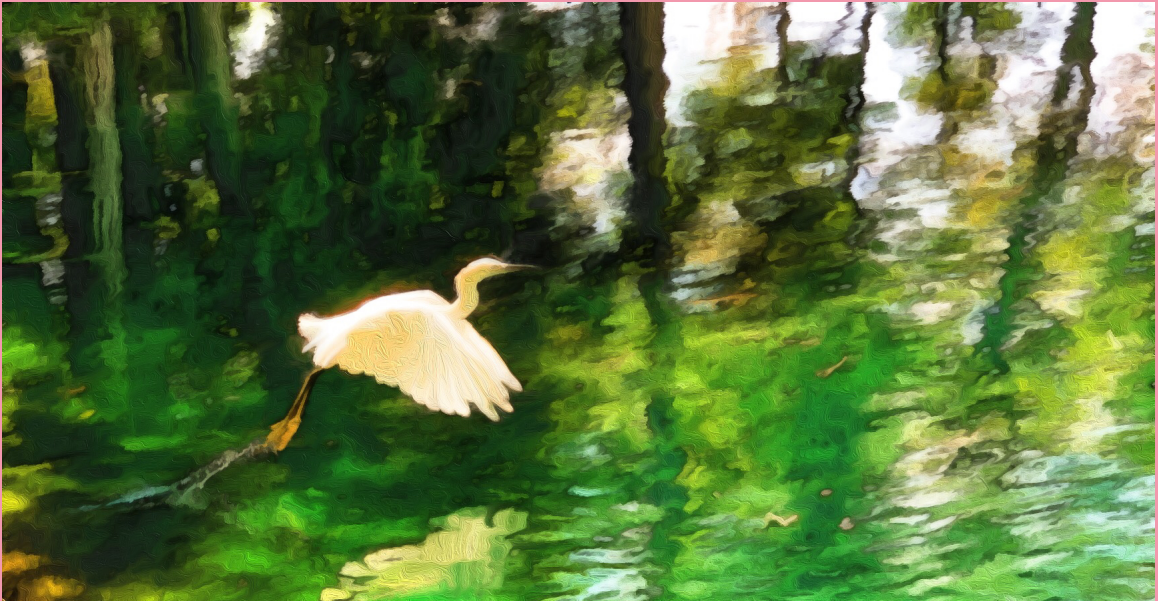
if we return to a
can mine float up?
I'd like to see above the ruin
And ponder on what once was human

“GOLDEN HOUR”

BY AUSTIN BIEHLE

IT SMELLS LIKE A HAPPY FIRE WAS HERE

BY MEREDITH WHITE



It smells like a happy fire was here.
Last night I fed him cranes and airplanes,
And Christmas was heavy in the air,
And new smiles were added to picture frames.

But the morning came, and the fire died.
The ashes sat in their bed,
And I know now why we say fire is alive,
And I hope he died well fed.

COURTYARD HOME

BY ZOE BAO

Above the dining room table
hangs a family portrait
from a bygone era
In the portrait
my grandma sits with her family
in their Chinese courtyard
Surrounded by magnificent antique vases
and freshly bloomed magnolia flowers
In the portrait
time stands still
Depicting a time no longer
Before they came to erase their culture
and tear her family away from
where they once called home
Years have passed since the revolution
Since the unfathomable brutality
My grandma still speaks of her
childhood courtyard home
Like it was yesterday
Her story
like many others
are forgotten
Centuries of culture
thrown away
and replaced with a little red book



“TOM THE TRAVELER”

BY JULIA WARGO

SUN

SPOTS

BY LAUREN HEAD

Griffin and Micah took their first steps into the chilling winter air. After a vigorous practice, the sweat that once served as relief from the heat now seemed to freeze against their skin almost instantly. Griffin shuddered under his thick canvas coat, sucking in frigid air through his teeth as he did.

"It's too fucking cold to be walking home," he winced, as if they had a choice.

Micah looked up at him with a smile. "It's okay, Finn, it'll be fun! Look, it's even starting to snow!" he responded, using the nickname that was reserved for only his voice.

Finn glanced ahead of him, noticing for the first time how quickly his view was being obstructed by a film of white snowflakes that, strangely enough, reminded him of the spray of freckles that coated his friends' cheeks.

"Oh," he managed to reply, temporarily stalled by the comparison he had just made, then he added with a bit more of his usual bite, "then let's hurry up and get home before we freeze our asses off."

The walk home was mostly silent, save for a few gasps from Micah when he caught a snowflake in his bare and quickly reddening palms, but this was normal for them. Finn usually had his headphones on after a long day of school, practice, and (though he wouldn't admit it) human interaction. Both boys had quickly learned each others' boundaries, and for the shorter one, that meant allowing Finn a couple minutes with his music before he started to engage in conversation. Now Micah had his hands cupped in front of his

mouth, breathing out hot air in an attempt to warm them up, and Finn's eyes were pinned on him, looking a bit conflicted. Micah flushed a little under the gaze, but it may just as well have been because of the cold.

"What?" he asked, smiling up at his friend suspiciously as he brought his hands away from his face.

Griffin's head cocked to the side, but he seemed to make a decision, suddenly reaching out with his gloved hands to grab the smaller boys'. He rubbed them in between his own and sighed, turning his attention back to the sidewalk ahead, noticing that they were only a block away from Micah's house and not much farther from his own.

"Do you wanna come over tonight?" he asked flatly. "We could just watch a movie or something. My mom's been gone this week."

Micah knew what Finn was trying to say without having to actually hear it out loud. Since his parents split up and his older brother went off to college, Finn's mom had been working a lot more, and as standoffish as he was, Micah knew that he felt lonely without anyone in the house.

"Sure, Finn!" he chirped, then looked down at his hands, which were still enclosed in larger, gloved ones. "Wow, I didn't know you could be nice," he joked.

The taller scoffed, but a smile ghosted his lips. He gave the cold hands a final squeeze before returning them to their owner.

“Better?” he asked. “Now you can go back to freezing”.

When they finally arrived at Griffin’s front porch, they kicked the snow off of the bottoms of their shoes and pushed almost desperately through the door, sighing contentedly as the warm air enveloped them and thawed them out, starting at their numb fingers and toes. They trudged upstairs and settled into the worn couch in Finn’s room, Griffin on the left side and Micah on the right, just like they had sat the first time Micah had come over and politely waited for his new friend to offer him the seat first. Now, however, they didn’t sit on the very far edge of their respective sides. Now they sat closer to the middle, where their thighs could just barely touch without giving the wrong idea to the other. Without insinuating anything beyond a friendship. But Micah knew better. He had known about his crush on Finn since he was nine years old and had scraped his knee on the sidewalk after attempting a cartwheel meant to be impressive. Griffin had so carefully placed a dinosaur bandage on his knee, tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on sticking it to the right place.

“There,” he had whispered, admiring his handiwork. “All better?” he had asked.

“All better, Finn!”

That was the first time Micah had used the nickname that now sat so comfortably on the tip of his tongue.

The snow fell in sheets outside the window, but it went unnoticed by the boys, who

were tucked under a shared blanket, eyes focused ahead of them at the bright screen. Just as Finn suspected, Micah’s eyelids quickly began to droop and he let the heavy weight of his head fall against the shoulder beside him as he drifted to sleep. The latter followed suit not long after, the voices on the TV still droning on in the background.

When Finn awoke, the first thing he noticed was a sharp pain in his neck from sleeping on it wrong. The second thing, he noticed very closely after, was the warmth of a body pressed up against him even as it was pulled tightly into a ball. He felt a slight tingle where warm fingers had made their way around his waist and crept part way under his shirt so that they touched bare skin. It was still mostly dark outside, but the dim blue glow of dawn seeped in through the slits in the blinds and cast faint streaks of light over the boys’ faces. Finn found himself using this barely-there light to count Micah’s freckles. He wondered how many times he had done it before, it was certainly too many to count. It was harder to find them now; the lack of golden sunshine that came with the winter months caused the tan flecks to dull until they were barely noticeable, but if Finn pulled his face a little closer to his friend’s, he could just make out the pattern of dots he’d grown so familiar with. The pattern of tiny little sunspots that etched constellations across his face. He got about halfway across the smaller boy’s face before falling back asleep, the soft lull of Micah’s breath against his chest pulling him into a comfortable state of rest.

PETTY

BY AARON ROBERT DAILEY

I know a secret no one knows,
Can't tell Daddy or Sheriff Poe
Can't tell anyone what she said,
Little Peggy Sue is gonna gorge herself to death

I saw her in the back of the barn
Eating cornbread; scarfing down Mars Bars
Chocolate on her lips; water in her eyes
"Don't tell no one – I'm eating 'till I die."

There's nothing I can do, and there's nothing I can change
So I sneak out at lunch, and I meet her every day
Take my milk money and I buy her a shake,
We split my sandwich while we sit on the hay

"What's so wrong about being alone?
I wish I were truck driver living on the road
No one could call me; I wouldn't have a phone."
Why she told me that? I still don't know

I know a secret that I can't tell
Little Peggy Sue wants to eat her way to Hell
There's nothing I can do, and there's nothing to change
But Sheriff Poe is gonna find her out one day

PURPLE PRAYER

Peggy Sue's body stretches like a balloon
Her dresses rip; her feet swell in her shoes
Her daddy don't notice, so she keeps gaining weight
I can't stop her – we fix our own plates

"There's nothing you can do – I want it this way
It's a Petty Purple Prayer, but I say it each day
Nougat and cornbread can fill my throat
'Till the Petty Purple Prayer is a Petty Purple Choke"

I don't have a prayer, but I know how to dream
I dream of Peggy Sue; she's consuming light beings
Glutting herself on the heavenly life
'Till her belly explodes with effervescent pride

I run beneath stars with tears in my eyes
All I need's a chance just to say goodbye
But tonight, red light saturates the barn
Sheriff Poe found what he was looking for

“EGGSHELLENCE”

BY KRISTEN SCHILLER





“PAGE OF PENTACLES”

BY CIERA DELA CRUZ



SENTIENT PRESERVES

BY E. CURTIS

Two days ago, I was mining my own business, an asteroid caught in the exoplanetary net, when someone, somewhere, planted their big fat politician thumb on a big fat red button. That's how I'm convinced it happened. The whole planet had been arguing for decades and started screaming and throwing things in the last few, and someone at a long, grim table decided to end the world just so they could get the

last word. And they would have, if it weren't for me. As it turns out, I get these last words.

I guess it's more fitting to say I am the last words, sentenced to solitary confinement. I'm not a violent person. They wouldn't have sent me up here with only one other person if I was. But there's something contagious about having a front row seat in orbit watching your home burn that just

inspires an equally explosive response, to recreate the little madness and see if you can make any sense of it. And when the little red pimple pops up on your radar to let you know the Life Conservation Administration is coming to frogmarch you away and sit you down in front of a document and ask you to recount whatever pieces you can fish out of swimming in whatever feeling spilled out, the only thing that really sinks in is that that was it, but you're still loitering around somehow.

It's funny how easily becoming singular turns you into something else entirely. There are a dozen terms you can pin it as. The unique. The original. The first. The last.

The only.

And that is what I was. The only.

Originally, there would have been two of us only on this LiCA ship. Back on the mining station, there were two faces pressed against the glass as Ehtyne fried like food left in the hydrowave for too long. But after dinner and the show, my fellow spaceman had brewed himself a cup of tea and decided to take a walk outside to clear his head. I used to love space too— obviously, given my profession. But I can't stand the thought of all that emptiness now, or the sight of it. You never know when you'll see a stiff corpse drifting away in graceful cartwheels, or your home crumbling apart in slow motion, or

nothing at all. Two point seven Kelvin apathy.

Lenden had left me a note beside his half empty cup of lukewarm spiked tea. He was sorry, and he figured I might need the tea more than he did. He'd also left me his backpack, stuffed with whatever personal items he'd brought up with him— rare artifacts now. It's a sorry consolation prize for simultaneously winning and losing the world's worst lotteries. So I was left, preserved in my airtight tin can, sitting between boiling or freezing like everyone else. I thought about following Lenden to chase whatever he saw out there, but the thought of the cold froze my finger an inch from the little red button of my own. I was already shivering, so instead I sat at the table spilling sips of tea down the front of my jacket and watching the Life Conservation Administration's shuttle creep closer on the radar.

When the LiCA docked, I grabbed a couple personal effects from the aftermath of my previous outburst and took Lenden's heavy backpack. I don't know why I did. I suppose because it was mine now, and there wasn't much left that was, but it still wasn't fair. He should have hauled his own damn weight, and I'd haul mine, and then maybe between the two of us, we could have gotten somewhere. It was too heavy to carry, so I dragged it along. The LiCA officials accompanying me didn't offer to help, and I was glad they

didn't pretend they could.

So here I am, in a blessedly windowless room on a LiCA transpon bound for headquarters with some other onlys. By the looks of us, three moons and two planets have recently kicked the cosmic bucket. The LiCA tries to get us to socialize because being this kind of only tends to give people bad ideas. They don't want us to be alone. But I'm not. When something like this happens, it's not as if you're alone. That's the worst part. There are still septillions and septillions of people around, just not your people.

Besides, it's not as if the LiCA really cares how we handle it, only that we do. They simply realized that the vacuum of space was about to eat every Ehtyinian either well done or blue, so they sent a ship for the last two and found the last one. They won a little lottery of their own. Lucky them. It must be incredibly satisfying to collect another last word for their library of genetics. Maybe less like a library and more like a living obituary.

I'm not sure exactly what I want now, but I do know I don't want to spend the rest of my life here. I did, of course, make an effort on the legal end. I don't know anything about law, I just figured I'd bring up my rights under Ehtyine's First Contact Contract and see what happens. The LiCA, for their part, were happy to provide the ridiculously long FCC re-signed by our own Global

Representative proving that like the many before him, he reauthorized the LiCA to harbor survivors off-planet in the event of global disaster. The LiCA assured me it was bioverified with no chance of forgery: eye scans, blood and saliva tests. Fingerprints.

I don't know if the GR's thumb was to blame for the button, but it seems as good a guess as any right now. I don't know enough politicians I can blame. I want to argue that the LiCA should let me go at some point, that the contract isn't valid or that they're lying, but we both know they aren't. It's standard procedure when you sign your FCC, just as the GR did, and I've decided I hate him a little for it. If he were still alive, I might not feel so vindictive; but I'm the judge and the jury now, so my verdict it is.

There might not be any windows in this room, but there's still plenty of space, too much blank space, right here at the end of this document. It's too presumptuous. Expectant. As if it just goes on, as if there's more story to tell. Well. There isn't. The past is just that, and I now have the certainty of knowing what the rest of my life will be like. If you need more information, I'll be perfecting the art of omphaloskepsis while waiting to be slapped with a label and stacked in the LiCA's pantry with all the other onlys. Ehtyine's salvaged leftovers. Just a sentient preserve plucked from a sealed can floating in space.

BEAUTY IN A BOTTLE

BY SHIVANI SELLADURAI

You cannot put a premium on beauty
Craft and sell with convenience
There are stories
That the skin doesn't tell
Churning beneath
Ripening
Ready to seep out of your pores
I unclogged my skin with
BEAUTY IN A BOTTLE!!!
Now the stories couldn't pour out
They weren't even there anymore
Couldn't "taint" our world
Treated our melanin like dirt
To be swept away
Dabbing my face with
An insidious ideal
A mask that I tried embedding
Into my skin
Or a truth I tried peeling away
But It Never Worked
And I thank God every day it didn't
I'd miss my stories



“DROWNING”

BY ADRIANNA DRAKE

OLD

**EZRA
CAINE**

BY CODY BAIRD

Old Ezra Caine sat atop a high, flat mesa. He could see every grain of dirt, every shrub, every skittering lizard for miles. Above him the sky was dark, a thunderstorm brewing at his back.

Ezra was being hunted. By whom, he didn't know. Why, he did. This desolate landscape was a lawless place, but money traveled and its influence cast a wide net. Even if there weren't a bounty on his head, Ezra knew someone would have reason enough to come for him. He had lived a long life and he credited

it to dirty deeds and double crosses. The local barkeep was the first to tell him of the hunter. The grocer and postman confirmed it. A stranger came to town wearing a black bandana over his mouth. The stranger had poked around, asking questions in a garbled, choking voice. In his hands he clutched a poster with Ezra's face plastered to it. The dollar amount on the paper was hefty, Ezra had been told, and it didn't differentiate between dead or alive. Ezra could keep his head down and his profile low, but he knew the town was small and his luck had a

limit. He could watch his back and cover his steps, but soon enough he would look over his shoulder and see the barrel of a gun.

So he fled to the frontier. Not far, though. For all he knew, the man would run him ragged. Run him until his boots fell to pieces, and when Ezra finally collapsed in a cloud of dust he would put him down like a dog. Ezra wouldn't let that happen. This wasn't the first hunter to come for him and he wouldn't be the last.

Ezra felt he was a decent hunter himself. One lesson he had learned was that every animal was dumb. They fell for bait. All he needed was to figure out what they wanted most, and they came flocking. So Ezra climbed atop the highest mesa he could find and sat down where every pair of eyes for miles could see his silhouette against the darkening sky.

He watched and waited. He snapped his attention to every bit of movement on the plains below, hoping to see the hunter creeping through the underbrush. Ezra didn't see the hunter stalking him, though. For hours, not a soul crossed Ezra's line of sight. When the hunter did appear, he crested a hill a mile away. He didn't look at the ground, or cast his gaze around, didn't check for boot prints or snapped sticks. No, when the man emerged Ezra could feel his gaze. The glare made Ezra shudder, and the hunter began to stride

across the plain. Despite the distance, Ezra never felt the gaze break, as if the man wasn't even blinking.

The rain began to fall. Ezra rose and readied himself. The hunter was close. Soon the moment would arrive. A moment Ezra was familiar with, had once relished. It only lasted seconds, but when he was in it, when the crack of revolvers rang out and echoed across the prairie, when blood pumped and flowed and men lived and died, it felt like a lifetime.

The hunter crested the mesa. Ezra's adrenaline. They stood twenty paces apart.

"Ezra Caine—" the man said, his mouth hidden behind a black bandana.

Ezra cut the man off by drawing his revolver. He squeezed off three shots from the hip. They all connected, punched into the man's chest and stomach.

The hunter recoiled but didn't fall. Three holes adorned his torso, but no crimson seeped out. Ezra's jaw slackened.

"Put your weapon away," the man said. The words sounded like they came hard to his lips.

"Who are you?" Ezra called out, but his voice was weak.

"Put your gun down. You've done your damage."

Ezra hesitated, then holstered his revolver.

"Are you here for the price on my head?" Ezra asked.

"I don't have need for money."

"Then what?"

The hunter's eyes burrowed into Ezra. "Do you know a man they call John Joe Garrett?"

Ezra racked his brain and tried to conjure up memories. Nothing came. "I don't."

"No, you wouldn't."

Ezra said nothing. The hunter continued. "Garrett was nasty. The kind to put a bullet in you when he loses fair at cards. You met him. Once. He claimed you spilled his beer, owed him a whiskey. You disagreed, and he caught a bullet in the face and bled out in the street."

Ezra shook his head. "I don't recall." "It ain't for you to remember. This is his story. See, when John Joe was laying there, jaw blown off, it wasn't pain he was thinking of or his life flashing before his eyes. It was you. All he had in him was rage. Rage so hot that he couldn't let go, just let it burn."

"How do you know this?"

"Rage ate him up, and John Joe stood up, covered in blood and dust, and he wandered out into the wilderness. Walked for years. He wanted you, Ezra Caine. He searched, and he never forgot the face of the man that ruined his. When he saw a poster with you on it, he knew."

"What do you want with me?" Ezra demanded. He reached for his revolver.

"Time doesn't heal all wounds, Ezra Caine. Jaws don't grow back. But sometimes something rotten inside, something festering? That goes away. I told you this was his story. You just played a part in it. That's done. John Joe let go of the anger. He let go of you."

Ezra's hand went slack, dropped to his side.

The hunter gazed out over the prairie. "You won't see me again. Remember what I said."

Ezra watched the man walk away over the edge of the mesa and into the storm. Ezra didn't go after him, didn't even watch to see where he headed. It didn't matter. He played his part, and it was done.

ODE TO EVENING SKY COLORS

BY MEREDITH WHITE

It's much too bright and yet not at all.
As the sun's grip slips - away it goes,
Retreating like the last waves of fall,
And we pause,
 The colors bleeding as it flows.
And we wonder if this is also Iris' work
To provide this vision for me, the mortal,
Before stealing it back with a jerk,
Pallet held tight, as she slips away through the portal

Oh! And the streaks fade away,
 My eyes flicker in the conquering dark.
A mother's color only seen at end of day,
And the aster breaks the sky apart.
But the memory throbs under the eyelid,
 As if only the blues remain able,
And there is no promise made, nothing to forbid,
Just us recharging this endless fable.

The canaries still flutter in my chest.
Spot lights filtering through my white ribs,
And this sky's falcon returns from the west
And rest in a halo over slow swaying cribs.
There is no song to sing at this hour.
We wait outside, at the predator's path
And witness the sunlight's funeral flower
As the world dips down in its pink bath.

The gradient soothes the blistering sky.
Beauty of this vision overcomes brawn.
One last look
 And then we'll say goodbye,
And we find harmony with a swan.
I pull my brittle fingers through the cloud
Watch as the color sways in tidal courtship.
The Earth can be nothing if not proud
And bask in our gaze's worship.

We all paint together, naming the lights that we see,
And point ourselves like a compass, toward the sky's end.
And the image is nothing but the sense to be free
And to dance a while closely with the world's dearest friend.
It is time to press rewind, and let the night return.
The light is different, but the sight is nothing new.
As the sun has retired, and the moon takes her turn,
I wonder if Icarus enjoyed this same view

STAFF WRITING

HUNTER

BY JOAN J. BELL

Will you hang my head on your wall as a trophy?
A tribute to your ego
on the mantle above your fireplace?
Put my body on a pyre
after you have stripped me
of my entire Sense of Self?
Will you bleed me dry?
Peel the stringy flesh from my bones and feast
as you reminisce
about
the chase?

Well I have slain every dragon
in my path
and I will not be hung
as the convict
I will be crucified like Christ,
a Martyr for the common man
to be followed
and revered;
I will thrust my sickle into the wheat screaming I have won
I am no doe-eyed omnivore in a carnivorous world
Nor am I the she-beast who knows no peace on instinct.

I will not be hunted.

I will not be trodden down,
and you will see no mercy at my hands
when the blood of my brothers stains yours.
What lengths will you go to prove your prowess, Hunter?

DREAM

BY MARIA CECILIA PELAYO

My name is Pandora, and I have a demon.

Sorry, that was blunt—let me explain.

Our acquaintanceship began on a scorching August night in the year 2014. At first, I thought I was dreaming. My eyes were closed and yet I could see around my small bedroom at my family's Boston townhouse.

I quickly realized that, despite being asleep, I was not in bed. My spirit, having been detached from my physical self after my twentieth attempt at lucid dreaming, stood by the bed where my body laid.

"Ha!" I grinned. "I did it!"

My fascination with lucid dreaming had begun early on in my life. My parents tried their hardest to raise a living Saint, so I was never allowed to indulge in anything. I thought if I could at least control my dreams I'd be able to feel a certain degree of freedom. I could escape.

"Who are you?"

Had I been in my body, I would have jumped out of my skin in fright. Being already out of my own skin, there was not much I could do but shout and frantically look for the eerie voice that had cut through the silence of my bedroom.

"Ah I see... yes." The voice echoed around my room.

There, leaning against a blush-colored wall, was a shadow. Glowing red eyes stared into my own, thinking—calculating.

"What do you see? Why are you in my room? Are you a pervert? This is my dream; you need to go." Fully believing this was a dream I could control, I clenched my eyes shut and wished the shadowy figure away. After a moment of silence, I thought I'd succeeded. I was proven wrong when my eyes opened to find the shadow was but an inch away from me. Its face was shifted constantly, more a blob than a face.

"Welcome to the Astral Realm, lamb." The shadow chuckled. Can shadows chuckle? "Not a lamb, but a snake in the grass—I thought I kept a record of all the Children of Darkness, but you, dear, somehow slipped through the cracks."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Suddenly a little scared, I turned and tried to lurch my spirit back into my body.

I won't pretend to know a lot about spirits, but I was pretty sure they weren't supposed to be tangible. Imagine my surprise when something clasped around my wrist, yanking me back.

"We've only just met, Darkling. Stay for a little."

"What's a 'Darkling'?"

"Don't concern yourself with the details." The shadow waved what must have been his hand in the air. "Is this form making you uncomfortable? Should I try something else? Any preference?"

"I don't—no."

Before my eyes, the blob changed into the form of a beautiful, almost ethereal young man. He looked my age, though he was probably far older than sixteen.

"My name is Baas, Darkling." His flesh-tinted hand stretched out in front of me in greeting. Hesitantly, I shook it. It felt so real.

"Baas... I'm not dreaming?"

Baas let out a thundering laugh which I tried desperately to shush.

"Don't worry, your sleeping parents cannot hear us. We are beyond them." Baas walked to my bed and peered at my sleeping form. "Oh dear, we have many years of mischief to catch up on. You Awakened quite late."

"Mischief?" I hugged myself.
"Awakened?"

"You were made for chaos, Darkling." Baas's face twisted into a smile and sat on the edge of my bed. "Good cannot exist without evil, and the inverse is also true. Don't tell me you've never felt the strings of darkness tugging at you."

I had. The voice in my head constantly begged me to cause a ruckus. Whether it be at school, at church, or at home; the voice didn't care. My parents had urged me to ignore it—said it was the Devil calling.

"So what if I have?" My hand flew directly to the gold cross that dangled from my neck. Baas scoffed at my gesture.

"Let me show you who you're meant to be." The demon rose to his feet and approached my window. "We're all about fun, Pandora. If you don't have fun, you can wake up and pretend this never happened."

I should have told Baas to go back to Hell, but his voice was alluring; his words far too tempting for me to refuse.

For the rest of the evening, I was Baas's personal Hell-raiser.

We triggered fire alarms in residential buildings and watched as half-dressed bodies flooded from every emergency exit. We shook dogs awake and coordinated a chorus of barking animals, waking their owners from their peaceful slumber. We whispered suspicions of infidelity in the ears of unsuspecting couples.

I'd be lying if I said it wasn't fun. The power that tickled on the palms of my hands felt so good. I felt complete, even if that which completed me came in the form of darkness.

Towards the end of the night, we came upon an old green and white warehouse.

"Picture flames." Baas's voice seemed to rattle in my mind. "Ruby hands climbing up the wooden planks and through the windows. See them with your mind's eye."

I must have been entranced, because my eyelids fluttered shut and I began to imagine flames licking the sides of the warehouse. They raged and burned as brightly as the Sun itself. When my eyes opened, that very scene lay before me.

"Wow." My voice sounded foreign even to my ears. The fire seemed to have a life of its own. It breathed and groaned and consumed in an almost artistic way.

But then I heard the screams. They were coming from inside the warehouse which I had thought abandoned.

"Baas, make it stop." No matter how much I begged, Baas only stood with a grin on his face, his eyes reflecting the same color of the unstoppable flames.

My heart lodged in my throat. I cried out and took off running, hoping that I'd somehow be able to get someone—anyone out of the building.

I was too late. Even as a spirit, I could smell the scent of burned bodies.

"You did this." Baas's voice appeared behind me, and I turned to him in anger. He looked absolutely delighted. His eyes shone with a self-satisfaction I'd only ever seen before in the mirror.

"I didn't, I—" Whatever defense I could have argued died in my throat. "This is evil."

"This is balance."

I groaned in frustration. Baas rolled his eyes and extended his flesh-like hand out to me once more.

"Come with me." Baas seemed suddenly more handsome, more persuasive, and more tempting. "I'll take you to a place where you won't have to feel this pesky guilt."

I would have taken his hand, but the smell of charred flesh kept me grounded to reality. I took off running towards the rooftop even as the flames raged around me.

I could not seem to burn.

I burst through the rooftop door and fresh air rushed into me.

Sirens blared from the streets below. I walked to the ledge and looked out into the lights of the city. I shouldn't be here. Baas appeared behind me, his offer still standing. I shook my head.

"Not tonight." Escape, Pandora.

Before I could think it further, I leaned forward and toppled from the side of the warehouse. The flames followed me down, down, down.

I awoke clutching my chest and crying like a lunatic. My parents rushed into my room and held me in place, trying to calm my hysterics. I couldn't hear their voices, all I could hear was the news anchor speaking through the living room TV.

"Deadly fire at a local warehouse killed seven construction workers last night—"

And a baritone voice in my head, which made a promise.

"I'll see you tonight, Darkling."

THE CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY OF LOBSTERS

BY RACHEL RAABE

immortality is a cancer,
an uncontrollable metastasis,
pluripotency redirected,
flesh extending into the infinite distance,
a ceaseless growth.

lobsters do not experience senescence.
instead, they grow, and grow,
until they can no longer shed their
outer shells –
they either die from exhaustion
during the process,
or from infection, which seeps
through the cracks.

the only reason we die
is because we accept it as an inevitability.
you, my dear lobster,
immortality blooming beneath your skin –
i crouch,
six feet above you,
and ask,
how does it feel to live forever?



“CURIOSITY” | **BY AUDREY RYDEN**

I GET IT

BY LOCHAN MOURTY

You admonish me when I come to you for comfort
But I get that it's because you're worried about me
And you only want what's best for me
So it's okay.

I sit next to you with tears overflowing
Beg you to leave me to nurse my wounds in silence
And instead you scream at me to tell you what's going on
Force my tender wounds open with an unrelenting grip
But I get that it's because you want me to be able to talk to you
And share with you my struggles, confide in you
So it's okay.

I walk into your room to present my new clothes
Clothes that make me feel confident, show me off
And your lip curls in disgust, and you ask me
If I am really so desperate for attention
As to dress like a slut, spread my legs to the world
But I get that it's because you don't want me to be taken advantage of
In a world where us girls are always asking for it
So it's okay.

I excitedly gush to you about my latest story idea
Ignoring the disappointment and disinterest on your face
And I pretend your words roll right off of me
When you tell me what a silly, foolish girl I am
Who isn't focused on the right things in life
And isn't talented enough for my passion to matter, anyways
But I get that it's because you worry about my future
And want me to land a stable job, and be successful
So it's okay.

You stare blankly up at me, blinking those dead eyes
As I stand in front of you, heart bleeding out on my sleeve
Baring the deepest parts of my soul, begging you to understand
I come clean about all the ways I've felt wronged by you
And you nod like you understand, promise to do better
Even though we both know nothing ever changes
But I get that it's because you struggle with empathy
And your upbringing was different, you just can't understand
So it's okay.

I turn to your husband, my dad
Pleading with him, at least, to be there for me
And for the most part he is, but I can't forget the times
When you are screaming your throat raw at me
And I, gasping for air, turn to him, my only lifeline
And when it matters most to me, he pulls the plug
And my heart monitor flatlines
But I get that it's because you're his wife, his love
And of course he'll stand by you, in sickness and in health
So it's okay.

Now, when you are reaching out for me
And I am recoiling in distrust and disgust
When you suddenly realize a fraction of my pain
And open your arms to envelop me in a hug
And I can't run fast enough in the opposite direction
When you offer our home to me as a place of comfort
But the walls embrace too tightly, crushing my bones
When you complain that I never talk to you
After you have let me down in ways that a mom never should
I can see how much it hurts you, how much you love me.

And I get it. I really do.

But while I always understand
While I try try try to move on and forgive
I remember that you have never understood me
And I realize that
It's not okay.

I WISH I WERE A WOMAN

BY ISABELLE CROSS

I wish I were a woman
The way other women are women.
The way the air bends and breathes around them,
Fits them in its arms and plants them in the earth,
Here, you are here, an oak or a daisy or a smooth stone,

Dug deep with your fallow roots,
Deep into the earth where the still waters run.
And the cloak, thrown over them since birth,
That cloak of gentleness,
That so protects and condones them;
I have never been cloaked, not I,
With my bare-faced bones and bloody nail beds.
I am the skeletal specter
Wandering and waning in the back of your eyes,
I am the purgatorial phantom
My limbs stretched taut over the ravine of the great divide,
Unable to even bend myself into a bridge.
I envy the way
Other women are women. Instead of what I am,
A rock, a wall,
A moss-covered valley
Turned bog,
Hidden away in the heart of the forest where humanity no longer goes.
I am a still pool of water
Reflecting nothing but the willows
And young Narcissus's face.
You are the willow, you are the reeds, you are the laughing dryads,
I am still just the pool.
You are the juniper bush, the grass, the soil
The sky, the clouds, the leaves.
I, the poison green ivy, envy the women
That are women
In the way women should be women.
Their feet planted in the earth, their eyes that reflect
Only the sun, the sky, the air.
I am an open mouth,
A cave,
A wound sheltered against the side of the mountains,
Gaping and empty.
And even there I envy the way the shadows
Move against the objects that keep them tethered.

I wish I were a woman the way other women are women.
The curves of their bodies that fit so easily
Against the curve of another's.

But I am the rock, the wall, the clinging vine.

As if anything
Could ever consummate my untethered form.

FROM ALL OF US

AT THE ECKLEBURG PROJECT

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THEECKLEBURGPROJECT.COM

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Cheers all around.
It truly takes a village to raise a creative project.

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