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Cover Image:
"The Vision" by Anaia Davis

Back Cover Image:
Detail from "Ravens" by Alina Oberglock

Table of Contents

The Body Aflame by Jenny Lopatin-Austin	1
Ravens by Alina Oberglock	3
The Masque of My Chaos by Myli-Ann Goodine	4
Two in One by Esther Pushkash	6
Two Sides to a Door by Kylee Nicholas-Goans	7
Future Home by Vlada Tarasova	9
The Olympian by Haley Minette.....	10
The Vision by Anaia Davis.....	15
Vanessa and the Butterflies by JC Barrera	16
Another Day by Diego Rodriguez	23
Lost and Found by Kira Glenn.....	24
Girl in the Mirror by Elizabeth Retslav	26
Monochrome Glow by Owen Miller.....	27
Where It All Seems Real by Kylee Nicholas-Goans	28
Alligator by Alina Oberglock	31
Ocean Theme Still Life by Vlada Tarasova.....	32
Fairies of Lore by Avery Witt	33
Tied Against the Train by Tavia Booth.....	35
Windows by Esther Pushkash.....	43
My Bubble Life by Vlada Tarasova.....	44
Girl in Red by Agatha Marques.....	45
The Valley Side by Anaia Davis	48
No More Diego Rodriguez	49
A Woman’s Desperation by Kira Glenn	50
Homage to Mapplethorpe by Maria Spelleri.....	52
Earth’s First Martyr by Eric Escoto	53
Burgundy Bliss by Owen Miller.....	54
Kratsovka by Elizabeth Retslav	55
Contributor Bios	56
Elektraphrog Staff.....	60

The Body Aflame

By Jenny Lopatin-Austin

She was *no* Sleeping Beauty. She was far from the feeling like a dragon guarding a keep. She felt more like that castle with an imprisoned dragon. Her teeth felt hot, not just around but almost like they were made from hot tile. Where she painfully exhaled the concrete wall before her became graffitied with a mark of inferno. It filled her soul with wrath. She had less of a body and more of a curled ball of melting wax. There were seldom things on her magma red bed that brought her comfort in her deteriorating state. One such thing kept being swapped for one another, two pillows that seemed to drink up any cold the house had to offer. One long as her body, the other short but wide as her torso. She fought her battle with these two bastions of cooling comfort, but as inevitable as magma making a slow descent on a village, her moments of chilling calm would burn out. Her body heat lapped at any cool object she twisted around, like a sad dying dog. The only other peace that came before her was tiny black beans balanced on her boiling leg. The cat, who could maybe be the metaphorical dragon to her decrepit tower, refused to leave her side. In his silly fuzzy head, there were no tools of medical trade. It was unknown if he could even tell if her temperature was well over 100 degrees. He held no pedigree, let alone a doctorate, but misery and pain were universal to all creatures great and small. It was his presence that made a way through this cauldron made of blood, sweet, and agony seem probable. Sometimes that wash of heat would end. The simplest attainable pleasure was a numbness that bloomed from her fingertips. The numbness was a Harald that soon sleep would creep in and bite her neck like some more cunning creature. The dragon within her wanted no peace, it clawed and raged against her throat. The dragon's attacks made speaking and breathing herculean labors. Forget coughing. Coughing was taboo as far as her respiratory system was concerned. She whimpered at the barrage being made within. At some point being

awake became more a task than a basic form of living and her mind and soul were dragged into the blissful nothingness. Whether it was Day 2 or Night 2 when she did come to again was hard to say. She had barricaded herself from other lifeforms. Only the cat was given enough room at the door to come and go to meet his own ends. Everything was made as cool and dark as it could possibly get to be. Maybe too cool. The heat had almost entirely vacated her body. While rising to quench the parched sensation in her throat she began to tremble. Her teeth would not stop chattering.

It was almost like being possessed.

All she could do was move forward and hope the feeling of being a maraca would dissipate.

Or maybe she was in the process of becoming dry ice? That was more on brand for this pox upon her.

She felt like a chain on a ghost, floating through her own home for offerings of water and cough syrup. Eventually she found what was required and retreated past the hazy light of a day beginning or a day dying.

As she past a mirror her flesh caught her eye. A tapestry of red blots had been thrown over her skin. She looked like she was being burned from the inside out. Anyone else may have screamed or gone pale with dread. However, she was intrigued. The strange blots of red that colored her fair skin looked like blood on freshly fallen snow. It looked like a rash, but her skin did not twinge or itch or ache for relief. All she could do was stare, and all her rash could do was sit and spread from within. She chuckled darkly as she retreated to quarantine. Maybe it wasn't a rash.

Maybe it was budding scales.

Ravens

Alina Oberglock



The Masque of My Chaos

By Myli-Ann Goodline

Have you ever been mocked by a god?

A mad god I was.

Changing forms like the laws

Oh how it was irrefutably beautiful!

Though I was hunted by other gods.

They couldn't comprehend my category.

Like a chaotic laboratory

Oh how I love to break boundaries the gods before me
made!

I watch them panic.

I am ecstatic with power!

Alas the taste on my fellow gods tongues were sour

Oh but the humans love me, for I exalt them beyond what
is human!

I do love this chaos, but who am I?

The god of destruction? Death? Life? Joy? Ecstatic terror?

The humans call me all these things.

Honestly, I might have to agree

Ecstatic terror, what a ring it has, a string of creative
power trailing my feet!

There is no meaning to time, to harmony, to nature when
I'm around

I *am* the meaning.

Oh, yes, yes, yesterday, today, and tomorrow

I *am* the meaning

Forever and far forward

They write about me

The poets gawk at my chaos

They scribble away on their paper

Like hard labor

I will live today and forever in history

Two in One

Esther Pushkash



Two Sides to a Door

By Kylee Nicholas-Goans

I will never stop writing poems outside your door and making everything up

Walking through meadows

Fresh bouquets of lilies

Dancing while it's raining and lingering in the dark

Religiously living through the stories I create in my head

All while you're living your own story

Creating a gap between us and our love

Going apple picking

Seeing the sun radiate against your skin

I know you have other characters in your story

You are the only character in mine

Waiting for you to have the same epiphany that I have had

You love the color green

But you don't love my green eyes

You settle for the aqua

I love you like a ripe citrus orange

You love me like the grape-flavored candy at the bottom of the bowl

I know some people love grape

You aren't some people

Does she know how distraught you leave me

Do you grasp the euphoria I feel

Sitting against the willow and the oak

Daydreaming a life without her
Sitting outside in our garden
You and me walking through this door together
Maybe then I wouldn't look so crazy
She could be the girl you discarded
And I could be the one you left her for

Future Home

Vlada Tarasova



The Olympian

By Haley Minette

“Somebody, call 911!” Every single person in the gym gasped and rushed out to help her, but she was completely unconscious. Within seconds, the ambulance sirens haunted everyone at the event. The paramedics run out and everyone backs up. You could hear a pin drop in the gym until the guys in the ambulance yell “CLEAR” and shocks her heart. It doesn’t work. Again, one guy yells “CLEAR” and suddenly the little girl is gasping for breath. It worked, but she doesn’t seem good. Her parents sob and everyone is stunned. It was one of the moments that no one could ever forget, no matter how hard they tried.

Felicia Surratt is a 16-year-old girl from a small-town in Arkansas. The other teenage girls in her towns were disrespectful, hormonal terrors but not Felicia. She respected her family, teachers and friends. She volunteered at nursing homes on the weekends, doing crafts and playing the piano. She wore yellow sundresses and flower earrings. Felicia was gentle, kind, and empathetic. She seemed happy, all of the time. She was sunshine on a cloudy day. She didn’t deserve what happened to her.

Everyone in a small-town knows everyone, and everyone knew Felicia to be one of the best gymnasts around. She had balance, flexibility, strength and drive. But mostly, they knew that she was being recruited to go the summer Olympics and if you’ve never lived in a small town, you can’t possibly understand what it’s like to have someone in your small town truly make it. Most people in Oshwook stay in Oshwook forever.

Two years prior, Felicia went to the doctor for heartburn. It was affecting her balance on the poles, but she didn’t really think anything of it. She was young and healthy. And maybe a little naïve. All that Felicia wanted was to continue being a successful gymnast and officially make it to the Olympics. She would be the youngest gymnast in history

from Arkansas to make it to the Olympics. When the phone rang, Felicia's mom braced herself.

"Felicia come down now," She said.

"I'm coming momma," Felicia said

The doctor got on the phone and used her bad news voice. She said, "So, I'm afraid that Felicia has something called coronary artery disease." Felicia and her mom looked at each other confused, but as if they both knew this was really bad. The doctor wanted to put in broader terms so that the two of them could really understand and process what that means.

"Basically," She said. "Blood flows to your heart to keep it healthy and happy, like you are." She paused to soften the blow as much as she could. "With the disease that you have, it's not doing that right. You don't have as much blood flow to your heart as you should. This is why some people may get heart attacks."

"Heart attacks?" Felicia's mom asked. Her eyes were extremely wide, and she was biting her nails, something she did religiously when she was anxious.

All Felicia wanted to know was if she could continue being a gymnast. Her mind was derailing, thinking of never swinging on the poles again. That is what made her Felicia in her eyes. She was able to be happy because she had peace during her routines, while flipping around, and balancing on her bar.

"Listen," said the doctor. "As long as Felicia takes her medicines, continues being active, and stays healthy, nothing should happen to her heart."

The phone call ended, and the house had a strange energy. Regardless, Felicia took her medicines, stayed healthy, and continued training. She kept her drive, her joyous nature, and her passion for the sport, regardless of her fear. Her mom always reminded her to be careful. "Remember what that doctor said little one," She would say.

Shortly after, Felicia's mom got a call on a way better note. It was the Olympic board and knowing her daughter, she already knew what the call was for.

“Felicia come down now,” She said happily.

“I’m coming momma,” Felicia said

Felicia’s mom was right. There was an event in New York containing one girl from each state. The top three girls got to compete in this Olympics. This was all Felicia dreamed about for years and it was finally coming true.

“Mom,” said Felicia with tears in her eyes.

“I know” said Felicia’s mom. She looked down affectionately on her daughter. “I am so proud of you.”

Felicia trained and trained until the day of her event. She was in the gym every single day relentlessly. Her and her mom got on a plane for the first time and cried together in joy.

“I am so grateful to be here right now,” Felicia said. She looked out the window and sighed. “I have worked so hard to be here right now.”

“Yes, you have,” her mom said. “Yes, you have.”

When they got to the big city of New York, everything immediately felt overwhelming. They both quickly realized they were out of their leagues here. Compared to the long fields of grass, dirt roads, and cow pastures, New York was overstimulating at its finest.

“Momma?” Felicia said.

“Yes honey,” said her mom. She turned her head and looked down to see her daughter’s scared face.

“I don’t feel confident anymore. I don’t know anybody else in gymnastics with a heart problem. I didn’t get to practice as much as I wanted to. I didn’t get to practice as hard as I wanted to,” Felicia said, rambling on. “I had to make myself less so my heart will be okay, and I just don’t see how that’s fair.”

“Honey, you are ready for this. Look at me,” said her mom. Felicia looked up slowly, with doubt in your eyes. “You are a fighter. You have a heart problem, and no one would ever know. You are strong and resilient and that’s what an Olympian is.”

Felicia smiled and realized her mom was right. She continued putting on her leotard, strapping up her shoes, and clipping up her hair.

Everything went smoothly when they got to the event. The judges and employees seemed really nice. They each found out where they were supposed to be, and Felicia was ready to perform. The girls went in alphabetical order according to their state. This meant Felicia was meant to go second. Alabama went first and started strong. Felicia was admiring from the sidelines when all the sudden she grabbed her chest. It was on fire. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't focus. She couldn't even see straight.

"Can you help me?" she said to her girl next to her. It was barely a whisper, and no one noticed that she wasn't okay.

"Get it together," Felicia muttered to herself. Alabama's performance was over and even with her ringing ears, she heard "Arkansas- Felicia Surratt!" over the loudspeakers.

This was the moment she had been waiting for her whole life. She started the routine, did her first spin, and fell to the ground. She didn't get back up. She couldn't. It was her heart. It was failing. She looked at the ceiling, in agony, while it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Tears fell from her eyes and that's the last thing she remembered before waking up in a hospital room.

"You're awake!" Felicia's mom said. She was clearly incredibly relieved that her daughter was up and conscious.

"I am," said Felicia. She was weak and discouraged.

"I am so glad you're okay," said her mom. She came up to give her a big hug.

"What happened with the event?" Felicia asked. "Oh my god," Felicia said, realizing that she bombed the routine and therefore, bombed her chance of going to the Olympics. "Am I ever going to be able to compete again?"

There was the kind of silence in the room that answered the question for her. Felicia busted in tears. She spent the next six months in physical therapy, but insanely depressed. She couldn't get out of bed, didn't want to leave the hospital room, and didn't want to hear anyone talk. She missed being

a gymnast because she thought that's what made her, well her. She started therapy and began to really look forward to next session. It was the only time she felt herself again. One day, in the thick of Felicia's depression, her therapist said something to her that really resonated.

"Felicia, can I ask you something?" asked her therapist

"Yes of course," said Felicia.

"Why did you wear yellow before? Because you were a gymnast?"

"Well, no," said Felicia. She looked lost

"Did you love flowers because you were a gymnast? Did you play the piano because you were a gymnast? Did you volunteer and build relationships at the nursing home because you were a gymnast?"

Felicia stayed quiet, even though she knew the answers to all of these things were no. She realized, suddenly, that maybe that wasn't all that made her, her. Maybe she was genuinely just a happy person, flips and twists or no flips or twists. Maybe, just maybe, she didn't need gymnastics to be her and to be successful and to be good at things. She felt completely and utterly inspired. After this session, she was ready to leave the hospital.

When she got home, she had a new lease on life. Even after tragedy, she could remain joyful, hopeful and overall a good person. She continued volunteering, but also starting hiking. She continued to knit and doing crafts, but also started boxing. She was done being naïve. Life is so incredibly short and falling to the ground at the event really emphasized that for Felicia. She was inspired and found a new, healthy love for her life.

The Vision

By Anaia Davis



Vanessa and the Butterflies

By JC Barrera

Vanessa almost instantly started screaming like a panther when the hallucinogens kicked in. Her body flew through the air backwards; it was like rewinding a long jump. It wasn't her surroundings changing into a green field with foot tall grass that freaked her out. She actually would've been disappointed if it still looked like she was in the shabby motel, hiding in a forgotten corner with the boy who was also experimenting with drugs. Although, the boy did have a really handsome face so it wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world. But, it would've ruined the purpose of the drugs: a getaway and an experience. The reason Vanessa was freaking out—a butterfly. And, it was *talking*.

The butterfly seemed to roll its eyes. "Meet your grandmother, Vanessa." A swirl of colorful wind swept around the butterfly before transforming it into an old, tanned woman of medium stature and wispy, curly silver bob cut hair. Her squinty eyes appeared more closed as she grinned at her granddaughter. "Come over 'ere and gimme a hug."

"Hell no." Vanessa stayed planted in her spot. "You were just a butterfly seconds ago."

"I don't want to hear any foul language out of you," her grandmother scolded.

"You just did yourself moments earlier," Vanessa countered as she fuzzily remembered the butterfly (Grandma?) cursing at her for taking drugs with a new acquaintance.

"I'm dead. I can do what I want."

Vanessa groaned. "This is lame. When are the psychedelics going to wear off?"

"You impudent, girl." The grandmother shapeshifted back into a butterfly. She then fluttered over to Vanessa, who screamed and crawled backwards in crab position. "Don't you realize you're at death's door?"

"I'm what?!" Vanessa jumped up. "I can't be! I haven't had my first love yet!"

Even as a butterfly, the grandmother seemed to raise an eyebrow. "That's what concerns you?"

"What? Is there something else...." Vanessa started but then the fact that she was talking to a butterfly freaked her out. She recoiled and begged, "Turn back. Turn back. Turn back. Please."

"Why is it you're so timid about butterflies?"

"Could you stop hovering over me?" Vanessa said, unable to look in the direction of the butterfly.

"No."

"Then I won't talk. No way am I going to die."

"Impudent Vanessa." Her grandmother landed on her, giving her the chills. "It's the land of the dead who is in charge of that." Vanessa couldn't look away anymore; suddenly, what seemed like hundreds—but was actually nowhere near fifty—butterflies rose up from the ground.

A sharp spikey ball seemed to insert itself in her lungs. "Please don't take me; I'm still young."

"Younger have been taken." Ten of the smallest butterflies Vanessa has ever seen flutter past her in a dance. It was a mixture of spiraling, bouncing, and heading back 'n forth. It reminded her of her childhood... Vanessa's mind burned as it tried to restrain the evoked memory from long ago.

"Grandma! I don't want to die!" Her vision blurred as tears sprung into her eyes at the truth within this reality.

The grandmother smiled as it was clear her granddaughter finally accepted this world as truth. "Don't worry. It's not your time yet, sweetheart," the grandmother said.

"But... you said I'm at death's door?"

"You are. You're among us in the land of the dead, but that doesn't mean we want you." The colorful wind transformed the butterfly into a being again. Her grandmother knelt in front of her and rested her hand on Vanessa's. Vanessa thought it felt weird and cold and even slimy due to the wrinkles, but something about it, gave her peace. Her

grandmother took in a breath before saying, "There's something we must discuss, Vanessa. Your parents are the ones in danger of dying."

Vanessa's body visibly tensed, but her response was apathetic. "So?"

"I want you to save them."

"And, why would I do that," Vanessa said as she ripped her hand away from her grandmother. She barricaded her vulnerability away from the surface and stood up. She could tell that she was also standing up in the real world past this drug-induced visitation or whatever. Her legs wobbled.

"They're your parents, Vanessa."

"Which means nothing if they don't act like it."

Her grandmother continued, "How would you really feel if they were gone, and you did nothing about it? Your parents have made many grave mistakes, sweetheart, but I know how much you think of them, and I know the bond between you remains."

"You know nothing. You're dead, remember."

"Nine o'clock tonight. They're not going to see the shots coming—"

Vanessa said as her grandmother continued talking, "I don't care."

"—too preoccupied with their wins."

"Whatever." Vanessa started to walk away, but her surroundings created by the drugs didn't disappear in time for her to see she was headed right for a wall. She slammed into it and passed out.

Vanessa used to frolic among the butterflies, chasing them around hoping to catch them, to stare at them intently, or to hold a conversation with them. Her favorite story growing up was the one from the personalized baby's book her parents had made about her. Perhaps, that made her seem narcissistic since the book was all about her, but actually, Vanessa loved it for the lore: the lore of a butterfly embodying her grandmother. The grandmother who attended the

gender reveal party in the form of a butterfly and who hovered outside the hospital window during her birth. Vanessa wanted to find her.

Vanessa used to remember those days clearly, but it was all destroyed by a memory she represses. Vanessa only has one memory of the “beautiful” home: she was six or seven; she was soaked to the bone by the all-evening downpour; her lower body and dress smeared with mud; she was bawling all the liquids out of her body and was crumpled in the backyard until a neighbor called the animal department, thinking a coyote was loose in the neighborhood. While that night remains clear in her head, the events following that point are a blur. Vanessa remembers a kind lady helping her get cleaned up and then taking her to a room to play while the adults talked loudly outside the door. To this day she can’t (not like she’d try to) figure out if she was in social services or a neighbor took care of her and covered up the fact that her parents had left her. Either way, she ended up with her parents again, moving from bad neighborhood to “residential” stays at motels. Her parents cared for her like she was their everything, but given enough time, they would disappear for weeks. She never had a clue if this was it; if this time, they were never coming back.

That day, her parents didn’t merely neglect her. They left her. Left her *abandoned* and *outside*. The place that was once her heaven, the garden with all the butterflies, soon became the symbol of her utter despair; for even the butterflies all vanished when the rain came. *Why did her parents do that to her?! Where was her grandmother then?!*

“Let them save themselves,” Vanessa muttered from the balcony of the motel. In the distance, she could make her parents, stumbling out of the bar and entering the casino next door.

“Heyo.”

“Hey,” Vanessa replied to Randy, the boy who supplied and tried drugs with her. I guess you could call him her friend; she shared some deeply personal aspects of her life with him... something she hadn’t done with anyone.

Randy leaned on the rail and gazed at her. "Is the bump on your head better?"

"I've suffered worse," Vanessa said, thinking not of bumps on the head but harsher things in life.

He nodded and changed the topic, "Those were your folks entering the casino, right?"

"Uh-huh. They're going to die there tonight."

Randy chuckled. "We can't all be winners."

"I'm being literal, Rands."

"Really?" He waited for Vanessa to nod her head. "Then don't you want to see it happen?"

"What?"

"You're cold-blooded enough to sit back while you know they're going to die, so why not go the extra mile?"

She shook her head slowly. "No."

"Chicken?" Randy said smugly. "Well I, for one, want to see the action." He started jollily heading toward the staircase. "Hey! It looks like they're finally getting theirs!"

Vanessa watched as he trampled down the steps. She watched as more building lights turned on as the night fully encased the world. She smacked mosquitos that landed on her arm, and she craved a guzzle of alcohol, but it's been a while since any party occurred which didn't care she was underage. Most of all though, Randy's final words echoed in her head.

She made her way downstairs and headed to the casino at ten minutes to nine. As soon as she opened the door, she heard yelling. Not even a few tables away, one of the sources was an angered man debating the casino's legitimacy while the other source... was her parents celebrating. Her mother was jumping and wrapping her arms around her father's neck. They both had bright and big smiles on their faces. Vanessa thought back to her grandmother's words about 'their winnings'. *Is this really winning, Mother, Father? Gambling away and winning back money but constantly neglecting your daughter?*

Good grief, Grandma. You're right. All I want is their love.

Since that evening in the downpour, that first time her parents skipped out on her not caring at all about her needs. Those moments she wailed, and no one seemed to care. Since that day, she thought she could die, and no one would care. To the people who did that to her, why should she feel any different about them? What makes them deserve better?

Because I'm not the same. Tears burned Vanessa's eyes. They could love however they want, but she was different!

Vanessa guessed where the bullet would come from. She rushed to the other side of her father and blocked him from the direction of the angry man. She felt her father's and mother's arms pull her in. Their joy from their winnings made them utterly oblivious to the danger they were in. But... they were embracing her. *I can find peace in this,* Vanessa thought right as the shot fired.

Vanessa waited for impact, but instead, she felt a poignant but gentle breeze, the swaying of tall grasses at her legs, and a warm sun. She opened her eyes, which she hadn't realized she closed. She saw Randy.

"Heyo."

"Hey," she said, feeling like all the air was knocked out of her. Was this all a hallucination the entire time? Randy pointed down, and Vanessa saw a bloody hole in his chest. "*Rands—*"

He held up his hands, motioning for her to stop before snapping his fingers. Instantly, he became a butterfly. "We told you, we didn't want you."

Vanessa's tears streamed down her face as the realization seeped in. A boy she had never met before got her to open up about her past. That same boy offered her drugs, which created the way for her to speak with her grandmother in the land of the dead. He said just the right thing for her to be impelled to watch the prediction unfold. He was the one... who took the bullet because he even knew more about the prediction than she did. *Randy* was from the land of the dead.

Vanessa's sniffles and giggles merged. It was an awful and confusing sound, but it represented her joy precisely. "And I still don't want to go."

Vanessa looked behind her, and the land of the dead dissolved into the casino. As if unpausing a video, her parents immediately swept her into their arms.

Her father said, "She's crying," before assuming with a shout, "my daughter's been shot!"

Her mother frantically searched Vanessa's body for something she would not find. Her mother told her father, "Check for the wound."

They both asked, "Vanessa, are you okay?"

Vanessa nodded her head, and a sob escaped her lips. There was a smile when she said, "I've missed you both."

Another Day

By Diego Rodriguez

My soul is a condescending smile.

Darkened by the invisible force.

I wince and cry out in pain,

Yet my need is but a muted foundation.

I nod to the breeze and run.

I hear my lungs collapse and break.

I gasp, and feel time stop.

My fingertips touch the end.

The end of this tunnel we call life.

Take me now please, I beg of you.

I wake up alive still, getting up,

I stare at myself in the mirror.

My body is a graceful treasure.

Harden by the years of misery and pain.

I find the physical scars alluring.

I touch them and trace them all around.

I sighed, another day.

Lost and Found

Kira Glenn

“I’m going to go out to search again.”

“Okay, be careful. We don’t want to have to send a search party for you too.” He said. The search for Lana started months ago with the whole community looking for her. She was last seen leaving her house in her car heading to class. Her best friend and her best friend’s father would drive around the neighborhood and ask the outlying gas stations if they saw her using a school picture.

Now it’s just her best friend looking for her. Everyone thought that she got in her car, got on the road and just kept going. Her best friend thinks that something bad happened to her and she is hurt somewhere. Everyone kept saying that they will not search for a dead girl. Her friend will not give up without knowing what happened to her. The library was checked. The bus stations, the train stations, the airports, and the grocery stores were checked. Then the police checked the hospitals and the clinics. She was nowhere to be found. Her mother is at work like nothing is wrong. Her father left when she was little. No one has seen him since.

After the search was called off, her best friend asked Lana’s mother, “You are going to work even when your daughter is still missing?”

“I know she is not here, but I still have to pay the bills. I cannot pay the bills without money and I need to work to get money.” She said. Her best friend was frustrated with the fact that everyone gave up after just a month of looking. She had been told that the reality of finding her now was slim and finding her alive was even slimmer. Lana’s best friend made flyers and asked store owners to hang them up in their windows.

After the flyers got weather beaten and torn down, the news of Lana’s disappearance stopped, the weather turned cold, and her best friend thought that it was probably time to say goodbye to Lana. No one had seen her since the day

she disappeared. There was a report of a female matching her description being found dead in a ditch. Did she want to know if the dead girl was Lana? Did the dead girl suffer? How did she end up there? The best friend of Lana did not want to hear the bad news after hearing that report. It is time to give up on someone who has been like a sister her whole life? Lana was there when bullies would pick on her at school or when she did not want to walk home alone when her mother would have to pick up another shift at work. Lana would stay at her house to keep her company until her mother got home. Lana would even help her with Math when she was having trouble understanding a homework assignment. Now who will keep her company until her mother gets home?

There was a knock at the door. She hoped it was not another neighbor showing their condolences that her lifelong friend was dead. She wasn't going to cry for her anymore. It was time to move on and stop searching for the forever lost. The doorbell rang twice. She sighed, got up off the couch, and headed for the stairs while ignoring the future condolences. The person on the other side of the door started banging on the door. Now she is on the verge of tears and anger with the door banger. She turned toward the door and opened it preparing to yell at the well-wisher.

"Hi, Bella. Do you need company?" Lana said with a teary-eyed smile.

Girl in the Mirror

Elizabeth Retslav

The girl in the mirror

For the first time in my life, I really see her

I see her eyes

The voids that have seen everything that I have

That have seen so much

I see her fingers, the ones that have touched so many
things

And I see my body

Which has survived through all my self destruction

And I look so different from what I thought I would

From the way my mother has described my eyes

Or from the way men have complimented my body

Or told me what parts of myself to fix with surgery

For the first time in my life I see her

Not only as the vessel that holds my soul

But as a part of me

For the first time in my life I really see her,

The girl in the mirror

Monochrome Glow
Owen Miller



Where It All Seems Real

Kylee Nicholas-Goans

The sound of giggling reverberated through the purge back road, bouncing off the cold concrete dividers. A boy stood within the faintly lit space, their shoulders slouched, head down, and hands clenched into clenched hands. It seemed as though nothing was going on, yet at the same time, his man's world was crashing all at once. The sense of humility that he was feeling was so far out of reach with the rest of him and he couldn't quite place a finger on where it was coming from. He had suffered from panic attacks, anxiety attacks, and really anything under the sun that had affected his mental health. What was going on with him felt similar to these attacks; the heart racing, the feeling of confusion, it felt like he couldn't breathe. The only thing out of the ordinary was the sense of embarrassment. It seemed to have happened as fast as your four years in high school go by,

It was a minute solidified in time, the world around him blurring into an obscure as the mortification washed over him like a tidal wave. All at once the world was spinning, yet so still. He felt like a million different eyes were on him and there was no way of backing them off. There was no making sense of what was going on. He tried to come up with every possible reason as to why he had this sudden wave of humility placed upon him. Did he trip on the curb and bust his face open? Did he say the wrong thing to the girl he has a major crush on at school and the wave of embarrassment is all hitting now? There is a huge amount of things that he, a teenage boy, could be embarrassed by. None of them clicked though. The rest of the world on the outside appeared normal, but all he saw were laughing figures making a mockery out of him.

Was it genuine, or was it all in his head? He walked the streets racking at his brain trying to decipher reality from his imagination. This was one of those feelings that they say you get when you're tripping on acid. The feeling that all

counselors and public speakers talk about when they make you sit through an hour-long assembly in your stale high school gymnasium. Maybe that's what it was? He went to a party, took the wrong thing, and now any sense that he had was wiped away and replaced with humility and panic. Sounds like a stretch, but it could be a possibility. Hell at this point anything is possible to describe this indescribable feeling. You start making the uncommon make more sense in order to rationalize what is going on.

The boy continued walking along the eerie streetlights sort of accepting that it was what it was and that the feeling would eventually go away like any other high. He pulled his phone out to see if anyone had messaged him in what felt like an eternity but really was only about a half hour of going crazy. No new messages, it was all the same as it was before, so if something happened at a party, no one was worried about him. That either meant that no one was worried because nothing happened or because they did something. At this point with the amount of anxiety rushing through his veins, he was going to think of each and every possibility even if it didn't make the most sense. It was hard for him to truly accept what was going on because, like many other people, he was a very big "why?" person. Why was he feeling this way? Why doesn't he have any recollection of what happened that night? Did he even go to a party? He put his phone back into his pocket and made his way home, he at least remembered where that was.

Walking in the front door, everything was normal. Nothing out of the ordinary and nothing out of place. His dog, Winnie, had run towards him welcoming him back home and his parents were in the kitchen sharing a bottle of wine as they laughed about who knows what.

"Hey, Luke! We missed you after school today. How was everything?" his dad said when he made his way into the kitchen.

"Yeah it was okay," Luke said "but I think I'm gonna head up to bed early tonight."

“Okay honey, I hope you sleep well and find some of the answers that you are looking for.” his mom had said.

Luke looked at her with a puzzled expression. What did she mean by “find answers”? Was his face really that giving? Luke decided that it wasn’t even worth the effort to make sense of, like many things that happened that night, and to head up to bed. Winnie following behind him, they made their way up the steps and eventually made it to his room where he instantly fell into his bed in hopes that this would all dissipate in the morning. It would be a brand new day and he would be able to put the rest of it all behind him. The feeling of humiliation that he had was still lingering, not as strong, and the anxiety dropped down to a minimum – it felt like it was all going to be okay and that he really may have had something at some party that just got to him. He drifted off to sleep.

As Luke woke up, he found himself zen like he had never been before. Any anxiety or humility that he had been feeling was gone.

“Did you find the answers?”, his therapist asked.

Luke sat up trying to get his head on straight.

“It was all a dream?”

Alligator

Alina Oberglock



Ocean Theme Still Life

Vlada Tarasova



Fairies of Lore

Avery Witt

Fairies of beauty and benevolence.

Fairies of mischief and malice.

Seriously sinister, or romantically rapturous?

Wings of a butterfly.

Yet prone to often lie.

Enchantingly ethereal, or horrendously hideous?

They'll tell you stories.

Give you your glories.

Spirits of spite, or a people of purity?

Whichever you pick,

Will-o-the-Wisp or Bug-A-Boo,

Tread lightly, tread carefully.

Redcaps and banshees,

Hags and hobgoblins,

Leaving bloodstained baths behind.

Elves and sprites,

Nymphs and pixies,

Leaving mischief or glory in their wake.

Tails and scales,

Dust and wings,

Fair of face or hideous of heart?

Foretelling of deaths,

And snatching of children,

Loving to humans or deadly to their end?

Soulless at the center,
Sometimes good-natured,
Figments of imagination, or simply hidden from view?

Tied Against the Train

Tavia Booth

The woman latched onto the man's hand, howling with laughter. He pulled her up onto the train, both laughing, as she fell into his arms. They caught their breath, huffing in unison, until they were both at ease.

“Oh, Pierre!” She hummed with delight. Her dress bunched into her hands, as the baby blue fabric was now blackened. Her brown tresses were wild and messy. “How fun that was. I long for an adventure with you. I wish not to go back to a boring woman, who is seen and not heard.”

“Odette, I would do anything to stop that...”

The man, Pierre, hummed aloud. He wrapped an arm around Odette's waist and nodded. They were identical in height, but peculiarly Odette was more muscular than Pierre. Their time together was ending, as the train pulled into the station. It was Blaise Station, to be exact. It made Odette sigh audibly, as this was her family's train station and trains. The locomotive halted as the loud whistle sounded. Well-dressed French men and women lined the station. One of those women in the crowd was furiously striding towards the caboose of the train. Her navy-blue bustle dress bouncing as she stomped forwards, the white lace trim swaying in the breeze. Her brunette hair tied beautiful into a mixture of braids and bun, with a bushel of blue flowers clipped to the side. She was the perfect specimen of a wealthy woman. This woman was Emeline Blaise, wife to the founder of the Blaise fortune.

“Odette Blaise,” the woman yelled loudly from the side of the train, as Odette watched from the caboose. “You get down here right this instance, before I take a switch to you.”

“Yes, mother,” Odette said back quietly.

The fun was over, and Odette complied. She waved to Pierre and trudged off the train. She joined her mother on the platform. As soon as she joined her, her mother took a handkerchief to the black smears across Odette's face. Odette gently pushed her mother away with a grunt.

“You are childish young lady,” her mother said sternly. She grabbed Odette by the arm and pulled her away, leading her back to their property.

Odette was alone again, under the canopy of her bed. She was reading the book, *Pot-Bouille*, by candlelight. She still wore the dirty underclothes from her previous adventure, as her dress, bustle, and corset were thrown to the floor. Odette wiped away a streak of dirt, or engine oil, to no avail. Suddenly, her mother stormed into the room, this time wearing a fitted baby-blue evening dress.

“What have I told you about reading those dastardly novels? No man wants a woman that buries her nose between a book.” Her mother snatched the book from her hands, setting it on the side table. “You are a mess, go clean up, and call the maid to gather your garments.”

Odette went to argue, but her mother stopped her with a grave stare. Pierre would not care if she were well read, or even argumentative, Odette thought. No one appreciated her willingness to learn. Every chance she had to ask a question, to practice writing, to understand her surroundings, she was told to, ‘go look pretty.’ Odette never found it fair that she was treated as an object, the only time she was able to be herself was with Pierre.

“And Odette, stay away from that boy Pierre. Nothing good will come from him filling your mind with blasphemous ideas of schooling and adventure.”

Odette did not look back, instead, she ran down the hall. Her eyes watered softly as she reached her private lavatory. There was no avoiding her mother and her wishes. Odette was nothing more than a woman.

Later that same night, Odette awoke to a soft knocking on her window. She was startled awake, her chest pounding as she sat up. Her head pounded softly from the headache of crying. Nonetheless, she stood and slowly stepped to the window.

“Odette,” someone whispered from outside. It was a familiar voice.

“Pierre!” Odette said happily, trying her best to keep her voice lowered.

Instantly, she undid the latches of the window and opened the vintage window. Odette could not wait, her arms around Pierre’s neck in an instant. Her tears started flowing again, as the emotions swelled like a wave.

“Oh, Odette, my darling what troubles you?” Pierre asked gently. He worked his way through the window as Odette held him tight. Finally, they were together again.

“My mother is a monster,” Odette said in a soft wail. “She has forbidden me from seeing you, and took my readings, she is relentless.”

Pierre sighed softly, his arms finding the crook of Odette’s back. He hugged his love close, his cheek against the top of her head.

“Odette, you know I will never let them take you away,” Pierre said softly. He comforted Odette softly as she sniffled and sighed into his vest. “When I get the money, we will be wed! Then, you can read and write as much as you want. We can wander the earth together... Knowledge will be ours.”

Odette smiled softly, though she did not respond. Nothing more could be said. She trusted Pierre, she loved Pierre. Her arms did not leave the tight hug, it felt like they would not see one another for a long while again. She wanted it to last, just for another moment.

The next morning, Odette woke to a cloudy sky. Her eyes were red and swollen from all the crying. Today was Monday, the only day she was officially allowed out of the house, as she got to help her father at the train station. Odette was the strongest woman in the family, and on shipment days, her father let her haul inventory into the train’s compartments. This was also the one day she could wear trousers. Odette hurried to ready herself, slipping into her stained and worn pants and work shirt. Her mother begrudgingly let her out of the house, but there seemed to be something else on her mind.

As Odette rode the barouche to the station, she could not help but smile. After a long hour she reached the loading

dock. With no hesitation, she hopped out of the carriage and raced into the dock. She was greeted by the smell of challenging work and sweat, and happily breathed in scents. This was her favorite pass time, and one day when she could go to school that would be her new life's calling.

Odette was called over by fellow male workers, few were showed her kindness, the other few seemed annoyed a woman was in their space. Odette knew not everyone agreed with her father's proposition of her working, but she did not care. Some of the workers would teach her what they learned in school, or give her books, it was nice. The burly woman started to get to work. Easily, Odette lifted cargo onto the train, with more ease than some of the bigger men. About an hour and a half into transporting goods, her father arrived.

"Good afternoon, all," a tall, muscular man spoke loudly. He looked dapper, yet his posture and build resembled that of a strongman. Every worker stopped what they were doing, as they responded back chipperly. Intimidation did not begin to describe this man, who was in fact, Odile Blaise.

"Father!"

The man was wrapped into a large hug by Odette, as she chuckled lightly. Odette loved her father dearly; he was her best friend. He understood her, but he knew that his wife was right about Odette being a proper lady.

"Odette," Odile said back softly, a sadden look across his face. He sat his daughter down gently from the hug. Odile was hesitant for a second.

"Your mother..." He hesitated again. "And I, have agreed that it is time you marry. You are a young woman now, there is no more waiting. We have lined up a protentional candidate."

"No." Odette said back harshly.

"I'm sorry, Odette, but this isn't a yes or no."

"No, please."

Odette could feel her fingernails digging into her palms, as she balled her fists. How could her father be so blind? This had to be her mother is doing. First her mother takes

away her books and poetry, now she is arranging her marriage. She did not want to cry. Not here, around all these men.

“This isn’t fair,” Odette said through gritted teeth. Her brow furrowed intensely as she stared at her father.

“Your mother—”

“I knew it!”

“Odette, enough. This is happening whether you like it or not,” her father said sternly. The intimidation influenced Odette, as she pulled back. It made her father falter, softening his expression again.

“You are old enough to understand your role in life. To bear children and marry. Your duty is to keep the bloodline going, and to obey what the men in your life tell you to do.”

“That’s all I am, isn’t it?” Odette asked with a scoff. “I thought you understood me, but no, you are just like mother. Just like everyone else.”

“Odette...”

“No, I understand,” she said back in a fiery tone. “Can I get back to work?”

“I’m sorry,” her father said in a softer tone, “but now that you will be a married woman, you must stay home again. Your mother is waiting outside.”

Odette did not move. She thought she would at least still have the trains to go back to, even a book, but now she had nothing. Odette was homebound and alone. It felt like she would pass out, until she felt a hand on her back. Her father smiled down at her, and all Odette could do was follow him back to the carriage.

Wedding bells tolled loudly for all to hear. The wedding of the Blaise family and the Blanchett. The bride sat delicately in the back room of the chapel. Odette Blaise, the bride to be, sat as she had her long, brown hair brushed slowly. No smile could be found as she sat crying gently, her Bridesmaids making sure she looked perfect. It was the perfect wedding, for anyone not forced to be wed, hundreds were there.

The time had come, and Odette was to be wed. Her tears were wiped away by the bridesmaids, and they fixed her complexion and stance. It was like a nightmare, as Odette was led down the stairs to the chapel, the music growing louder. Odette was met by her father in front of the chapel doors, everyone was waiting for her behind the closed doors.

“Odette...”

“Yes, father?” She spoke hopefully, hoping her father would change his mind.

“Stand up straight, eyes forward, do not mess this up,” her father said back.

A softened snuffle sounded but quickly Odette composed herself. Her father linked arms with her, as the doors slowly opened. Wedding March started to play loudly, every instrument could be heard, the bassoon, the organ, the many violins, and flutes. Beauty at its finest, but Odette could not see the beauty through the pain.

Odette was led to the alter. White Lilly of the Valley hung from every inch of the altar, the smell of fresh flowers and vanilla made Odette’s head pound. Her eyes looked down as she was faced with her bachelor, Henri Blanchett, who she met only once before the wedding. He smiled softly at Odette. He was an attractive male, and richer than the Blaise family, a perfect bachelor for any rich lady. Henri was the same height as Odette as he held his hands out to hold hers.

“Welcome, all,” The sound of the priest sounded. Odette had no time to think, as her hands were grabbed into Henri’s. “Today we celebrate the joining of the Blanchett family with the Blaise family. Odette and Henri will join hands in marriage in the eyes of the church.”

Odette let her eyes trail to Henri’s face again. She was terribly sad, but nothing could save her. It angered her that Henri was happy, that he was smiling, everything about Henri upset her. How could you marry someone you have only met once? That is not love...

The wedding ceremony continued as she was deep in thought. The whole speech was over, and it was time for the exchange of vows.

“Do you, Sir Henri Blanchett, take Odette Blaise to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live in holy matrimony,

to love her, to comfort her, to keep her in sickness and in health, for as long as you shall live?” The priest said loudly, every onlooker on the edge of their seats.

“I do.”

“And do you, Odette Blaise, take Henri Blanchett to be your lawfully wedded husband, to live in holy matrimony,

to love him, to honor him, to keep him in sickness and in health, for as long as you shall live?”

Odette did not answer. She was frozen looking into Henri’s deep brown eyes. She did not, she did not want anything to do with Henri or the Blanchett wealth. But then, her eyes met with her mother, who sat only feet away. Her brow was furrowed and stern. Nothing, no one, could help her. She had no choice but to say those two words.

“I...Do,” she said softly. Everyone let out sighs and nods, as the suspense gripped every family member and attendee.

“I ask now, if anyone is in disagreement to this holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace,” the Priest sounded loudly.

No one was expecting an objection. For a few moments, silence ensued. Then, through the long quiet, a familiar voice sounded.

“I object,” a man called loudly, standing at the back of the chapel.

It was Pierre, dressed nicely in a beautiful emerald vest suit, with dashing khakis. He was as confident as ever, as he kept his promise. Nothing was going to stop Pierre and Odette.

Unfortunately, in an instant, Odette’s father sent his security to the scene. Odette did not care. She broke free from Henri’s hands, grabbing her white dress tightly in her fists, as she started to run. Odette started running down the aisle, to her true love. She was fast, but her security was faster.

“Pierre! What is the plan?” Odette called to him, arm's length away. Pierre reached for Odette, and they held each other's hands.

“We run, and we hop a train,” Pierre said quickly, as the couple started running together. They reached the exit of the chapel, mere seconds before the guards could stop either one of them. “Do you trust me?”

“I do, Pierre, I do!”

Together, they ran from the wedding to the horror of everyone in attendance. Odette and Pierre made it to the station, having outran the guards, and her father. The tracks rustled loudly as a train approached. Without thinking, Odette jumped into the open cargo cart, reaching for Pierre. They were together at last, as the train rushed quickly down the tracks. Their old life behind them as the train did not dare stop. The couple leaned on one another as they watched the scenery race by. Their new lives ahead of them, for better or worse, they were together.

Windows

By Esther Pushkash

eyes like poetry, enchanting and deep
reflecting what goes on truly within
showing the pain that you choose to keep
showing new possibilities set to begin
what truly reflects what you dream when you sleep
your eyes, like poetry enchanting and deep

“eyes are the windows to the soul” they say
your eyes reveal what your lips conceal
your inner child wanting to come out to play
greens and blues and swirls of brown reveal
the pain, the love, the joy, the pain-
every feeling felt every which way
they truly are the windows of the soul as they say

and though she loves your eyes like the stars,
inside she knows she will never have either
she will stay and watch and dream from afar
hoping that observing alone will be enough
eyes like poetry, enchanting and deep,
windows to the soul, reflections of within
eyes like the stars, shining forever bright,
but not for her- no, not tonight

My Bubble Life

By Vlada Tarasova



Girl in Red

By Agatha Marques

Susanna Grinfeld was a snake. For one, ever since grade ten, she's been smearing her lips with every shade of red lipstick Ulta had to offer, and that was my thing. And two, she was after *my* man.

It all started in middle school; Susanna and I were best friends. Every night she would sneak out of her house, which was right next to mine, and crawl through my window so that we could stay up all night and talk about the things in our mind. Sometimes we would even flip through teen magazines looking for new fashion trends that were worth our time. Though she never really followed them anyway. During the weekends, we would go out for ice cream and shop for every new shade of red lipstick we could find. Though she never wore it. But that was our friendship, and we loved it.

That all changed when we started our sophomore year of high school. When we first got our schedules, we looked frantically over each other's shoulders trying to compare classes. That's how close we were. We had three classes together and lunch so that wasn't all too bad. Anyway. During the second half of the first semester, a new student transferred from across the pond. A real cutie. He had that little accent that you just didn't quite hear here in Texas. Every girl was swooning over him. Not Susanna though. That's what she promised.

I asked her if she was sure because we girls never ever go after somebody that our friends also like, but she said, she was sure. Said she was 100% sure too! After we had had that talk, I began to reapply my bright red lipstick in between classes. All the girls were wearing nude shades. *Boring*. Ricky Evans wasn't looking for boring. And surely enough, a little while after, Ricky Evans became my boyfriend. But I'm not fake. I still wanted to hang out with Susanna, but she always had homework and chores whenever I tried to make plans. Then she began to take different routes to class or not show up at all. So, Ricky sat with me at lunch. He

was so dreamy. He had brown hair like Susanna's; it fell in little curls past his eyes. *Oh, his eyes.* They were green, but not like swamp green, they were like fresh cut limes. And his freckles were like little kisses that the sun placed on his skin. Susanna had freckles too. Anyways.

One morning, while Ricky was out of town, I walked over to biology class by myself. Sitting at the lab tables in the front of the classroom was Susanna. She showed up to lab day with the new MAC lipstick shade Red Rock. I knew it was Red Rock because that was my new favorite. And she rocked it. Her lips looked beautiful. *What a snake.* She never wore lipstick, let alone bright red. *Why now?* We had a little stare off and I knew then just what she was trying to do. She stole my signature bold color so that she could steal my man!

Whenever my Ricky was back, Susanna would try harder and add a little mascara between fourth period and lunch. In the lunch line, she would bat those long, beautiful eyelashes towards us as if she was trying to cause a tornado that would rip my Ricky away from me. Thank heavens that my Ricky was oblivious to just about everything. He never listened when I would tell him about Susanna.

It was worse during homecoming week. Ricky started to drift away from me. *That damn Susanna.* She was stealing my look and my man! Oh, but I never put down a fight. Susanna and I had gone dress shopping during one of our outings back when we were friends. She had pointed out a real nice red dress. So, I went back to the boutique, and I bought it. She wanted to steal my look, so I stole hers.

The day before homecoming, I wore my favorite white blouse and jeans; it was Susanna's favorite too. So surely Ricky would like it too. He still had to ask me to the dance, and I just knew he was planning on the sweetest gesture. Earlier that week I made sure to remind him of some real pretty tulip flowers that I saw at the market during the weekend, I knew he would make a mental note for later.

But Ricky didn't even show up. I stood next to the locker waiting for him like I did every morning. *Maybe he was waiting with the surprise HOCO poster in the classroom.* So, I put on my bright red lip and walked to class.

He wasn't there, but sitting at my table were the pretty flowers I had said I liked. *What a gentleman he was.* I sat in my seat and stared at Susanna. I wanted her to see me and know that I was happy. She looked back at me, glaring past her shoulder. Her beautiful brown curls fell in all the right places. Her lashes piled with mascara hovering above her beautiful blue eyes, and then her lips with a faint hint of the red lipstick I liked. She looked nice, real nice. The red suits her well.

I took the flowers in my hands and a small piece of paper fell out. *Amelia*, it read on the outside in neat writing. My heart fluttered at seeing my name written so pretty.

I quickly opened the letter feeling my heart pound a little faster. I read it, then skimmed through it a couple of times. This letter wasn't from Ricky, it had been written, delivered with my favorite flower, and sealed with a fresh blotch of red lipstick.

My Susanna.

The Valley Side

By Anaia Davis



No More

By Diego Rodriguez

I have not forgotten; however, I choose not to feel.

I neglect the original death.

The creature I was, and the passage a distant destiny.

I see my demons and the artistic rainbow at the same time.

The freezing snow an imperial crown.

I dream the concept of attitude and giggles.

I crouch in the sun and watch the dashing stars.

The lurking shadows surround me, they pull me in.

I feel the dark shimmer of the sinful energy.

Grabbing the broken sword, I kill it.

I kill the language at the tip of my tongue.

The wreath of drunk ribbons is my gift.

I drown out the world, the forbidden words.

I walk the imaginary garden just to be with you again.

I smile, daring the maximum of what is, to take over me.

I laugh at the irony; how did I get here?

No more demon, no more.

A Woman's Desperation

By Kira Glenn

A thousand nights and what is one more?
Make it a thousand and one Arabian Nights.
While searching for where the title came
from, there are over fifty-five million results found.
Try finding the stories bound.
When was the stories first told?
The collection was first told
eight hundred years before Christianity
through India and Persia. India can tell
some very interesting stories.

Scheherazade had to appease her husband.
Please don't slay me for I have stories
that will take a thousand and one nights
to tell.

With stories like that, there should not be war.
She told the story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves.
Instead of cleaving lives and stealing lives.
I wish I had three wishes like Aladdin
to wish to be a prince for a day.
To win the heart of a sheltered princess
while thwarting a power-hungry advisor.
To hear about a king who farted at his wedding

or be able to travel like Sinbad from Baghdad.
Give me tails like the “Serpent Queen” and hunt
For treasure. All to save the life of a woman.

Homage to Mapplethorpe

By Maria Spelleri



Earth's First Martyr

By Eric Escoto

Cain and Able knew the minds of each

More than saints can teach.

Able was not blind to Cain's designs,

But kept his secrets better than birds of a feather.

He knew when to speak, when to still,

When to come and when to go,

But the depth and breadth of hate,

that he did not know.

So Death arose in shadow

And tempted Cain,

And in strident, invented violence

Able was slain.

Recounted here the birth of Earth's

First Martyr,

Who was slaughtered

For knowing the mind of God

And bearing divine fruits from earthy sod.

And dared not boast, even to the shoots.

Burgundy Bliss

By Owen Miller



Kratsovka

By Elizabeth Retslav

Kratsovka (noun) /krat-'sov-ka/

1. A mystical creature

I have always yearned for human connection. I begged for it from god, getting down on my knees and pleading to have what felt like a sin be absolved. My sin of always feeling different, of never connecting with a single being in a meaningful way. Eventually, god answered my prayers, and had me meet my family. They made me feel like the child of Adam and Eve, as if we were just banished to Earth after having opened Pandora's box, and must now suffer the torture of a mortal life together. My family has this tradition, and it makes me feel disgusting, and I know god looks down on me for it, but in the back of my mind I know he looks down on my family for it too, and that makes me feel connected, for we carry the burden of this sin together. On our land, we have a farm of Kratsovkas. Usually their meat is tough, but we have found a way to make it taste tender, much better than before. On every Friday, at 7pm, we uphold this family tradition of ours. We gather around the kitchen table and my little brother will hold the stopwatch, my mother, she'll hold the Kratsovka down, and my father will do the hardest part, of hurting the Kratsovka. That is what makes the meat tender. I must note, the meat is not inedible without the torture, but it is simply much better this way. And once the stopwatch beeps, it will be time to do my job. I hold the hatchet up, and end the Kratsovka's misery. Afterwards, my brother cleans the table, and I go to the altar to pray. It is not part of my job, but I can see in my families eyes that they are thankful for it. Thankful for the chance for our selfish sin to be absolved. I know all the signs of a cult, the found family, having the members be in a constant state of paranoia, and I see all of these signs in my family. However, for the first time in my life I feel a sense of catharsis, a sense of meaningful connection.

Contributor Bios

JC Barrera is pursuing her passion to be a published author. She is also in the process of becoming a yoga instructor and is working on a project which would look good for a voice acting resume. She is 19 and will graduate from SCF in May 2024. She absolutely adores her husky and loves traveling. Some of her hobbies include reading, baking, watching anime, soccer, and playing pool.

Anaia Davis is an 11th grader at SCF attaining her A.A. degree. She is interested in many forms of art, including painting, drawing, and photography. She recently became interested in photography in 2020 when she started capturing pictures of vacation spots whenever she traveled. However, she still finds the most pleasure in writing.

Eric Escoto: I am a student at State College of Florida. I am aiming to be a Professor of Classic Literature, some of my favorite poets are Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickenson, and Gustavo Adolfo Becquer. I'm 31 years old, from Miami and love to travel and aquire new experiences and impressions. I am of the opinion that without living properly one cannot write properly.

Myli-Ann Goodine is an eighteen-year-old currently attending her first year at the State College of Florida. Myli also works at SCF as a student employee. She is currently getting an Associate in Arts for English Literature. Eventually, she wants to move on and get a Bachelor's in English Literature or Creative Writ-ing and then get a Master's in Fine Arts. In the future, she would like to publish books and become an author. She enjoys true crime, mystery, horror, and fantasy, crime being her favorite genre of the four. She likes to read in her free time, paint, and learn new things such as philosophy.

Jenny Lopatin-Austin exists somewhere in Venice if you haven't found her yet then you probably aren't looking hard enough. She enjoys cooking, watching films, and spend time with what is either a void with eyes or a black cat. For her day job she works in a library as an assistant, not a librarian, a very important distinction. She currently has an associate in art degree. She'd ideally like to be paid for her writing or paid to do nothing, but that last part is unrealistic. If you or a loved one are interesting in her combining more words into sentences and then sentences into stories you could try emailing her at her own personal email address at jl1781@comcast.net, but if you have no interest that's fine too and she hopes you have a great day.

I'm **Owen Miller**, I am a freshman at SCF studying biology. I moved down from Michigan with my family during COVID and am still learning about the area. I'm pursuing biology to prepare myself for a career in the medical field. I started photography back in 2016 when my parents got me my first camera. When we lived in Michigan it was more of a part-time hobby. But when we moved to Florida, I rediscovered my passion for it by volunteering to take photos at my church. From there, I have poured more of my time into Photography and turned it into a full-time hobby.

Haley Minette is currently at her last semester at SCF. She is an aspiring therapist and plans to get her doctorate within the next 10 years. Haley is from Chicago, IL and is currently working and living in Lakewood Ranch, FL. Haley is a certified bilingual and loves to travel. Her career is just getting started!

The flash fiction author, **Agatha Nascimento**, is a dual enrollment student at Bayshore High School. Writing this work of flash fiction, she wanted to demonstrate some difficulties that can be faced in self-discovery within the LGBTQ+ community. Nascimento began to take classes via SCF to pursue her A.A. degree post-graduation. During her

first semester, she fell in love with literature and chose her career path to pursue English, and therefore chose Creative Writing to demonstrate her creative abilities. Nascimento finds that music best enables her mind to roam freely and create worlds and scenarios for her stories. The flash fiction story, "Girl In Red", is inspired by real-life events of self-discovery, but also by American singer and songwriter, Girl In Red. The story ventures into the friendship of two teen girls who go through self-discovery as they get into high school.

Kylee Nicholas is a college student originally from Chicago, Illinois, but now resides on the West Coast of Florida. She has yet to have any work published, but she has written many personal works. She likes to dabble in poetry from time to time, whether that is reading or writing it.

Alina Oberglock is 20 years old and currently enrolled to earn her A. A. degree. Planning to get into Psychology. Her hobbies include photography and writing.

Esther Pushkash is a senior at SCFCS Venice, in her sophomore year of her A.A. degree. This photo was taken because it reminded her of her sisters, who are polar body twins, neither identical nor fraternal.

Diego Rodriguez was born in Puerto Rico. He came to the United States in 2015 with his parents, and brothers to live the American Dream. He is currently a high school junior and taking college courses. Ever since he was little, Diego loved writing and art. Diego wishes to major in both animation, and creative writing. His dream is to reach the lives of millions through his art, and words.

Maria Spelleri: Professor, Artist, Tries to be Kind, Loves Cats and Nature

Avery Witt is an SCF freshman student. She has been writing for many years but has never attempted a professional publication. She will continue to write to improve her work and someday hopes to publish a novel.

Elektraphrog Staff



Isla De La Cruz is a former performing artist, current TV/Film enthusiast, and student at State College of Florida. She has a deep affection for indulging in romantic comedies through both reading and streaming. She is best known as the “surprise personality hire” at her recent place of employment in customer service. Her aspiration is to transition into a start-studded career in the entertainment industry as a Public Relations Representative or Publicist. She loves pop culture and sad music. May the odds be ever in her favor.



Daniel Nascimento embodies the three Ss God originally envisioned for Adam -- sexy, swag and sleepy. Currently a student at SCF, he spends most of his time not doing his school work, instead choosing to pursue playing the guitar and thrifting for any BB8 merch he can find. Please send any his way...

PLEAAAAASEEEEEEE.

Heather Pope

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