

# eletraphrog



Fall 2024  
Issue 17.1

Diana  
24

Cover Image:  
"A Lonely Road" by Dina Sizemore

Back Cover Image:  
Detail from  
"Owl Study No. 1" by Faith Dahlke

## Table of Contents

Soldier in Pink Camouflage by Lex Emery.....	1
Owl Study No. 2 by Faith Dahlke .....	4
A Broken Heart by Grace Knowles.....	5
One Day by Alina Oberglock.....	9
How I Was Made by E. O. E. ....	10
The Beauty of a Flower by Alina Oberglock.....	11
Loss, Longing, and Learning by Dan O’Brien.....	12
Mental Health Online by Grace Knowles .....	14
Deadly Drifting by Christopher Nevins .....	15
Owl Study No. 1 by Faith Dahlke .....	21
Hurricane Helene by Christopher Nevins .....	22
The Cost of Her Heart by Maria Ballesteros .....	24
Favorite Places by Alina Oberglock .....	26
Mysteries of the Deep by Maria Ballesteros .....	27
Don’t Talk About It by Felix Altman.....	29
Boeing 757 flying low at Sint Marteen by Luke DeSantis .....	30
A Lonely Road by Dina Sizmore .....	31
Family Plot by Tyler Bogard.....	32
Masquerading Mask by R. M. Sloan .....	35
Stop Acting Like the Sky is Falling by Paige Ondrek.....	37
Betty Fish Study no 1 by Faith Dahlke .....	45
<del>Mikayla</del> Micaela (Mi-Kai-Ayla) by Micaela Ramirez .....	46
Things That Broke by Andrew Turner.....	48
Afterglow by Paige Ondrek .....	50
Left Behind by Dina Sizmore .....	52
The Sounds of the City by Lex Emery .....	53
The Hand that Feeds by Lex Emery .....	54
Final Reprimand by Andrew Turner .....	55
Contributor Bios .....	58
Elektraphrog Staff .....	60

# Soldier in Pink Camouflage

By Lex Emery

What happens when the,  
World you know  
Completely changes?

What happens when,  
The world you know,  
Rearranges?

When everything you,  
Know goes  
Out the window?

That uncomfortable truth,  
The uncomfortable stares,  
Become too much for you?

You fight, you fight, you fight.  
You want change?  
You fight.  
You want to be  
Taken seriously?  
You fight.

You fight because you  
Cannot forget.  
You fight because of a legacy  
Of regret.

What do you do  
When they try  
To fight back?

You fight harder.  
You do not give in.  
You may not win.  
But,  
Does it matter?

Does it matter  
When you know  
History will  
Completely forget you?

Of course it does,  
You're fighting for  
Your home,  
Identity,  
Independence.

You become a soldier  
Because it's all you  
Can be.  
You fight because  
You are a woman.  
You are Barbie.

# Owl Study No. 2

By Faith Dahlke



# A Broken Heart

By Grace Knowles

I could feel the tension as Lewis and I walked out together. As normal, our hands interlock together, but it feels different this time. He's been questioning my loyalty for a while. He has good suspicion, but his doubt is wrong. We walked in silence slowly back to the car after a long day of classes. We both knew someone had to say something eventually which is why there was built up tension between us. I did not want to start the conversation, but I knew he is too stubborn to say anything. I broke the silence and ask, "Are we ever going to talk about this Lewis?"

It took a while for him to come up with something to say, probably because he did not even want to talk to me. He says, "Pandora. There's nothing to talk about," he takes a deep breath before continuing, "It seems like you made up your mind on where we stand."

"What are you talking about Lewis?" I say. I knew exactly what he was talking about. How are you supposed to tell the person you love that there is a great chance you are dying? I know I can't. Especially considering Lewis lost his mother only a few years ago due to a similar disease that was found too late to cure. There was nothing but awkward silence between us all day and it continues throughout our conversation right now. I want everything to go back to normal. Before I knew about my heart disease and before I had to lie to him just to protect his feelings.

"Why are you always leaving to answer random phone calls? Why can't you tell me who you're talking to? Why can't you at least tell me what you're doing?" Lewis asks while tearing up. He quickly wipes the few tears that rolled down his cheek. He looks at me with confused and watery eyes. I can't help but cry. Why is it so hard to tell him? Is it easier to end it so he won't have to worry about me or to let him watch me possibly die? I know he can't watch me die after losing his mom.



“I just wish you understood Lewis. I can’t tell you and I have told you that before. I’m sorry,” I say. I knew exactly what was going to happen right after saying that.

Lewis’s tears stopped and he says, “I’m not doing this anymore then. You can’t tell me simple stuff, we’re done. I’m so sick of always being confused with you.”

Five years down the drain. I know it’s the right thing to do. He will assume I was done with the relationship, and he won’t ever know what is happening to me. It’s for the better. Right?

We drove home in silence. It was the longest car ride I have ever been in. I could not even look at him until we got to my house. I apologized one last time before leaving. It was over.

I know my chronic stress is linked to my heart disease, but tonight it feels like Lewis is the only thing causing this stress. I noticed he blocked me on everything hours after the breakup. I could not sleep the entire night thinking of what he might be doing. People always say breaking up because the person you love has cheated is the worst kind of breakup. I have a feeling they have never felt the need to lie about their heart disease to the person they love the most.

I have another hospital visit today; these checkups are exhausting. I’m told the same thing every time, I need surgery soon or my heart will continue to become weaker. My muscles feel more fatigued every day and there is almost nothing I can do about it. I’m dizzy, exhausted, and in pain constantly. With Lewis out of my life I feel like I am finally ready for everything to be over. He was the only person I even considered fighting this disease for.

I slept on the thought of potentially dying and I woke with a completely different feeling than I had yesterday. I don’t know what flipped the switch in me, but I do know I need Lewis to get through this. He is the only strength I have right now. He has always been there for me, and nothing would change that. I need to tell him the truth. I have been confusing him for the last few months of our relationship. It is not fair to him; he has been nothing but good to

me. I already lost him, but maybe I can get him back after I explain it all to him.

I decided to stop by his house so I can finally explain what I have been keeping from him. Fortunately, he was home. I knocked a few times, and he answered the door rather quickly. I did not know what he was going to do, but before he had any time to think I say, "Please let me explain to you what happened. Just let me in and I will tell you everything. I promise it's not what you think."

Lewis sighed and then says, "Pandora. I know what happened. I don't need the closure you think I need. I'm done, we're good."

He begins to slowly shut the door. So, I did what any desperate girl would do, and I forced myself through his doorway into his house. I say, "You actually have no idea what is happening."

Lewis rolled his eyes and asks, "Do I really need an explanation to your cheating?"

"Yes, you do."

"See. I knew you were cheating you just admitted it."

"No Lewis, I have a heart disease."

We both paused. I can't believe that just came out of my mouth, and he can't believe that is what I have been keeping from him. I watched his eyes as they started to tear up. Watching him cry made me cry. Before I even noticed he was hugging me as we cried in each other's arms. It felt so good to finally tell him. He deserved to know. I knew I was crying because of the relief I felt. I was no longer upset about my heart disease. I have been dealing with it for months. I knew there was no way to fix it considering I can't afford surgery. I say to Lewis, "I'm sorry, I know you have been through so much. I understand if you don't want anything to do with me."

"Pandora. All this time I've been trying to get over you because I assumed you cheated. I'm relieved you didn't, but I am also terrified for you. Are you kidding! I want to be there for you. You should not deal with this alone."

I tear up because I always knew he was the sweetest boy and I say, “Thank you, Lewis. I’m so sorry I kept it from you. It doesn’t even make sense why. I just thought it would be easier and it wasn’t.”

“Just promise me we won’t hide anything from each other anymore. No matter what.”

“Yes, Lewis. I promise. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Lewis says while he pulls me in for a hug.

The rest of the night we hung out like everything was normal. It felt so good to finally feel normal again, even if it was for just one night. I know the cycle will repeat when I go back to the doctor. Once I left his house, I went to bed shortly after getting home. I woke up to news I never thought I would see.

That night while I was asleep, he started a GoFundMe for my surgery, and it went viral online. I can finally afford to fix my heart. I understand there are many risks when going through surgery, but I will do whatever it takes to have more time with him. I need him and he wants to be there for me. I wish I always realized I need him.

# One Day

By Alina Oberglock

One day we will be free,  
To be who we are,  
And who we want to be.  
Free of all the scars,  
And of all the pain they caused.

One day we can go,  
To wherever our hearts desire.  
And then we will grow,  
To be someone we truly admire.

# How I Was Made

By E.O.E.

Sometimes I think I can bully myself  
Out of mixed identity,  
That my transness is all a mirage or illusion  
And not all I'll ever be.

That all this confusion is being caused  
By some mental contusion,  
And is fixable or redeemable  
With a simple blood transfusion.

And maybe one day I'll wake up and find  
That my mixed identity has been left far behind,  
That it was nothing more than phase or charade  
That I am normal and can live how I was made.

# The Beauty of a Flower

By Alina Oberglock



# Loss, Longing, and Learning

By Dan O'Brien

Although I have not been on this Earth for a long time, I feel my experiences, positive and negative, have crafted meaningful values instilled in me. August 29, 2020, was a normal day for me. That evening, I was going out with my family to pick up some Chinese food. I was never an enthusiastic fan of Chinese food, but I tolerated it because my family enjoyed it, especially my parents. The Chinese restaurant was a fifteen-minute drive from my house. Once we arrived, my dad, my sister and I all got out of the car to pick up the order. Within moments my entire life had changed; my dad suffered a heart attack and died right in front of me. That is something you never expect to happen, and when it does, it feels like a horrid nightmare. A sense of helplessness and a desperation for it to end grows inside you.

At twelve years old, I had never even experienced death before in my life. In hindsight, the death of my dad is one of the things that has helped me turn into the person I am today. I ended up not going to school for a while after his passing. My classmates wrote a card about how they were sorry for my loss, but I did not believe that they understood my loss and the tragedy I was suffering. To this day, I still feel the void his passing has left behind in my heart. For the rest of my life, it pains me knowing I will never be able to have my dad at any more momentous events in my life. I still long to be able to undo that terrible event in my life.

Dealing with this loss has helped me realize how fragile and sacred life is. After my dad's passing, loss has become an almost common theme in my life with pets, other family members and friends included. Grief is the most awful feeling one could experience. Despite its negativity, it is an extraordinary emotion. It is something we all will have to deal with in our lives. I have now dealt with it multiple times; it is like a friend to me. Although tragic, grief has helped me learn plenty, and it makes me cherish my life a lot more.

Losing loved ones is not the only thing I feel has helped me grow in my life. Relationships with friends and others have also helped me become much more insightful in understanding people's different perspectives on life. By creating friendships and connections with people, we combat the loneliness within us. People long to be rid of the loneliness that plagues them. However, it is important to know it is the quality, not the quantity, of those relationships that matter. There are many ways to connect with people, whether through a favorite topic you both share or even through an argument. People vary in many ways from each other. It is a challenge to understand what someone else has struggled with in their life. Having empathy can help making understanding someone's struggles more easily. Learning about people's difficult experiences in their lives is an arduous process, but it shows how unique all of us are.

Empathy may be hard to show and express, but it is a valuable skill everyone should learn. Trying to be compassionate towards other people is what I have learned can help me understand the complexities and challenges that people endure. The incredible range of experiences we have throughout our lifetimes shows the depth of every aspect of someone. It is important to realize how different we all are, and that people can not be categorized into one group.

I know no matter how many things I accomplish and learn, I will always have my flaws and shortcomings. I can never be perfect. It is worth trying to at least be the best I can be and enjoying however much time I have. Many agree that life is the most beautiful thing we have. However finite it may be, I strongly believe in trying to live life the best you possibly can. There will be plenty of times when we feel lost, or even feel like life is not worth living. It may at times feel impossible to continue in life, but things like the loss of my dad and others in my life remind me that my life is not something worth throwing away, and neither is yours.



# Mental Health Online

By Grace Knowles

Our mind's a maze, moments have hazed  
Their fingers type behind a screen  
But what is written is so mean  
Scrolling screens, sadness has seeped  
Distortion of images, emotions are formed  
Filtered faces fleeting for fame  
With eyes glaring while we simply fade  
Words linger pervasive, permanent fixture of our lives  
Social isolation, causes our parents frustration  
Virtual violence glamorized, making lives dramatized  
Television is fake, and our hearts are at stake  
Online immaturity is the death of our purity  
They all exaggerate, and we don't know what is accurate  
Online oceans flood our mind  
We can't resist even though it is time  
The screens that glare, our eyes will stare  
It is short and fake, hearts often break  
We are lost in thought, many can relate  
It's an empty lot, our mind in a fragile state  
Brave brattles make burdens born  
In absence of experience, we need more obedience  
In the media's maze, minds often stray  
Seeking comfort, in a world of gray  
Mental scars are healed, we see stars  
Virtual voids will be no more

# Deadly Drifting

By Christopher Nevins

The roar of the engines drowned out all of the noise that filled Lane's head. Lane gripped the steering wheel with both hands tightly. Lane was focused as the road flew by, corners whipping by.

He wasn't used to the adrenaline rush. Pushing boundaries and living on the edge was not how he lived usually. He'd typically stuck to the straight and narrow, he's always done everything the right way. But that was before it happened.

The diagnosis.

He generally lived a life that was calm and collected. His body betrayed him in ways that he didn't understand and couldn't control and time was now an important factor. The doctors told him he only had months left. Knowing that, something changed inside him. Lane Miles now searched for the thrill of danger and lived life truly on the edge. He'd learn how close to the edge he was tonight.

Lucas, his best friend and partner in crime tonight (literally), was close behind. The mountain towered above them. It's twisty roads egged them both on. Lane's heart bumped in his chest with excitement. The boys met at the top and were currently skidding through turns, racing to the end.

*"I could die doing this,"* he thought. But the thought didn't scare him. It excited him and it was a hell of a lot better than being hooked up to machines and on medication that would make him sick.

Lucas' car came closer, his headlights starting to flicker behind him. Lane could feel something wasn't quite right. Lucas was always a bit reckless, pushing himself to the max. With the extra loose gravel from the dry days, Lane wasn't going to push it. Lane couldn't help but worry about safety, even in his new reckless way of living.

The next corner came up fast, it was a hairpin that challenged everyone. Lane downshifted, his car sliding into a

slower drift naturally and controlled. He enjoyed the swing and power of his car and the control he had over it.

Lane glanced in the rearview mirror, his smile faded, and his stomach dropped.

Lucas took the turn too hard. Lane could see his car struggling to stay straight, the car swinging back and forth. Lucas was going too fast, he was trying too hard to keep up.

Lane slowed down, trying to force Lucas to as well since he was behind him. There was just too much gravel and Lucas' car passed him. Screams from the tires flowed through the air but were quickly swallowed by the roaring engines.

It happened in slow motion- Lucas' car lost control and he spun out of the drift. Lane's heart sank as the back tires hit guardrails, sending the car into a frantic swerve. His jaw dropped as he watched Lucas' car flip over the edge.

"No! Lucas!", he yelled. Lane began to panic; Lucas didn't have a fatal diagnosis like he did. He had a life to live.

Lane slammed on his brakes. The car screeching to a stop just inches from the broken guardrail. His breath came in short gasps as he swung open his door and stumbled toward the edge. His eyes frantically searched through the darkness below. There, far below, he saw the taillights of his friend's car straight up in the air.

"God, no..." Lane said. His chest hurt, the adrenaline from the race leaving his body, replaced by fight or flight. He began to sprint, trying to plan how to get to his friend.

He reached into his pocket as he ran and dialed 911.

Heavy gasps of air interrupting his words, he said, "My friend, he went over the edge. I don't see movement. I'm trying to get him."

"Take a deep breath and stay on the line. I'm sending help to you now. Can you tell me what happened exactly?" the dispatcher asked Lane.

Frustrated and still gasping for air, Lane said, "We were racing down the mountain. It was stupid. We hit a tight turn and pushed a little too hard and he went off."

Lane stayed on the line with the dispatcher while he ran to his friend. Sirens grew louder in the distance.

Lane stood on the road, staring at the eerie red lights lighting up the mountain above.

He began stumbling down the slope, trying to get to his friend, his mind racing. How did it come to this? How had he let it get this far?

Six months earlier, Lane had been a completely different person.

He lived a calm, controlled, and predictable life. His days were neatly ordered and coordinated routines- wake up, go for a run, eat breakfast, and head to work. He liked the routine and stability. Lane never took risks and never deviated from the path he'd made for himself. But all of that had changed the day he sat in his doctor's office. The excessively clean smell struck him. The doctor's voice was calm as he delivered the news that destroyed Lane's life.

"Stage four. It's spread too far. I'm sorry, Lane. With treatment, you might have a year, but without it- only a few months."

The words knocked the wind out of him. A year. If he's lucky. A few months. More than likely. Lane had always believed that if he did everything right, he would be fine and nothing bad would happen. But life had shown him that was not the case.

"I'm not doing treatments," he said to his parents, "I saw how miserable gramps was, I just can't live like that."

His mom, disappointed, looked to his father, "Please Lane. You're so young. You can't just give up," she said. His father nodded in agreement.

"No mom, this is my life, and I can't live like that," he said, getting ready to walk out the door.

Lane couldn't remember the few weeks after that conversation. He was in an isolated daze. The routine that had once brought him comfort now felt like a straitjacket. He didn't want to live his life like this. Each moment was a reminder of his time slipping away. Lane stopped functioning. He stopped answering work, his friends, and even family. He spent hours contemplating the point of life.

There was one person Lane couldn't stop thinking about.

Lucas and Lane had been friends since college, but they were total opposites. When Lane was cautious, Lucas was wild and always living on the edge. They had stayed close over the years and checked in with each other. But now, Lane found himself drawn to Lucas. He wanted to live life to the fullest, he didn't want this diagnosis to strangle him.

When Lane called Lucas, his voice was barely above a whisper, "I need to talk to you."

Lucas didn't ask questions and showed up at Lane's door saying, "You look like hell, man."

Lane didn't even grin, he opened the door said, "I've been better, please come in."

They spent hours talking and catching up on everything. Lucas told Lane about his latest adventures, which was racing cars, and more recently, he took a trip to Tokyo. Really making the most of his life. Lane listened, wishing he had these experiences also. He realized that he had spent his entire life playing it safe. Now that the clock was ticking, he wanted to make the most of the time he had left. He didn't want to die with regret.

"I want to know what it's like," Lane said cutting off Lucas. "I want to live like you."

Lucas asked, "You sure about that? It's not for the weak. I know you know that Lane."

Lane nodded, saying, "I'm sure. I can't just sit here and wait to die. I need to do something. I need to feel alive before I go."

Lucas responded, "Alright. But this isn't just some one time thing, Lane. You need to commit to this lifestyle."

It took some time to adjust to the new way of life.

Over the next few weeks, Lucas guided Lane through a lifestyle he had never known. This was a life of speed, danger, and adrenaline. The risks started small, Lucas eased Lane into this lifestyle. There were late night drag races, high speed motorcycle rides, and eventually, they did go sky-diving from a plane. Lane felt himself changing, loving this life. The fear no longer controlled him. He was controlled by the desire to feel alive and love for his life. For the first time,

Lane felt like he was in charge, making the decisions for himself. He was free and living on his own terms.

Even as Lane pushed the boundaries, he always held back. He couldn't ever completely let go and be reckless. While the new lifestyle was nice, Lane lived carefully for so long and his tendencies to play it safe were beginning to show.

Lucas noticed it too. "You're still holding back on me now," he said one night after a close call street racing. "You can't commit if you're still afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Lane said quickly, even though he knew he was.

"Then show me, I want to see you let go" Lucas said, daring him. "Race me down the mountain."

Lane needed to prove it to himself and Lucas, so he agreed.

Now with Lucas' car sat upside down at the bottom of the mountain, Lane wished he had never agreed.

Scrambling down the slope, Lane's mind raced. He felt fear, guilt, and regret take over him. This wasn't what he wanted at all. He really just wanted to feel alive and take control of his life. But in his search for freedom, he had gone way too far. As a result, Lucas was paying the price.

Each step tested Lane's balance. Lane's breath came in panicked gasps as he got closer to the wreck. The car was a mess and the smell of gasoline and burnt rubber heavy in the air. Normally, these are smells Lane loves, but they made him fall to his knees beside the car. Head in his face, Lane faced the car. The interior light was on, and he could see his friend.

"Lucas!" he yelled, panicked and frantic.

There was only a small whimper of an answer, punctuated by the silence of the night. Lane's heart pounded in his chest as he tugged on the door, prying it open successfully. Lucas was laying over the steering wheel, blood trickling down his face, his breathing shallow, his eyes fluttered open.

“Hold on, man,” Lane said, trying to keep the tears from streaming down his face. “I can hear them coming. Listen. They’re really close.”

He stayed by Lucas’ side, monitoring his breathing to make sure he was still alive. The minutes felt like they lasted forever as sirens drew nearer. Small whimpers came from Lucas, he was in pain, but he seemed okay.

“I almost had you,” said Lucas. “I was gaining on you.”

“I know man, you were so close. Keep talking, they’re right here.” said Lane.

Lucas’ eyes fluttered open as paramedics surrounded him. They quickly pulled Lucas from the wreckage and strapped him onto a stretcher. Lane watched anxiously, trying to process everything that just happened. Lucas was alive, but barely. As for his car- that was gone. Lane felt himself break as he watched his friend get loaded into the ambulance.

He wanted to feel alive and push the boundaries of life. But in doing so, he almost lost his best friend. Life isn’t worth killing yourself to enjoy it.

As the ambulance sped away, Lane walked himself to his car. He was deep in thought as the chilly air pinched him back to reality. He had made a choice to change his lifestyle, but in the end, it wasn’t worth it. He had been running from death and taking his life into his own hands, but at the same time, he ran towards it.

Lane turned away from the wrecked car. He didn’t how much time he had left with his diagnosis. There was more to life than just surviving. It was about truly living, and he needed to find that balance. He took a deep breath in and accepted that life can still have thrills, but not be deadly. With one last look at the deadly road, Lane shuffled back to his car. This time, when Lucas was better, it’d be Lane teaching him how to live a balanced life.

He finally felt like he had control over his life.

# Owl Study No. 1

By Faith Dahlke





# Hurricane Helene

By Christopher Nevins

Survivors wonder about the salty water in Manatee,  
Nothing like that bottled water normality,  
The death toll triples between the cities, more than 100  
bodies,

Building tumbles, washed away by flood,  
DeSantis tells us, "It's okay", he speaks all day  
Whispers of another one churning in the bay,  
Ready to demolish, turning the sky gray,  
Let's just hope this one goes the other way.

Helene was mean, staining our waters deep green,  
Sand is sinking homes, gnomes, water-raising tombs.

Tornado warnings dampen the mood-

"Put on your helmets and go to your safe rooms!"

Winds wailing wildly, warnings with no water, no law  
Hellacious Helene howled hard against our windows.

Palms punished painfully in the gusts, tugging, tearing,  
and thrusts.

Some falling, some leaning- some still standing.

Fronds on the ground, on cars-in cars,

Nature's missiles reminding you why you stay inside dur-  
ing the "weather event"

Weather "event"??

An event like wedding, baby shower, a celebration-

Not a natural disaster drowning our people.

dragging our cars, our homes, and lives back into the  
ocean.

An event is happy and cheerful- new baby, new home, new  
car, new job

Not a dead baby, no home, no car, no job

The stores closed and no one knows when our next weather  
event will begin.

DeSantis says we'll be ready for him- Milton,

How obscene- we were barely even ready for Helene.

# The Cost of Her Heart

By Maria Ballesteros

The streets felt quieter than usual, though the marketplace was still as crowded as ever. People walked past stalls filled with food, clothes, and trinkets, but no one exchanged money anymore. In this world, hearts were the only currency that mattered, and today, Alex had one beating faintly in the jar he clutched in his hand.

Mariah's heart was failing. The doctors had told him there was nothing they could do—her life was slipping away. That's when they mentioned the heart trade. "Find a heart, and we can save her," they said, their voices steady, as if this was just another routine.

He hadn't hesitated. There wasn't time to. Mariah had been everything to him—her smile, the way she lit up the room, the moments they'd shared. Losing her was not an option. So, he found someone, a man who no one would notice was gone. A drifter with no family, no name. Alex told himself it wasn't so bad. It was just survival. Mariah needed a heart, and this man had one he didn't need.

Now, with the heart pulsing inside the jar, Alex walked toward the hospital. The thudding beat echoed in his mind, louder than the chatter around him, louder than the sound of his own heart. His hands felt cold against the glass. He had to keep reminding himself that it was all worth it. She was worth it.

The hospital loomed ahead, sterile and gray. He had saved her, he told himself. He had done the right thing. But with each step, the weight of the jar seemed to increase. He could feel the heart inside, alive, beating for a man who no longer existed. Alex shook his head, trying to push the thought away. It was for Mariah. He had done this for her.

He remembered the drifter's eyes, wide with fear when Alex cornered him. There had been no struggle, no screams—just a quiet acceptance, as if the man knew this world wasn't meant for him. But now, that silence haunted Alex. He hadn't just stolen a heart; he had stolen a future, a life that could've been.

Inside the hospital, Alex found the room where Mariah lay, her face pale and still. Machines beeped softly around her, measuring her heartbeat, but it was growing weaker with each passing second. Her frailty tore at him. The jar in his hand throbbed with life, mocking him for the life he had taken. But there was no turning back.

He stood over her bed, the weight of his decision crashing down on him. Could she ever know? Would she even want to? The thought of her looking at him with the same horror he had seen in the drifter's eyes made his stomach turn. He had done this for her, but now, he couldn't shake the feeling that he had crossed a line he could never uncross.

There was a knock at the door. One of the doctors entered, glancing at the jar in his hand. "You brought it," the doctor said, as if the heart inside was just another item on a grocery list. Alex nodded, though he didn't speak.

The doctor took the jar without a second glance at Alex's face. He could hear the doctor explaining the procedure, the steps they would take to replace Mariah's heart with the one he'd brought. But Alex barely listened. His mind was elsewhere, caught in the quiet of the moment when he'd sealed the jar, when the heart began to beat in time with his guilt.

He paced outside her room, the sterile walls of the hospital closing in around him. Mariah would live. That's what mattered. She would wake up, and they would have a future together. But the cost was gnawing at him.

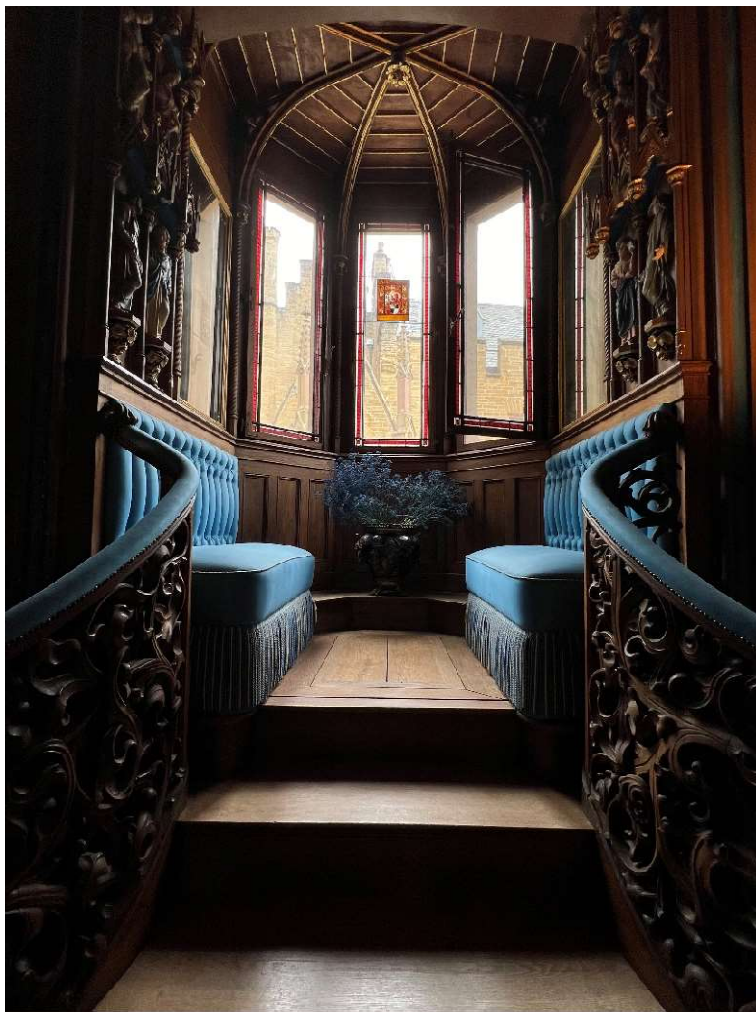
Hours passed. Finally, a nurse came to get him. "She's stable," she said, offering a small smile. "You can see her now."

Alex walked into the room slowly. Mariah was still pale, but her chest rose and fell steadily. The machines hummed with the rhythm of her new heart, the one he had traded for her life. He sat by her bedside, watching her, waiting for her to open her eyes. But even as he reached for her hand, he felt the weight pressing on him, heavier now than ever.

She would never know the price he had paid. But he would always know.

# Favorite Places

By Alina Oberglock



# Mysteries of the Deep

By Maria Ballesteros

The ocean's depths, so vast, unknown,  
A realm where giants rule alone.  
Currents whisper, tides they sway,  
Shaping shores both night and day.

Blue whales sing their ancient song,  
In waters deep where they belong.  
Coral reefs, with colors bright,  
House creatures glowing in the night.

The octopus, with stealthy grace,  
Darts and hides without a trace.  
Great white sharks patrol the sea,  
Hunters fierce and swimming free.

Volcanic vents on the ocean floor,  
Spew heat and life forevermore.  
Seahorses drift in gentle dance,  
Carried by the current's trance.

Schools of fish flash silver light,  
Moving as one, a brilliant sight.  
The mighty kraken, myths and lore,  
Haunts the sailors evermore.

Turtles roam the endless blue,  
On journeys ancient, long, and true.  
While storms above may churn and weep,  
Calm silence reigns in ocean deep.

We gaze upon the waves in awe,  
Their power holds us still in thrall.  
The ocean's secrets vast and wide,  
Forever calls us to its side.

# Don't Talk About It

By Felix Altman

I don't talk about it.

At least I shouldn't talk about it.

The culture surrounding it is sensitive,

And I might overstep a boundary that isn't there.

It's an unheard hymn,

But I'm still silently singing.

It's wrong to talk about it

Like how it's wrong to correct a teacher on a subject taught  
incorrectly.

It's a shameful thing these days,

To talk about it.

How inconsiderate it is of me,

To talk about it.

But it eats me alive

From the inside out

Every time I look in the mirror,

Every time I lie awake in bed,

Unable to stop thinking about it.

It is what I am.

But that's okay,

I'll stop talking about it.

Maybe one day

They will talk about it in my eulogy.



# Boeing 757 flying low at Sint Marteen

By Luke DeSantis



# A Lonely Road

By Dina Sizemore



# Family Plot

By Tyler Bogard

The shaded area, which I walked softly to avoid disturbing the dead, made the hot Virginia air breathable. I once imagined the site as modern before the twigs and long weeds covered the gravestones in clothing. The forecast called for an overcast, and the graveyard felt abandoned without the sounds of construction workers and children. The trees didn't need to cover my body; I felt claustrophobic.

The gate in front of me wore metal. The black paint peeled, and the door creaked as it opened. The gravestones, dated in the mid-1800s, bore the names of the unspoken. I tried to read their names, but they disappeared in time. The faded lamb reminded me of the loneliness I felt when I buried my firstborn. And then came my second a few years later.

The hills covered the cemetery with a feeling. It's not easy to describe; isolated is the closest word. I turned to look down the steep hill I climbed; the Confederate general stared at me with marble eyes. He stood at the bottom of the mound holding a saber. His marble beard makes me wish for sunlight, for seeing the reflection is the closest to heaven. I turned back to the family plot, hoping to pay respect.

These people were common- more common than me; more common for the reader to assume, "Why do I care?". More common than the squirrel, Grey in color, climbing up the Oak tree to my left. I respect the unknown bones under my feet. A respect that the Caregiver doesn't hold.

I marched further into the family plot. The weeds caressed my legs; though not passionate, I can still feel the soul latch onto me. The weeds weren't dangerous, for the souls of the buried helped them grow. I pictured the weeds as the spirits of the family. I felt depressed that they were immoral. Why would God let the deceased be such a creature? Weeds are like Flies- they never die.

I kneeled, hoping to speak to the departed. The muggy ground left little support for my knees. I whispered as if I

was praying. The words landed firmly on the stone and echoed into the ground. The mud-stained my gray jeans, and the brown junk swam on the pants leg.

They listened carefully; no response. The weeds tugged against my suit and danced to the rhythm of the wind. In the distance, I hear thunder. Or was it ghostly cannon fire? Let's say it was cannon fire, and the general smiled at his victory. I whistled a battle hymn as I went to talk to the father.

I wish to give a word of advice to the lost reader; the reader would sit on a gravestone and read Emily Dickinson until the break of dawn. Her brunette hair blows in the autumn wind. I miss her view of the treatment of this cemetery that many call home. When I last saw her, she read to this family. The cold October wind made her hair fly- her black lipstick noticeable and her smile bright. She finally put sunlight in the dark environment in which they rest. Her reading filled my heart with sorrow, for I haven't seen an angel read so calmly.

I held out my hand, hoping to discover her next to me. The illusion of a spirit filled my mind with loneliness. I could see her eyes in the shade- the sweet, soft footsteps dancing to an unheard beat. I once imagined her dancing to Johann Struss; Tales of Vienna Woods filled my brain with wonder; I danced along.

1...2...3 the waltz began. Oh, how I wish we danced.

4...5...6 Angel takes my hand.

I danced in the family plot, holding an invisible partner. The illusion appeared- the waltz was a gift for the Queen. The candles burning, the strong scent of tobacco, and the sweet linger of perfume filled my nostrils with the sweetness of strawberries and lavender. In front of me was the angel who read poetry. Her blue eyes stared at me with the romance I had only read about. I whispered her name; she giggled and led the dance. Now, we are back to counting.

1...2...3 she leaned in for a kiss.

In the fantasies, she wore bright red lipstick. The choice was queer for the period, for a girl wouldn't show such a

color. She didn't look like the other girls in the ball, and I led her further into the middle of the massive room. The ceiling was a magnificent sight, with the painting of the chapel darkly colored; the painter stood at the end of the room admiring his work. I looked back at the angel as we shared a kiss.

There was never a kiss so passionate. The kiss, long and deep, made me feel numb. I felt levitated as we moved our dance toward the clouds. The sun beamed bright, but we didn't feel the heat; the warmth came from our bodies as we descended to the ground. The kiss was over, back to reality.

God, why are dreams so vivid?

I looked away from the family plot, hoping to catch a glimpse. But I'm stuck in a world of illusion. For if I see her again, I'll give her a sign. If she listened, she would know that dead people fall in love.

# Masquerading Mask

R. M. Sloan

I sometimes think of you

When I'm blue.

In your masquerading mask.

It throws me into a fit,

Cuz you took something Cracked and Shattered it.

Leaving the Pieces on the floor,

And walked straight out the Door.

Every time I see your face I want to Scream,

Because of what you did to me,

What you say you didn't Mean,

But I know the truth,

Behind your fake smiles and laughs,

And your masquerading mask,

We both Know the truth.

Deep down you're a Manipulative Bitch,

And that's that.

Not that I'd ever tell you,

Not when you left my Esteem shattered on the Floor.

Few understand you for who you really are,

But I do.

Because no one sees what's Rotting beneath.

But I do.

I see what's behind your Masquerading mask.  
Only one insignificant thing,  
A tiny little thing called insecurity.  
A mighty ferocity,  
able of causing pain and destruction beyond imagining,  
tucked far away from your Masquerading Mask.

See, you're the worst kind of Person,  
Because you'll never Truly Comprehend,  
How you Completely Shattered Me,  
In your Masquerading Mask.

# Stop Acting Like the Sky is Falling

By Paige Ondrek

My parents always told me, *stop acting like the sky is falling*.

This was usually the case when I was being dramatic. A tantrum thrown over a lost game. Not able to find my yogurt in the fridge. Being five minutes late to class. *You always make a scene*, my sister would say, a roll of her eyes, a twist of her tongue. *Don't cry when I say I told you so*, a shake of Mom's head as I dared to dream too high.

*Stop acting-*

The sky *was* falling.

I stood in that clearing, bonfire hissing, spitting, roaring. Friends behind me, screaming and laughing and so damn drunk no one else was paying attention but me. Perhaps it was because they couldn't see the sky falling. Maybe it wasn't the sky at all but me, tumbling through the ground, grass in my mouth and dirt in my lungs and falling stars in my mind.

How many times have I watched the sky fall?

A dozen?

A hundred?

I've lost count...

Spent so long trapped in a body I want to crawl out of, skin sewn to muscle sewn to bone, that I wish I could just slice away. Find a new body to crawl in. One that didn't have ghost painted scars and tidal waves inside their veins. One that was quiet and calm and fit *just* right.

*Don't cry-*

Don't cry.

**Don't cry.**

But all I wanted was to let the dam inside me loose, strangle the beavers of my mind that constantly added sticks to it. Making me so full that every second of every day, I am watching the damn sky fall. Left begging on my knees, fetal position in the bathtub—at the bottom of the ocean, ocher ripples of time passing over me.



My friends were laughing and my mind was crying and I wanted so much to be seven years old, able to look at a stable sky that didn't lose a star with every blink. Dad at my back, pointing out each constellation as we watched them travel across the sky. But I couldn't see the constellations anymore, no matter how hard I tried.

Not with every map and how-to and guide spread out in front of me. Not even his fingers could point the way. All I see are waves and fire and rock raining down on me. And no one else ever saw it. Never saw me.

They saw the shell outside. The smooth skin. The hollow curve of my collarbones. The soft flush of my lashes. They saw *sweet little Emily*, as delicate as a bee and as gentle as a butterfly. They didn't see that each part of me was made from impossibly thin glass, reflecting silver starlight across each shallow crack.

Not until your eyes found me. Like the first rays of dawn. The first break in a storm. The first star in my ever falling sky.

You looked like the earth, all soft grass and tangled branches and mud pies in the sandbox. The rigid lines of a mountain that led to the canyon that was your mouth. It curved, a cup raised behind the crackling sparks of a fire.

Part of me wanted to approach you, see if your touch could do what your eyes did. See if you could see the skies falling too, if you were another cracked figurine placed upon an impossibly high shelf. Looking for constellations but seeing meteors instead.

... maybe your mountain was tall enough for me to place each fallen star back in my sky.

I wasn't seven but thirteen, a flush to my cheeks, stars not quite bright but not dimmed either. Not until a cosmos of hands were on my body, pulling each star from my sky; watching planets crash into each other in bursts of blue and purple and red.

*-told you so.*

Seventeen now and down went my drink, drowning those memories, those white rabbits that taunted me, beckoning

me to follow them down their dark holes. And I tried to forget you, earth boy. The peaks to your canyons, the browns of your mountain, the greens of your leaves. Terrified that if I dared to wonder, dared to dream, that your hands too would become another white rabbit, another robbed star.

*-make a scene.*

Do I? Was I making a scene that Tuesday night? With trespassing signs strapped to my body and bright yellow **do not enter** tied about my hips? Were my tears a scene? The scars on my mind and body? Unseen to you but still there, imprinted on my skin and soul like vibrant tattoos. Hands that didn't belong there. Smiles framing bared fangs.

A room stolen.

"Need another drink?" Brown fingers holding out a green glass bottle, tears rolling down its neck and over its chest.

My soul was yelling *no no no*. My mind was cementing brick upon brick and my beavers were smacking their tails with so much force I could hear the drumming in my ears go

*ba-bump*

*ba-bump*

*ba-bump*

Again and again against whistling leaves. I grabbed the crying bottle by the neck and tilted my lips in a foreign state. "Thanks." Vocals strained and stars froze behind your earthly body.

"I'm Landon." Your hand filled the space between us and every white rabbit chattered at the bait.

"Emily."

Your fingers brushed mine as you passed me the bottle, and for a moment, the sky stopped falling. Just for a heartbeat, a fraction of a heartbeat, but long enough for me to notice. Long enough for me to wonder if maybe, *just maybe*, you could see the cracks in my glass skin, the scars etching into my soul

"You looked like you needed it," you said, your voice as warm as the earth after a summer rain.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. The bonfire crackled between us, casting dancing shadows along your earthly skin.

“Not much for parties?” You gestured at the rowdy crowd behind us, around us.

I shrugged, pretending to take a sip from the bottle. “Not really my scene.”

Then you released the softest rumble of thunder. “Mine either. I’m only here because my roommate dragged me out. Said I need to ‘live a little.’”

“And are you? Living a little?”

Your eyes met mine, a flicker of something familiar. Something broken, yet warm. “I think I might be starting to.”

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. You became my constant, my earth beneath my ever tumbling sky. Your fingers were a welder's torch along every crack, melting them back together, repairing each one by one. You'd find me on my worst days, curled in the bathtub, the ocean of my mind leaking rivers from my eyes, drowning me slowly. You'd sit on the cold tile floor. Not speaking. Not touching. Just being there. A mountain I could cling to should the waves get too high.

Late at night when I curled into your warm soil, your fingers tracing the lines of my palm, you'd whisper, “tell me about your constellations.”

Not *the* constellations, but *my* constellations.

I'd close my eyes, remembering Dad's finger tracing those familiar-turned-foreign patterns across the sky, his eyes full of wonder, full of light. And as I spoke, voice shaking, trembling, frightened, you'd smile that canyon smile and my seas would calm.

Six months later that earth boy was sitting on my couch eating Cheerios and I found the ordinary becoming extraordinary. Grocery shopping turned into late night quests, you riding shopping carts down empty aisles, me laughing so hard I thought I'd burst. Movie nights became blanket fortresses with fairy lights for torches. A safe haven, where the only stars falling were the ones on the screen.

A year later, you plucked flowers from your skin and wrapped them with your hair, presenting yourself as a gift.

I watched, mesmerized as petals unfurled from your fingertips, blooms emerging from the creases of your palms. Daisies, you told me, were your favorite—resilient little things that pushed through concrete just to feel the sun.

Your eyes met mine, a field of wildflowers in their depths. I saw myself reflected there, no longer a shattered constellation but a garden learning to grow in the spaces between stars. You knelt down before me, not on one knee as tradition dictates, but on both—grounding yourself, grounding us both.

“Emily,” you said, voice nothing but a whisper of wind through leaves, “my sky girl.”

The world held its breath. Or maybe it was just me, lungs frozen, heart suspended between beats. In that moment, I realized that this—us—was a collision of universes. Earth and sky, no longer separate but intertwined, creating something new and terrifying and beautiful.

You opened your hands, revealing not a ring but a small, imperfect stone. Smooth on one side, jagged on the other. Like us. Like me.

“Will you build a home with me?” You asked.

Not ‘marry me’, not ‘be mine forever’, but something deeper. Something that spoke of shared roots and weathered storms and skies that changed.

And I, the girl with glass for skin and stars for scars, found myself nodding. Wordless. Breathless. But, certain.

It was no surprise that after so long in your sun, blinding and radiant and all things good, I’d forget my sky was still falling.

You taught me to dance in the rain, to find beauty in the raging storm. “Look,” you’d say, hands on my shoulders putting me in front, lips brushing the shell of my ear as you lined your sight with mine, pointing up at a dark cloud coming our way. “It’s not falling. It’s changing,” you’d whisper as the rain started to fall. When the storms visited during the wisps of dreams, your arms would wrap around me, pull me close. “I’ve got you... I’ve got you, Emily.” As soft as the wind through our screens your voice brushed my drums.

Ten years later. A dog with a tail so sharp it knocked over everything in its path. Too many rugs, because you could never decide on just one, frayed every which way from our three cats. A life built on laughter and tears and everything in between. Ten years of your sun warming my skies, your fingers melting my cracked glass together, your earth grounding my tumbling seas. Ten years of learning to see the sky as vast and beautiful, rather than a looming threat.

It was a Tuesday. Unremarkable in every way, until it wasn't. The morning light dappled through our too-many rugs hanging on the clothesline, a patchwork of memories fluttering in the breeze. Your promise of being home for dinner still lingered in the air, as tangible as the scent of the flowers you'd planted last spring.

The doorbell's chime shattered the afternoon quiet at 3:27pm, a moment forever etched in my mind, another crack in my glass.

Jorge and Benn stood on the other side of the door, still in uniform, their faces gentle yet grim beneath their caps. My world tilted on my axis before they even spoke, your absence suddenly a palpable thing, heavy and suffocating.

"Emily?" Benny reached out, steadying me as I swayed, my hand trembling against the door frame.

I nodded, my mind telling me that I could be wrong. I desperately hoped I was wrong.

"There was a fire," Jorge said, his voice gentle yet firm. "Landon..."

His words faded away, swallowed by the ocean that was swelling in my mind. Shattering everything we've built. He kept speaking of a burning building, nothing but fragments catching my ear—"fire", "trapped", "ceiling collapsed"--but they didn't make sense. How could they, when you'd promised to be home for dinner.

The kitchen timer dings.

"He didn't make it out, Emily. I'm so sorry." Benny's voice cracked, I felt his hands on my shoulder, yet he kept talking and talking and talking and I wasn't sure he could stop if he

wanted to. All I heard was that he didn't make it. He didn't get out.

Noose words I couldn't bear to hear tightened around my throat as my earth quaked.

Got tighter and tighter the more they talked. With it the less I could hear. The less I could feel.

Landon didn't make it out. My Landon. My earth. My mountain.

Gone.

Gone.

Gone.

The world blurred, turning days into weeks, weeks into months and I found myself back in that bathtub. An ocean with no earth left to contain it, a constant tsunami now. No mountain on the tile floor. No canyon-mouth smile to remind me of constellations.

I'd wake in the middle of the night, reaching for you, only to find cold sheets and empty air. Your voice echoed in my dreams, "tell me about your constellations, Emily."

But how could I, when every star had fallen from my sky?

I'd walk through our home, a ghost in a museum of haunting memories. Your coffee mug still on the kitchen counter where you had left it, waiting for hands that would never hold it again. Never hold me again. The dog's tale, once so joyfully destructive, not limp and quiet as he searched for you. As I searched for you.

*Stop acting like the sky is falling.*

But how can a sky still fall with no stars?

I pressed my palms against the cold porcelain, feeling the repaired cracks in my skin threaten to split apart. The sky was falling, stars raining down, each one a memory of you. Your laugh. Your touch. Your promise to always be there.

In the deafening silence of your absence though, I could almost hear your voice.

*"Look, Emily. It's not falling, it's changing."*

But how do I change when my earth has crumbled beneath my feet? When my mountains have turned to dust and all that's left is one large sea.

I close my eyes, searching for those constellations in the darkness behind my lids. For a moment, I'm seven again, Dad's finger tracing patterns across the sky. I'm seventeen, your hand steadying me in the field. I'm twenty-seven, learning to dance in the rain.

My parents always told me, *stop acting like the sky is falling*.

But the sky *is* falling. It's always been falling.

So am I. Falling through memories, through love, through loss. Falling through a sky that's vast and beautiful and terrifying all at once. It terrifies me. I want to curl up in this bathtub, let the ocean continue swallowing me. I want to scream at the unfairness of it all, to rage against this universe that would give me you only to take you away.

But somewhere in the depths of my despair, your voice echoes once more. Soft as a whisper, steady as the mountains.

*"It's okay to fall, Emily. I've got you."*

And with the ache your voice pulls in me, a semblance of hope does as well. Hope that maybe one day I will be okay. Not today. Not tomorrow. But someday. And that maybe, just maybe, it's okay to not be okay.

Because you taught me, earth boy, that falling isn't the end. It's just another kind of change. Painful and terrifying and lonely. A change that tears you apart and leaves you raw and broken. But a change nonetheless.

So I'll fall.

I'll crack.

I'll shatter into a thousand glassy stars.

And then, somehow, I'll learn to put myself back together again. One constellation at a time.

# Betty Fish Study no 1

Faith Dahlke





# Mikayla Micaela (Mi-Kai-Ayla)

By Micaela Ramirez

I have zero recollection of speaking Spanish to my family. But, according to my mother, I would proudly recite prayers to my Abuela during our Thanksgiving visits. Growing up in Kyle, Texas, I was immersed in my family and the richness of Mexican culture. So, when I moved to Bradenton, Florida, at the age of six, I was slightly culture shocked by the lack of Mexican cuisine and the common occurrence of microaggressive comments.

“Micaela is a stupid name,” a pretty blonde girl loudly declared one day at lunch time. I blinked in stunned silence as other pretty blonde girls nodded and agreed. “It’s easier to say Mikayla.”

Six year old me nods and agrees as well. “You’re right, I like Mikayla better too.”

Sarah scrunches her nose up in disgust, pulling her lunch box away from my arroz con pollo as if it would contaminate her store bought Lunchables.

And though I never brought Mexican food to my elementary or middle school ever again, I was still quietly obsessed with the taste of rice, beans, fideo, guiso, carne guisada, and tortillas.

I took Spanish for two years in highschool, initially for the credit but later due to the disconnect I felt with my culture. The summer I turned 15, I visited my childhood friend in North Carolina for a week. The moment that my mom’s car pulled up to the house, I immediately noticed the sign “BUILD THE WALL” in big letters that was rooted on their front lawn. My mom’s discomfort was detectable as we stepped through the threshold of their all American home, now away from the excessive display of racist merchandise.

“Mikayla,” Lauren’s mom began as soon as my mom finally left. “There’s this Mexican restaurant down the road that is to *die* for. You have to tell us what you think!” I nodded, though silently skeptical about the quality that North Carolina Mexican food could possibly provide.

It was awful. The enchiladas were covered in nothing else but a sad excuse for queso and the beans were runny and tasteless. Still, I forced a smile and muttered “Tastes great”, as Lauren’s mom proudly smiled back.

The next month, I celebrated my quinceañera, which Lauren was not allowed to attend, and that November, we celebrated Dia de Los Muertos for the first time.

I met my best friend in the cast of a musical, and one day, she noticed the spelling of my name. “Is it pronounced differently than ‘Mikayla’?” she asked. I stiffened, then carefully sounded it out for her. “Mi-kai-ayla.” She echoed to me, and then smiled. “Perfect, now I know what to call you!”

When I returned home that night, I eagerly informed my mom that the entire cast was now using the correct pronunciation. A proud smile spread across her face, and I felt a new sense of pride implanted in me as days passed, hearing “Mi-kai-ayla” more frequently. Yet, when introducing myself, I still defaulted to “Mikayla.”

I packed back and forth outside the audition room, my eyes flicking between the door and the casting call on my phone that read “Familia De Flamingos: Looking for Hispanic Talent.” My hands shook as I handed my resume and headshot to the woman who sat at the table, taking one last glance at my name printed on the top.

“And how do you pronounce your name?” The woman asked, looking up from her clipboard. My throat went dry as I glanced at the rest of the audition panel in front of me.

“Mi-kai-ayla.” I sound out for them in a shaky voice, and they all nod in understanding.

# Things That Broke

Andrew Turner

In the corner of the room sits a symbol of luck,  
an old, worn coin resting on a shifting pile.

I see my own face, blurred in the mirror,  
half-hidden by questions that gnaw like teeth.

This life we live, fleeting, dances with death,  
while moments pass, sharp and embarrassed.

There's something strange in how embarrassed  
we are by simple mistakes, as if luck  
were a scornful god, and each small death  
a reminder. We bury our shame in a pile,  
layered thick as fossil, growing under our teeth,  
while beneath, we're smudged as in a mirror.

But reflections don't explain. A mirror  
knows no shame, shows no blush embarrassed.  
It glints off the enamel, flashing teeth,  
a brittle grin asking for luck  
or at least understanding. There is a pile  
of days left unseen, blank as death.

Yet, in that stillness, even death  
waits its turn, casting no shadow in the mirror.  
It gathers its tools, stacks them in a pile

to be sorted through later, neither embarrassed  
nor proud. Such is the strange luck  
of lives lived between grinding teeth.

Beneath the gums, nerves tremble. Teeth  
are always first to sense change, know death  
when it's near, that fleeting shadow luck  
dares not cross. It lingers, too, in the mirror,  
where hints of a life, fractured and embarrassed,  
are strewn like remnants in a pile.

These fragments we guard in a shifting pile,  
worn, stubborn, cracking like teeth.  
Nothing can hide forever, least of all embarrassed  
thoughts, old hopes. Against us waits death,  
its eyes blank as a dusty mirror,  
its timing nothing more than chance or luck.

And so we wait, caught between luck and death,  
hiding in the mirror with our stubborn teeth,  
piled like dreams, fleeting and embarrassed.

# Afterglow

By Paige Ondrek

In the dim light of dawn, I trace  
the outline of your face  
on a pillow that's losing your scent  
memories bent

out of shape, like the books  
on our shelves, the looks  
we used to share now faded  
love degraded

to whispers in empty rooms  
where shadows loom  
larger than life, than us  
dust to dust

I collect the scattered pieces  
as night releases  
its hold, try to make sense  
of this absence

Your laugh echoes in spaces  
between embraces  
that never happened, dreams  
at the seams

coming apart, like my heart  
in this art  
of forgetting, of letting go  
of afterglow

In this raw aftermath of you and me  
I learn to breathe in discontinuity

# Left Behind

By Dina Sizemore



# The Sounds of the City

By Lex Emery

My mom wants to move somewhere that is quiet. She said she grew up in a loud city and wants to finally escape it. I'm not sure that's what I want. I enjoy hearing the sounds of cars and Latin music and talking throughout the night.

I like knowing I can step outside and hear the low hum of electricity in the Wawa on the street corner, see the sign illuminating the street in a bright bright light.

I can hear the main road, I can see the stop lights, but the road is empty. And yet, in the distance, I can hear cars. I wonder, "where could these people be going so early in the morning?"

And then I wonder, "what am I doing up this early in the morning?"

As I stand outside my door, listening to the sounds of the city I call home, they remind me that, no matter what, there are other people out in the world. That no matter how disconnected I feel, how lonely I become, how isolated life can be, I am not alone.

I will never be alone with the sounds of the city right outside my door.



# The Hand that Feeds

By Lex Emery



# Final Reprimand

By Andrew Turner

You think this is because of the arm? Ha. I don't need a left arm—it couldn't even write my name on parchment or help solve a puzzle. It was by far my least favorite appendage. You have a favorite appendage too, right? I'm sure you do. I can do so much more with this nub you left me. I could paint with it, I could drum with it, I could draw eyes, a mouth, a nose, an ear, and give it a wig and name it. I might even attach a coat rack to it.

The thing more important than some vestigial appendage is a captain, a leader. Someone who tells you exactly what to do and when to do it. Someone who divvies up all the loot so everyone gets their fair share. Someone who takes control and guides us to safety. Someone who will, inevitably, be blamed for all the misfortunes that adventures may bring. That is the most valuable thing in the world, you see. For if you don't have a captain, a leader, your mind turns to goop. How are you supposed to know when to wake up, when to eat, what to clean? Life loses all meaning, see.

And, God forbid, anything happens to a captain. Where would all those hopeless souls go for guidance?

They'd go straight to the first mate, you see. Doesn't that sound unfair? I think so. The first mate has just been following orders; he's meant to be the most loyal to the captain, that's all. Why ask him who deserves more loot? Why ask him what to do in the face of danger? Why ask when to wake, eat, clean, shit, or sleep? That's not his job, you see. His job is to... inspire. That's all. He must inspire the ants to build the colony, see, and look good while doing it. He must be revered the most out of the crew, see? He is meant to be the one people aspire to be, the one people work to become. He is meant to have the right to the first pick of drinks and women.

You see why you're dying, right? You see the mistake you made.

Your eyes tell me you don't agree. Your fear is intoxicating. Your blood shimmers gorgeously under the candlelight. Beautiful.

You should feel special. You're the last one left breathing among the ants. I'm sure you were wondering why my rough good looks were covered in a lathering of red ooze as I reprimanded you. That's all this is, you know. Another reprimand. You're used to those, aren't you? Though I suppose not one this thorough. You've outlasted the others by quite some time. The others didn't get to understand the mistake they made like you did. They died confused, asking, *How could I?* Their eyes seemed to say. Yours don't say that. Yours say something else.

How much more blood do you have to lose? I've almost run out of things to say to make your end feel climactic. In truth, your death is senseless. I could have just abandoned you all, I suppose. But if I did, you would have just died a prolonged death of incompetence and stupidity. So I suppose this is a mercy for you.

My, you're still with me. I mean, come on, this has got to be a world record, man. I'm impressed. Is that enough? My approval will make you let go, won't it? Jeez, man, you're freaking me out here—those noises are disturbing. What is it you want from me? I can't believe you're making this about you. You wronged me, so how dare you take so long to die. You're just attention-seeking scum.

Fine, fine. You've taken all the joy out of this for me, selfish bastard. I'll just let you die alone I guess. You win.



## Contributor Bios

**Felix Altman** is an aspiring writer with a passion for all things creative. They hope to continue their education and earn a degree in English. They enjoy spending time with family and playing with their cat, Koko.

**Maria Ballesteros** is a Florida-based writer whose work explores the natural world and the mysteries within it. Drawing inspiration from her Colombian heritage and fascination with the sea, she crafts poetry that delves into themes of wonder, beauty, and the unknown. Maria is currently studying communications and aspires to make a meaningful impact through her writing.

**Tyler Bogard** is technically still a freshman, but he is going for an Associate of the Arts degree before taking an English major. He discovered that he had a talent for writing in the eighth grade; his cousin and his friend taught him a lot about writing, especially throughout high school when he attempted poetry. His favorite authors are Raymond Chandler, Dennis Lehane, and Washington Irving.

**Faith Dahlke** is a student living in Venice. She enjoys exploring all types of art and craft mediums. Some of her artistic hobbies include drawing, sewing and crocheting. Along with art she also likes to read and volunteer.

**Luke DeSantis** is an amateur plane spotter/photographer. He considers this picture some of his best work.

**Lex Emery** is a 12th grader at SCFCS who writes horror short fiction and poetry.

**E. O. E.** writes poetry about the transgender experience.

**Grace Knowles** is a senior in high school. She wrote this piece poetry as an assignment for her creative writing class.

She included partial personal experience to make her story truly come to life. Once she graduates, she plans on attending University of North Carolina at Charlotte for athletics and academics.

Originally from Chicago Illinois, **Riley McGeever** enjoys reading and writing in her free time and contemplating life.

**Christopher Nevins** is a student at SCF who enjoys cars, fishing, and sport bikes. He looks forward to graduating in December 2024 and will start an Automotive Program in Manatee County in January to pursue his passion for cars.

**Alina Oberglock** is a 20-year-old SCF student currently enrolled to earn her associate in arts degree, planning to get into Psychology. In her free time, she finds inspiration in nature for both writing and photography.

**Dan O'Brien** is a writer currently studying at the State College of Florida campus in Venice.

Having been writing creatively for most of her life, **Paige Ondrek** finds joy in writing all things from short stories and poems to epic fantasy series. Outside of writing, she also finds joy in other creative outlets like painting, sculpting, knitting, and the like. She lives in the busy SW Florida area with her daughter, partner, and several pets but hails from New York, where she enjoyed the open farmland of the country.

**Micaela Ramirez** is an aspiring writer and actor! This is her first published work. She is very passionate about storytelling, and usually spends her time at rehearsals for a musical, or writing fantasy stories that she hopes will one day be published.

**Dina Sizemore** loves art and creating using different media. She loves making miniatures, working with polymer clay, painting using watercolor and oils.

# Elektraphrog Staff



**Maria Ballesteros** is a communications student at the State College of Florida and an aspiring journalist based in Sarasota. She is passionate about storytelling and explores themes of resilience and transformation in her writing, drawing inspiration from personal experiences and her cultural background. Maria enjoys spending time with her family, working on creative projects, and hopes to inspire others through her journey in the arts and media.



**Roxy Gatchell** is a student at the State College of Florida and resides in Englewood. After completing her A.A., she plans to transfer and acquire a bachelor's in Communications. Her ideal job is to work at a publishing house, and she is currently working on two novels and a poetry collection. As a writer, she enjoys producing works in the Sci-Fi, fantasy, and poetry genres. When Roxy isn't writing, she loves playing video games and participating in Dungeons & Dragons campaigns.



**Myli-Ann Goodine** is a full-time student at the State College of Florida, Venice Campus, pursuing an Associate in Arts degree. She also works as a student assistant in the Academic Department at the State College of Florida. She enjoys reading mystery, crime, and dark academia. She enjoys learning new things related to philosophy, psychology, mythology, and the law. One of her poems, *Masque of My Chaos*, was seen in the college's magazine, Elektraphrog. She's traveled around the States, has lived out of the country, and loves to share her endeavors.



**Kaylee Joy** is a student at the State College of Florida Bradenton Campus. She is pursuing an Associate degree in Arts with a focus on Creative Writing. She hopes to transfer to the University of Miami. Kaylee has several stories published in *Elektraphrog Spring 2022 Issue 14.2*, including "Estranged from a Once Favored Father" and "Black Cat Crossing". She hopes to one day create her own sitcom. When Kaylee is not writing or working, she is chasing (and being chased) around by two sassy corgis named Tater Tot and Peanut.



**Emma Lucibello** is a full time student at the State College of Florida in Bradenton. She loves to read and write, her dream job is to be a successful journalist. Her goal is to transfer to University of South Florida after she gets her AA. When Emma isn't working she loves spending quality time with her friends and family and going on spontaneous adventures.



# You (Yes! You!) Can Earn a Certificate in Digital Publishing!

This is 18 Credits of Awesome!

This is an extraordinary new certificate program that is cutting edge and interdisciplinary!

## Program Goal

The purpose of this program is to prepare students (yes! Even you!) with hands-on training in new media and digital publications. This program focuses on the skills necessary to work on print and digital publications, work in social media and digital marketing, or work in layout, design, and editing fields. The skills in this program are transferable to both local and national level publications. This program includes editing, programming, and graphic design courses.

## Core Requirements:

- CGS 2820C: Web Page Development (3 Credits)
- CRW 2001: Creative Writing I (3 Credits)
- GRA 1100C: Introduction to Computer Graphics (3 Credits)
- JOU 1440L: College Magazine Production I (3 Credits)

## Choice of two courses (6 credits total) from

- GRA 1206C: Typography (3 Credits)
- GRA 2121C: Communication Design (3 Credits)
- GRA 2150C: Photoshop (3 Credits)
- ENC 2210: Technical Communication (3 Credits)
- JOU 1441: College Magazine Production II
- MMC 2949: Internship in Mass Communications (3 Credits)
- PGY1800C: Digital Imaging I (3 Credits)

Contact Professor Masucci at [masuccm@scf.edu](mailto:masuccm@scf.edu)  
for more information.



**Are You Interested in  
Writing and Publishing?**

Join Elektraphrog!

JOU 1440L (3 Credits)

<https://litmag.scf.edu>





[litmag.scf.edu](http://litmag.scf.edu)