



Hedera helix



2025

Hedera helix

Sigma Kappa Delta's
Literary Journal
Vol. XXIII
2025

Editor:
Bradley Sides,
Calhoun Community College

Purpose of Sigma Kappa Delta

Sigma Kappa Delta serves two-year college students who achieve academic excellence in English. Members need not be English majors but must demonstrate an interest and proficiency in literature and writing.

ΣΚΔ offers members opportunities for:

- Scholarships • Awards • Leadership • Competition
- Publication • Travel • National Conferences • Networking

Visit English2.org for complete eligibility requirements.

Hedera helix — the scientific name for English Ivy and the national plant of ΣΚΔ symbolizes resilience and individual growth. In keeping with the Greek spelling, we use the lower case “h” for helix.

Copyright © 2025 by Sigma Kappa Delta

All rights reserved by Sigma Kappa Delta, the National English Honor Society for two-year colleges. There shall be no copying of the content of *Hedera helix* without express written permission from Sigma Kappa Delta and the author of the literary piece. Each author maintains his/her individual copyright and may sell or copy his or her work.

Sigma Kappa Delta, Advisory Council 2025

**President: Ms. Joan Reeves,
Northeast Alabama Community College**

**Vice President: Dr. Leigh Ann Rhea,
Calhoun Community College**

**Secretary/Historian: Ms. Donna Newsome,
River Parishes Community College**

**National Regent: Dr. Serena Richards,
Collin College**

**Editor: Mr. Bradley Sides,
Calhoun Community College**





Editor's Note

As someone who has been a long-time resident of Mister Rogers' "Neighborhood," I don't know that it's truly possible to express the joy I experienced when I, along with fellow Advisory-Council member Joan Reeves and my friends at Northeast Alabama Community College, visited Fred Rogers' memorial on a beautifully-damp morning during our Convention visit to Pittsburgh--and on Mister Rogers' birthday at that.

Fred Rogers taught me, like many of us, about kindness and understanding, of course, but he also taught me about the power of our imaginations.

I owe much of my own creative existence to Mister Rogers. He told me it was okay--and maybe even necessary--to create, and I've never looked back.

Putting together this collection of award-winning work reminded me of the power of our imaginations--the power of storytelling.

Thank you, students, and thank you, Mister Rogers.

I hope you all enjoy these words and images. I have a feeling you will.

Keep creating!
Bradley Sides, SKD Editor

Table of Contents

Essay

1st Place: “Betting on the Losing Dog”	7
Glynnis Stout, Calhoun Community College	
2nd Place: “Suicide Changes Things”	12
Angela Garrity, Dallas College (Eastfield Campus)	
3rd Place: “Stepping In”	22
Gina Peduto-Sly, Northeast Alabama Community College	

Poetry

1st Place: “I Learned to Swim”	27
Stephanie Diaz Rocha, Northeast Alabama Community College	
2nd Place: “Irish Eyes”	29
Cody Johnson, Jefferson State Community College	
3rd Place: “Don’t Worry”	32
Sundance Hollingsworth, Aims Community College	

Literary Analysis

1st Place: “Callous Control”	35
Gina Peduto-Sly, Northeast Alabama Community College	
2nd Place: “No Home for Girls Raised by Wolves”	43
Kathryn Runyans, Calhoun Community College	
3rd Place: “Love Beyond Prejudice”	50
Joseph Romero, Calhoun Community College	

Continued

B&W Photography


1st Place: "Favorite Places"	57
Alina Oberglock, State College of Florida (Venice)	
2nd Place: "Writings of Relaxation"	58
Stephanie Diaz Rocha, Northeast Alabama Community College	
3rd Place: "A Breeze of Life"	59
Stephanie Diaz Rocha, Northeast Alabama Community College	

Short Fiction

1st Place: "Hunting Spirits"	60
Alexia Poulin, State College of Florida (Venice)	
2nd Place: "Fly Away"	72
J. Phillips, Calhoun Community College	
3rd Place: "Gallery Wall"	82
Alexia Poulin, State College of Florida (Venice)	

Hispanic Heritage Poetry

1st Place: "It's Gonna be Ugly"	86
J. Phillips, Calhoun Community College	
2nd Place: "Zonah"	89
Veronica "Nunmarie" Hill, Temple College	
3rd Place: "A Call Home"	92
Stephanie Diaz Rocha, Northeast Alabama Community College	



“Betting on the Losing Dog”

Glynnis Stout

I was never supposed to live to twenty. I never planned to at the very least. I stopped making plans for my life around the time I wrote my first suicide letter. When you tell someone you are suicidal, there are several responses you will get. One that I’ve heard more times than I can count is that I have so much to live for, while I saw a life of just going through the motions. Making my bed because it’s what one does after waking up. I had long since given up planning for the future, floating through life without a purpose. I watched my potential decline as my hope and future diminished. At a certain point, I felt I was simply lying in the bed I made for myself, that it was my fault that I could barely get out of bed most days. I felt like I was losing my mind, because how could it possibly be this difficult to do basic tasks.

The one thing that brought me joy in these days was going to dog training with my dad. Three days a week, hours each day, I just watched, not having a dog of my own to train. I’d sit in the grass and absorb everything around me. It was one of the few places I felt truly

at peace. One day, things were different; my trainer told me to go to the dog pins near his house. Unbeknownst to me at the time, he was asking my dad if he could give me a dog, a dog he had just sent me to meet. At the pin were three puppies waiting for me, and one would not leave me alone, attached to my hip the entire time I sat with her. The next day he gave her to me with one condition: that I love her. He spoke so highly of this puppy and the potential he saw in her and told me I could take her as far as I wanted. Giving me this dog, this chance, I felt he was betting on a losing dog. Looking at this puppy with such potential, she deserved more than the girl who couldn't get out of bed most days. I felt like a lost cause who would never live to the standards everyone held for me and I worried that I was taking her down on the sinking ship.

In the beginning, having her, Aus, as she would soon be known, was more than I had expected. As a working line German Shepherd, she had so much energy. Aus was always ready to do any and everything, never truly settling down. She woke me up throughout the


night, and for someone who was normally sleeping 14 hours a day, losing sleep was unacceptable. It took me months of being woken up at three am by my needy puppy to realize that was the time I used to contemplate life, or more often death. Since getting Aus, I had not thought about killing myself. She gave me a reason to get out of bed each morning, a reason to plan for tomorrow. She gave me companionship in my normal isolation. I was accustomed to being alone all the time, but suddenly, that was not an option. She wouldn't allow it, sticking to my side as close as I'd let her. This dog only knew how to love me. She showed me a gentleness and grace that I had not shown myself in years. Looking at this love, I could only follow by example; like a skittish animal learning to trust, I began showing myself the grace and compassion that I deserved all along. Slowly, working with Aus became working on myself. As I taught her how to sit, I began relearning who I am. What do I want to teach her, what do I need to learn, what are my goals for Aus, what are my goals for me? I was focusing on self-improvement, something I hadn't prioritized in years.

Unfortunately, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. After a while, I retreated into old habits of self-doubt and feeling like I was failing Aus because I saw no progress in her or me. The worries that plagued me when I got her resurfaced with a vengeance. This is when I met Anikan. He was a titled, working dog that did not have a person. At that point in time, my trainer had given up on him because Ani refused to work with anyone, until I came along. While he was out roaming, he came up to me and started heeling. From that day forward, I was his handler, his person. Every day I went to training, I grew a bond with this dog who had no one. Working with Anikan and Aus, I got to see how puppy training works up to titles. This revelation granted me a grace not only to her progress, but also my own. I remind myself that you eat an elephant one bite at a time. Anikan, also, showed me the love and patience of growing a bond with a dog, that Aus's love at first sight did not grant me. I brought him home and offered him a love he never had as a pure working dog. I have slowly developed a bond with him and began teaching him how to show affection; I showed him the same patience Aus showed me. Aus and

Anikan became as much mine as I am theirs. On the bad days, working with them keeps me going. Anikan was a dog that everyone had given up on and was given a second chance; I deserve the second chance as well.

My trainer recently told me that Aus has grown into herself and is showing the drive he saw in her as a puppy. Looking at this dog he saw such potential in growing into herself, I cannot ignore the parallels. I see growth in the mirror rather than the withering I had grown to expect. This progress, transformation came with a reckoning within me. Growing up I had dreams for myself, and I am now rediscovering what I want. I'm not only setting goals but also designing my path to reach them. Loving these dogs altered the trajectory of my life and offered me something I had been lacking for a long time: a reason to live. Because my trainer took a bet on the losing dog, I am making plans for twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two.





“Suicide Changes Things”

Angela Garrity

I stood in front of the mirror, tears streaming down my cherub-like thirteen-year-old face as I held the bottle in my hand. I felt completely alone and had lost all hope in believing that life would get better for me. I had lost my mother, who was a single parent, just a few years prior in a car accident, and I felt like nothing had been the same for me since she passed. I realized at that moment that I was thinking of ending my own life immediately by suicide from overdosing on prescription medications. I feel it is so important to share this moment of my story that turns from a void of hopelessness to a journey of believing that there is, as the Sherman Brothers wrote and sang about, “A great big, beautiful tomorrow.” I am pursuing my degree in Psychology so that I can help others to not feel alone, helpless, and hopeless and think that dying from suicide is the answer to moving away from their pain.

As a child, I was always an “overachiever” when it came to doing good in school. I would sign up for the hardest classes and push myself

to exhaustion in pursuit of excellent grades. What I didn't fully understand during my childhood was this was a trauma response to how I received praise from my mother until she died when I was ten. I didn't understand that I was being victimized and abused at such a young age. This "overachieving" mindset would continue throughout high school, and I still see it present in myself today.

After graduating high school as Valedictorian, I went to Tarrant County College for a semester and never took my finals because of a bad manager. The manager guilted me into covering a shift during a Christmas retail rush instead of investing in myself. I was nineteen years old and trying to understand how to be an adult during this time and completely independent and living on my own, being solely responsible for myself, so the idea of losing my job was really scary and I felt that I needed to do what I was being asked, instead of pushing back and telling her, "I'll be here as soon as I'm done with my finals." This mistake caused me to exit pursuing my college dreams, even though I had a fully paid scholarship in the state of Texas. I never went

back and sat with this guilt and shame for more than thirty years. I thought I had failed my two classes at Tarrant County College, so I never bothered to entertain the idea of a degree and chose to just focus on working and building my career as a trainer for the next thirty years.

As an adult, I have always supported mental health and advocated for it openly because I see the struggle in others and share a lot of these commonalities with ever feeling like we are “good enough”. We share the invisible common thread of battling our own thoughts and feelings, that lie and whisper, telling us cruel things about ourselves that simply are not true.

It took me years to get diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Depression, and Anxiety and this came as a result of having a full-blown breakdown in a parking lot. I would have frequent panic attacks that became so disruptive and dangerous that I was not able to drive a car for years. When I found an amazing doctor, who helped me get my medications right and talk about all the feelings that I was

having, I was able to finally put all the panic attacks behind me and enjoy driving again. Things were good, I was driving on my own, my medication levels were right and everyone was doing so well, but there was life, hiding to kick me down when I least expected it.

February 15, 2023 started as a beautiful and crisp day. I was on my way to work and remembered the radio talking about a disturbing statistic that had just been released that said that LGBTQ youth were at a significantly higher risk of suicide, and I shuddered to hear this. I had a huge presentation with a new client and was feeling incredible about the meeting, despite this warning that included my daughter and her friends in this demographic. I dismissed it after thinking, “Surely, one of them would say something if they were feeling this way, right?” I grabbed my bag from the car and got settled into my desk. I was in a very good mood and ready to meet the new client, but I never got to meet or present to the new client, because I received some incredibly disturbing information that changed the course of my life forever.

Five minutes before our scheduled meeting, I received a text from my husband telling me that my teenage daughter's best friend had died. I remember reading that message twice because I did not believe the words I was seeing. I was confused and had a million thoughts racing through my mind. "Wait. You're saying she *died*? What happened? Are you sure? Is this a prank? This isn't funny. I don't have time for this right now because today is really important for me at work and why are you telling me something like this? I don't have time for a joke, Nicholas." Except this wasn't a joke or a prank. This was real. My daughter's best friend had died by suicide. This beautiful child who had become best friends with my daughter in the 2nd grade was gone. This sweet girl, who was funny, had incredible manners, and spent many weekends with us in our home, was gone.

I grabbed my phone and went into the hallway and immediately called my daughter. She was hysterical and told me that this was real and that her best friend had ended her life by suicide. This was not happening, I kept telling myself. How? What happened? Was she upset

about something? Why didn't she tell someone? Was someone else involved? The questions flooded over me like a tsunami, and I knew that I was drowning in disbelief.

I went home and immediately hugged and comforted my daughter, but I wasn't sure what to say or do. I just knew that I needed to be with my daughter immediately and that she needed me. This wasn't just her best friend; this was also her ex-girlfriend who had broken things off a year prior, so there was an extra layer of hurt that we were all struggling to understand. I knew right then and there that I needed to do more than just simply talk about mental health.

Losing this sweet girl who spent many overnights and weekends in our home, so close to sixteen years old, has impacted me in ways that I never thought possible. It made me speak up and speak out about mental health in ways I never considered because most find it so taboo and stigmatizing. I found myself talking about my own mental health struggles on social media, including LinkedIn which every

person in my professional training company could read about. Her loss made me braver than I've ever been in my entire life.

I contacted Crisis Text Line and became a crisis counselor. I started a fundraising campaign for To Write Love on Her Arms and exceeded several fundraising goals. Everything was coming together so quickly; I just couldn't believe it.

In March, I was laid off from my job in corporate training. Normally, I would be struggling with fear, worry, and anxiety over this unforeseen incident, but this time, everything just felt different for me. I opted to make this change to pivot into a completely different career field. I became Mental Health First Aid certified and turned over every rock I could. I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in mental health, but I wasn't sure where to get started.

I started looking into opportunities in the mental health field but realized that I didn't have a degree to take any next steps toward my future. I reluctantly requested my former college transcript and was shocked to see that I earned 11 hours. I couldn't believe it. My GPA

was awful, but I did it. I'm committed to improving not only my GPA, but also myself, my community, and the world.

988 was extremely new and still in its infancy as a national three-digit number. I became a volunteer 988 crisis counselor at Crisis Text Line immediately because I never wanted anyone else to feel the way that my daughter's best friend felt on that day and the way that loved ones feel who are left behind after someone dies by suicide. If I could help just one person to not feel so alone, and to choose to continue to stay, then that was what I was going to do.

I left a thirty-year career in corporate Learning and Development and decided to go back to school to pursue my degree in Psychology. I also became a Crisis Counselor at The Trevor Project to be a light and safe space for LGBTQ youth who reach out in times of crisis.

My mental health journey started with my own thoughts of dying by suicide and I have never shared that bleak moment with anyone until now. I keep a plaque on my desk to remind me that there is a "great big, beautiful tomorrow" and it allows me to pour kindness

into helping others to step away from such a dreary space they're in by holding space, being nonjudgmental, and having a tremendous amount of empathy for them and their situation. I am dedicated to this life-saving work of mental health because everyone deserves the opportunity to stay. People's lives matter, and it's time that everyone be given the right to choose to live another day instead of the devastating impacts that are felt after suicide.

Suicide changes things. It leaves an unspeakable hole in the hearts left by families, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances of the survivors left behind. When I entered Dallas College in pursuit of my Psychology degree, my GPA was horrible, however, with each class I take and the commitment I have behind me, I am improving it and moving closer to my dream, one class at a time.

Today, I am in the Honors Program at 47 years old. I know that I have a long way to go to complete my master's degree and get a license to practice in Texas, but my dream of being a Licensed Professional Counselor is bigger than anything else. So, when I say

suicide changes things, it definitely has, because it has changed me and set me back on track into the field, I feel that I have always been meant to do. I am pursuing my degree in Psychology so that I can help others to not feel alone, helpless, and hopeless and think that dying from suicide is the answer to moving away from their pain. Everyone deserves their life and the hope that can come from their own “Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow.” We need them here to see that and believe it.





“Stepping In”
Gina Peduto-Sly

There are countless videos on the internet of real-world violence, crimes being committed, and people being murdered right before someone’s eyes. In some, the person recording may yell to stop or tell the perpetrator they are being recorded, but usually they do not get involved, choosing to do nothing and record the event in the hope of getting a viral post. Never did I think that I would be able to stop an act of violence, and because it happened before the age of cell phones, I had not thought of recording it; it was either act or watch a man be murdered. I am no hero; I was in the right place at the right time, and thank God, I made the right choice. While I was primarily operating on adrenaline and instinct when I stopped a murder, the normalcy before, the terror during, and the disbelief after, taught me that we can make a difference, or even save a life, if we are willing to intervene when someone is being hurt.

The night started out like any other Friday night. I was a 19-year-old bookkeeper and after a long week, I decided to go out with some

friends. My best friend, Stephanie, and I were driving home from a late movie, screeching along to a Bon Jovi classic on the radio. It had rained all day, and since we lived by the New Jersey shore in a marshy area, we were used to regular flooding. For some reason, I took a road that I knew normally flooded out, irrationally hoping that I would not have to turn my car around to take the long way home as I had to so many times before. As we drove up towards a little bridge over the marsh, we saw two men in the headlights, standing in floodwater a few inches above their knees. The night had just taken an unexpected turn.

As I started slowing down, I was not prepared for what would happen next. Stephanie turned down the radio and we could hear them yelling and cursing. Suddenly, the argument turned violent with them viciously punching and pushing each other. One of the men fell, and to our utter shock and horror, the other guy pounced on the fallen man, brutally holding him under the water while he struggled and thrashed. I could not believe my eyes, but he was drowning that fallen man! This all happened so quickly and chaotically that I panicked and opened my car door, not having any clue what I was going to do but

knowing I had to do something to make this guy stop drowning the man under the water. Stephanie was terrified, yelling and trying to grab me to keep me in the car. I got out, but stayed behind my door, with one foot still in the car, and started screaming at him to stop. Stephanie began honking the horn as I was yelling at the guy that the police were coming, which was a lie as neither of us had a cell phone yet; anything to make the guy let go of the drowning man. After what felt like ages but surely was only minutes, it finally worked; the guy let go and then turned toward us screaming and menacingly taking steps towards my car. Behind him unheeded, the victim surged up onto his knees, coughing and choking, crawling and then stumbling away. I watched as he escaped, but I had no idea what to do next.

Now, I was terrified that I was the source of this man's rage, and he was still coming closer. I quickly jumped back into my car, backed up, turned around and got out of there, all while he was still screaming at us. We drove home in shock and disbelief and repeatedly went over the ordeal to make sure it was real. Stephanie scolded me for getting out of the car but acknowledged why I felt I had no choice. We were

relieved and grateful to have stopped a violent tragedy and to have gotten away unscathed. We got home and reported it to the police. Then, we checked the local newspapers for a few days but found nothing about the incident. So, I tried to let it go and hoped for the best for both men. The ordeal was over.

In the years since, I have thought of them often, with Stephanie and I going over the craziness occasionally and praying for them. I realized that we saved that man from drowning, but we also saved the other man from making a grave rage-fueled mistake that would have ruined his life. I know that we were in danger, but I have never regretted my actions; the alternative was too horrible to contemplate. I could not imagine staying out of it, running away to get the police, being a witness to a murder, or just recording it on a cell phone. Though there was a risk, I was proud that I was willing to step in and intervene when someone was being hurt, as I hoped someone would do for me. No matter what else I may accomplish in my life, I am grateful for this valuable lesson. Rather than witnessing or recording violence without

trying to stop it, we should all take the chance to help our fellow human beings, as we never know when we will need help ourselves.





“I Learned to Swim”
Stephanie Diaz Rocha

I could have learned to swim

Or perhaps to paint or have done a sport

I could have become a devoted athlete

But I did none of the above

I picked up a pencil

The old one

The forgotten one

The one sitting at the bottom of a cluttered bag

I then let the forgotten become my treasure

Letting the thin lines turn into fantasies

I let the world around me be replaced with the world inside me

Letting myself become engulfed in the luxury of words

To be swallowed by them

And to drown in them

I became a fish in an ocean of unknown

The waves submerged me deeper and deeper

Preparing me to unlock the hidden world within

I learned to swim –

And now I swim through my thoughts

Wandering deeper and deeper each day

I then come up to the surface

And pour my world onto this page

Tales of both the new and old age

Oh, how important it has become – that day

That special day

On which I learned to swim





“Irish Eyes”
Cody Johnson

I am an American

Born on her soil

The home of the free, the land of the brave

I’ve seen amber fields, I’ve watched them wave

But America is not who I am

As a child I heard of my origins

Irish farmers

Scottish theologians

They tell me I’m celtic

Say it’s my blood

But I am not Scottish

I am not Irish

A celtic young man

A home with no land

No, I am a migrant

And a son to one too

The Irish in me lived years ago

Long before the American showed

But as I read of my heritage

Of religion, dance, song

I'm humbled

I'm humbled

The Irish in me rustles with pride

It knows not the shame that blossoms inside

I am not an American

I am not Irish

I have not an ounce of the blood of these lands

I know not these hills on which I stand

But I know the connection I feel in my soul
To Irish and Yankees who lived long ago
I carry them with me in blood and in pride
These American hands, these Irish eyes





“Don’t Worry”
Sundance Hollingsworth

Don’t Worry

About your bank account

Life’s Too Short

And Stress Kills

Don’t Worry

About the drum corps in your engine

Every time you stop, just imagine

It’s probably nothing

Turn up the radio

Don’t Worry

About the pain in your chest

When you hang on a breath

Juuuuust too long

It’ll go away

It always goes away

Don't Worry

About the job that you hate

Or the raise you didn't get

It's just work and anyway

You aren't supposed to like it

Don't Worry

About the

Drip Drip Drip Drip Drip

Slipping in when it rains

Put in another work order

Don't Worry

About the sugary shit that you give to your kids

It's still filling in the morning when everything is running behind

And it's all part of a balanced Alzheimer's

Don't Worry

About the bills you can't quite pay

The sports your kids won't play

The lunch you'll skip today

The endless bricks you'll lay

Or the life you waste

The lines on your face

Or the unending pace

Or whatever your case

Just say thanks

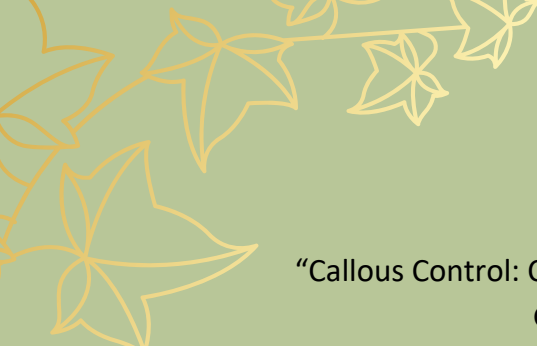
May I stay

And Don't Worry they'll say

"We like you right

Where you are"





“Callous Control: Comparing Dramatic Monologues”

Gina Peduto-Sly

Throughout history, women have struggled for autonomy and independence within a patriarchal society that literally considered them property. In the nineteenth century, Robert Browning challenges this attitude in two poems about men with an obsessive need to completely dominate their lovers. Rather than tolerate any hint of independent behavior, the speakers kill the women. While “My Last Duchess” gives no details of the murder itself, after her death, the husband reduces his wife to a covered piece of art that he alone controls who views. In “Porphyria’s Lover,” the speaker quite dramatically recounts the act of strangling Porphyria with her own hair, and then lies with her corpse all night reveling in his complete control. Browning’s dramatic monologues “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover” use the speakers’ differing relationship status, tone, and symbolic imagery regarding their victimized lovers to examine the

extreme consequences of a callous society that treats women as property.

First, the differing marital statuses of the speakers convey the idea that all nineteenth-century men shared the desire to control women. In “My Last Duchess,” the speaker is a Duke negotiating with a representative to marry the Count’s daughter, and his complaints about his dead wife serve to warn the representative about what he desires in his new wife. He resentfully tells the man that the last Duchess had not been appreciative enough of his marrying her, nor suitably impressed by his gifting her his “nine-hundred-years-old name” (33). It is not enough to be his loving wife, instead she should have been grateful for the name and status he had given her. Further, he shows the representative how he has reduced his wife to a work of art and revels in his control of it. He keeps her painting covered, emphasizing “that none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I” (9-10). He seems to appreciate her more as a piece of art than as a woman; indeed, she is never even named. Thus, even after death, he is exercising control over her. In contrast, “Porphyria’s Lover” starts with

the woman alive, and the speaker is either of a lower class than Porphyria, or she is already married to someone else. He waits for her in a cabin while she is at a feast worrying about his being alone so she leaves early, thinking of him as “one so pale / for love of her” (28-29). They are not married, and the speaker is resentful of her independence, stating she is too weak to “give herself to me forever” (25). Therefore, even though he cannot marry her, he wishes to own her as if she were his wife. Clearly, the idea of women as property is so ingrained that, though the two speakers have a differing marital status, they both feel they should own these women.

Next, Browning uses different tones to emphasize the callousness of the speakers toward the women they seek to control. For example, the Duke speaks formally and arrogantly, and his tone toward his late wife is derogatory. He never names her, nor mentions loving or missing her; he only criticizes her behavior and refuses to communicate his feelings. Instead, he says, “I gave commands” (43), and when they were not heeded, “then all smiles stopped together” (44). His words imply that rather than tolerate her behavior, he has her killed because his

commands are not obeyed. The Duke further clarifies his expectations of his new wife's obedience when he says that the Count's "fair daughter's self, as I avowed / At starting is my object" (50-51). He is clearly stating that his aim is dominance over the girl. In contrast, in "Porphyria's Lover," the speaker's tone is not as formal, and he is the one left unnamed. The absence of his name is intentional because this speaker is not in control, and the poem starts with him petulantly and resentfully submissive towards Porphyria. Since he is home alone without her, he says, "His heart is fit to break" (5), and then she confidently comes in and takes charge of the cottage, building the fire and making it warm. At first, he is pouting, so she tries to cajole him into answering her by baring her shoulder and embracing him. Then, the power structure changes, and he suddenly feels in charge, saying he is "happy and proud; at last I knew / Porphyria worshipped me" (32-33). Obviously, he equates love with power and using the word "worship" conveys this belief. Therefore, when he realizes she loves him, he kills her to freeze that moment of dominance forever, calling her "mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good" (36-38). Once he has

literal control of her body, then he is satisfied. Obviously, the speaker's tone towards her is obsessive and delusional, and his sanity is questionable. While the Duke's tone is formal, arrogant, and not overtly insane, they both have the same sick need to severely subjugate these women.

Finally, Browning uses symbolic imagery for different effects to convey the speakers' desire for domination of the women. The imagery about the Duchess is symbols used to convey her personality as a sweet-tempered, appreciative, and joyful young woman, emphasizing her warmth and guilelessness. For instance, the Duke calls the blush on her cheek, used as a symbol for innocence, "a spot of joy" (21), and says she had "a heart...too soon made glad" (22). Her inherent joyfulness makes him jealous and resentful; he wants her to be cold and aloof and unimpressed by anything or anyone except himself and his attentions. Finally, in the last lines he points out a statue made for him by an affluent sculptor, saying, "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse" (52-53). This statue is a symbol that further emphasizes his intentions of the new wife being a completely

obedient (tame) object that he will use to adorn his house like a work of art, much like the painting of his dead wife. In contrast, the symbolic imagery in “Porphyria’s Lover” is used to shock the senses. The speaker uses Porphyria’s hair to strangle her, matter-of-factly stating, “In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around” (39-40). Using her own hair, which is usually a point of pride and vanity for women, to kill her adds insult to injury and further humiliates her. After she is dead, he revels in having complete control of her body, arranging her head so that it is submissively lying on his shoulder, and says her (dead) cheek “blushed bright beneath my burning kiss” (48). This positioning is an incredibly morbid image of dominance. Finally, the poem ends with him saying, “And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has said not a word!” (59-60). This imagery quite effectively evokes the horror of bodily belonging to someone else, and he evokes God to imply that his deed must be sanctioned behavior. The jarring images coupled with that last line serve to challenge the callous attitude of a society that accepts women as possessions. Though the symbolic imagery is used for different

purposes, both poems effectively convey the danger of denying women's autonomy.

Ultimately, in "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover," Browning condemns society's acceptance of women as the property of men, whether married or not. Though there are differences in tone and imagery, the speakers insist on total control over their wife or lover, killing the women when they resist. While these actions are rather extreme, they reflect the reality of that possibility when women are viewed as objects of ownership. Unfortunately, this is not an outdated concept because women's rights are currently being stripped, and women have lost the right to make their own health care choices and decisions about their own bodies and futures. This injustice is accepted in the same society in which men also insist that their rights cannot be infringed upon by being told what guns they may own or being required to get a vaccine. The duplicity is clear, further showing that when society accepts the inherent callousness of women being treated as property to manage rather than autonomous human beings,

all manner of injustice is allowed. Clearly, Browning's work remains relevant.

Works Cited

Browning, Robert. "My Last Duchess," 1842. *Compact Literature: Reading, Reacting, and Writing*, 9th ed., edited by Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, Cengage Learning, 2016, pp. 679-681.

Browning, Robert. "Porphyria's Lover," 1836. *Compact Literature: Reading, Reacting, and Writing*, 9th ed., edited by Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, Cengage Learning, 2016, pp. 696-697.





“No Home for Girls Raised by Wolves”

Kathryn Runyans

Karen Russell’s “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” follows the story of a wolf-teenager, Claudette, and her wolf-sisters, Mirabella and Jeanette, sent to a home to learn how to become human girls. While at this home, the nuns who run the school systematically strip Claudette and the other girls of their cultural and personal identities. Claudette, along with many of the other girls at the school, begins resenting those other wolf girls who either conform too much or not at all. This story explores the theme of otherness through setting, home, and family.

The world presented in “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” features human societies and werewolf packs. These packs come in all varieties. Claudette describes her pack as being “hirsute and sinewy and mostly brunette” and having terrible posture, though other packs do not share these traits (226). Claudette also shares how the world at large treats her pack with hostility. According to Claudette, her group lives the lives of outsiders, finding shelter in caves

found on the outskirts of the forest. They face threats not only from frost, but also from pitchforks of local farmers. Claudette goes into more detail about the human's disdain for the werewolves, saying, "They had ostracized the local wolves by having sometimes-thumbs, and regrets, and human children" (227). Interestingly, these werewolves gain the ire of these farmers not only from general wolf-like behavior, such as terrorizing cows and stealing food, but also because these werewolves have human traits and human children. Werewolfism in this world skips a generation, leaving behind human children running on all fours, never gaining the speed of their werewolf parents and howling wolf language from a human mouth, separating these children not only from their outsider parents but also from the human world. When the nuns of St. Lucy's come with offers of education for these human children, their werewolf parents are unable to resist.

St. Lucy's promises to teach these outsider children how to fit into human society, to break the wall of separation put between these children and the world their parents believe they should be a part of.

However, the parents do not know that a world of further ostracization and pain awaits their children. As the girls' first act of conformity, St. Lucy's gives them new names—new human names—Jeanette, Mirabella, and Claudette—to replace old cultural names consisting of howls and growls. St. Lucy's strives to slowly turn these wolf-girls into true humans, but what happens when these girls fail to discard their wolf upbringing? The home uses this very idea as a stick to push the girls into changing. They see projection slides depicting wolf-girls too human to return to their packs and other wolf-girls too wolf-like to integrate into human society, ending with a slide asking, "Do you want to be shunned by both sides?" (235). This statement seeds fear into Claudette. She has already begun to transform from a wolf-girl into a girl-girl, and now she faces the thought of what would happen if she resists change. This sentiment leads Claudette to begin separating herself from Mirabella out of fear she would lose a place in both worlds.

Mirabella refuses to change the most out of the three sisters in this story. At the beginning, when receiving a nametag with her new

name, Mirabella resists for two hours before the nuns finally get the tag on her. When all the other girls have finally been able to unlearn wagging invisible tails, Mirabella continues to show her resistance. She plays like a wolf even when Claudette tells her to stop, resulting in Claudette seeing the slide show full of half-wolf half-human girls. Claudette does not know what the nuns did with Mirabella; however, whatever was done did not work. Mirabella comes to Claudette with her wounds, who refuses to follow werewolf custom and lick the splinter clean as the nuns had instructed. Mirabella's continued inability to change begins to affect her physically and socially, dulling her eyes and instilling a craving for connection. Claudette recounts, "But you couldn't show Mirabella the slightest kindness anymore-she'd never leave you alone!" (236). She even struggles to sleep knowing Mirabella's bed lies right under her own. This statement shows Mirabella's craving for affection and love and the other girls' unwillingness to give it to her. Mirabella never forsakes her wolf heritage, continuing to howl and bite and call things by their wolf names. This behavior makes the other girls uncomfortable, with

Mirabella fully encompassing all they had to forsake to become girl-girls. Finally, everything comes to a head when Claudette takes her Adaptive Dancing test. When Claudette begins panicking and forgets the dance steps, she seeks help from Jeanette, and Mirabella answers the call instead. The wolf-girl comes to Claudette's aid by knocking her down, causing all in the room to run away in fear. The next day, Mirabella disappears, unable to find companionship in her wolf-sisters anymore. Too wild, too wolf-like, the nuns turn Mirabella loose, never to be seen again, rejected not only by the human world, but by her own kin. Would conformity have saved Mirabella from this fate?

Throughout the story, Jeanette seems to change the easiest. The nuns took to using Jeanette as an example quickly, chastising the other girls to follow her example. However, the nun's love for Jeanette only extended as far as her being an example. Sister Ignatius would call Jeanette their "little wolf in sheep's clothing!", a thinly veiled backhanded compliment (232). Though Jeanette quickly made progress, she would always still be just a wolf in their eyes. Just as quickly as the nuns took to loving Jeanette, the girls began to despise

her. The girls only liked Jeanette when she acted wolf-like, and the nuns only liked Jeanette when she did not. Jeanette's understanding of humanity separated her from her sisters as well. When Jeanette cried at a thing she had read, Claudette could not read it or comfort her sister. In the end, no matter how hard Jeannette tried to become human, she never fully could be. She would always have an accent betraying her wolf heritage, as Claudette notes, "I noticed she stumbled on the word bloomer. HraaaHA! Jeanette could never fully shake our accent" (241). Jeanette would always be an outsider to both wolf and human society, no matter what she did. If even Jeanette, the perfect student, could never find a place in the human world, neither could the other girls. None of them could ever be good enough for the humans, and none of them could ever be the same.

"St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" fully explores what it means to be an outsider, never to be accepted. This theme roots itself in the very world of the story, branching out to the entities within it. The girls reject both Mirabella and Jeanette, one for not changing enough and the other for changing too much. None of the girls can


ever be the same, unable to return to the home of their birth and unable to find a new one with the humans, remaining in limbo for the rest of their lives.

Work Cited

Russell, Karen. "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves." *St. Lucy's*

Home for Girls Raised by Wolves: Stories, Knopf, 2006, 225-46.





“Love Beyond Prejudice”
Joseph Romero

“I stand next to her, looking at the flowers George sent, acknowledging
how little I truly know about this world.”

-Alexander Weinstein, “Saying Goodbye to Yang”

In “Saying Goodbye to Yang,” Alexander Weinstein transports readers to a futuristic society inhabited by people like ourselves who are intermingled with robotic humans and clones. “Saying Goodbye to Yang” is a short story that follows the narrator, Jim, as he and his family struggle with the loss of their robotic son, Yang. Throughout the story, Weinstein explores the meaning of humanity, the influence of technology, and the way we perceive others. A general reading of the text reveals a story about grief and the love of a robotic son, yet there is a deeper narrative that develops between the narrator and his neighbor, George. In “Saying Goodbye to Yang,” Alexander Weinstein

argues that the way we judge and categorize others is not only harmful, but also pushes away a potentially strong community.

Within the story's opening paragraphs, Jim describes himself as morally good. Jim states, "When we [narrator and his wife] adopted Mika three years ago, it seemed like the progressive thing to do.... Kyra and I are both white, middle-class, and have lived an easy and privileged life; we figured it was time to give something back to the world" (3). Through this statement, Jim attempts to convince the reader that he is a morally just person. Jim specifically narrows in on his privileged life and his desire to give back to the world. In the early stages of the story, Jim presents himself as a morally righteous person.

As the story develops, the narrator introduces his neighbor, George. Jim describes George as "a friendly enough guy, but completely unlike us [narrator and his wife]" (7). Jim then lists a variety of reasons why he thinks so lowly of George which includes George's decision to clone and his bumper sticker expressing his distaste of solar cars. Jim also states that "a man who paints his face for Super Bowl

games isn't the type of guy to open your heart to" (7). Through his descriptions of his neighbor, Jim presents George as a moral failure, someone to keep distant. Jim also props himself up as morally better than George.

As the story comes to a close, the dynamic between the narrator and George becomes more complex than previously presented. While reading to his daughter, Mika, the narrator reflects that "it's the first time I've read to her in months" (17). To this realization, Jim nonchalantly remarks that Yang, his now-deceased robotic son, would normally be the one to read to the daughter. After Yang breaks down, the narrator goes to Russ, a technician who repairs human robots and is a friend to George. Following Yang's diagnosis as out of commission, Russ offers to remove Yang's voice box. Jim declines and instead thinks to himself, "I can just imagine the pleasure Russ will take in cutting up Yang" (12). Rather than giving the benefit of the doubt, Jim assumes that Russ will take pleasure in slicing up Yang since Russ has previously presented a prejudice against Easterners. These interactions reveal

that Jim is not as morally right as first presented, not only neglectful of his daughter by outsourcing reading to his daughter but also through his over-willingness to quickly give judgment on those he hardly knows.

Unlike Jim, Weinstein presents George in a new light. Upon hearing of the narrator's loss of Yang, George extends aid to Jim's family, saying, "If you guys need help, let us know. You know, if you need a day sitter or something. I'll talk to Dana—I'm sure she'd be up for taking Mika" (17). Initially, Jim presents George as a rough character, and while true, Jim harshly judges George as a man who "isn't the type of guy to open your heart to" (7). Yet, when Yang dies, it is George who offers both sympathy and to day-sit for Jim's daughter. Making matters worse, Jim recalls that "George reaches out across the hedge, his large hand coming straight at me [the narrator]. For a moment I flash back to Championship Boxing and think he's going to hit me. Instead, he pats me on the shoulder" (17). Rather than assume the best, Jim thinks George wants to attack him. To Jim's surprise,

George (literally and figuratively) reaches out to offer sympathy to Jim. As the events of the story unfold, Jim cannot reconcile his initial impression of George with the kind man that George reveals himself to be.

Additionally, George sends flowers for Yang's funeral and respectfully, despite their differences in beliefs, gives the narrator and his family the space and support they need to grieve. This revelation of a more soft and loving man behind the rough and gritty personality shows that there is more to George than the narrator leads the reader to believe.

Weinstein, through the narrator's perspective, establishes the narrator as morally superior to George who has a rougher and grittier characterization than Jim. However, when Yang dies, Jim reveals a colder and more judgmental personality than he initially let on. Likewise, the portrayal of George changes from a rough and gritty personality to one that shows deep empathy and support for Jim's grieving family, despite the prejudice that George previously displayed.

This change of character, by both George and the narrator gives George a heroic tinge while twisting Jim into a more villainous figure. When it comes down to it, George will help even if he does not wholeheartedly agree with Jim's perspective on life. George shows that love (in the sense of community) is not based on how much people agree, but rather how far someone is willing to go to help others who are not like themselves, by their ability to do what is right even when it seems unlikely.

Throughout the story, Weinstein explores morality and community through the relationship between the narrator and George. First, Weinstein uses the narrator's perspective to establish George as a morally ill character and contrasts that with the narrator as a supposed morally right person. Weinstein then goes on to flip those initial observations revealing George to, deep down, be a deeply empathetic and loving neighbor while the narrator reveals a cold and judgmental personality. This twist in character allows Weinstein to fully explore the moral failures of the narrator and the unexpected empathy

of George, who, despite his prejudice and gritty personality, is a man full of love and kindness. Alexander Weinstein's "Saying Goodbye to Yang" argues that by harshly judging and categorizing others, we push ourselves away from a potentially strong community.

Work Cited

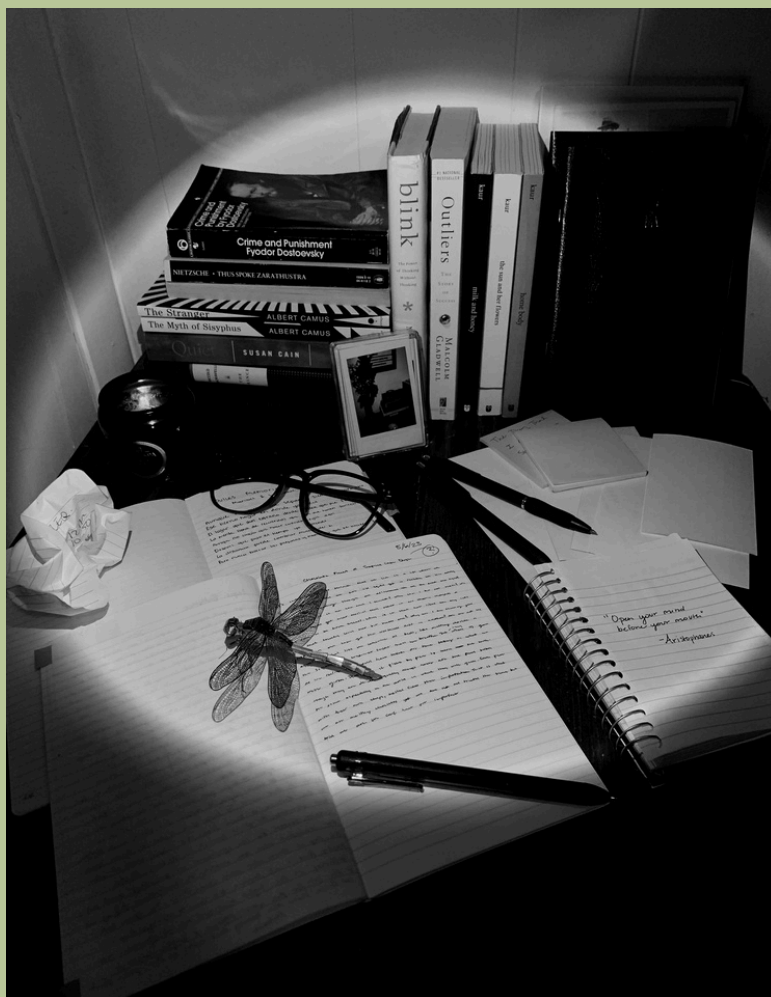
Weinstein, Alexander. "Saying Goodbye to Yang." *Children of the New World*, Picador, 2016, pp. 1-22.



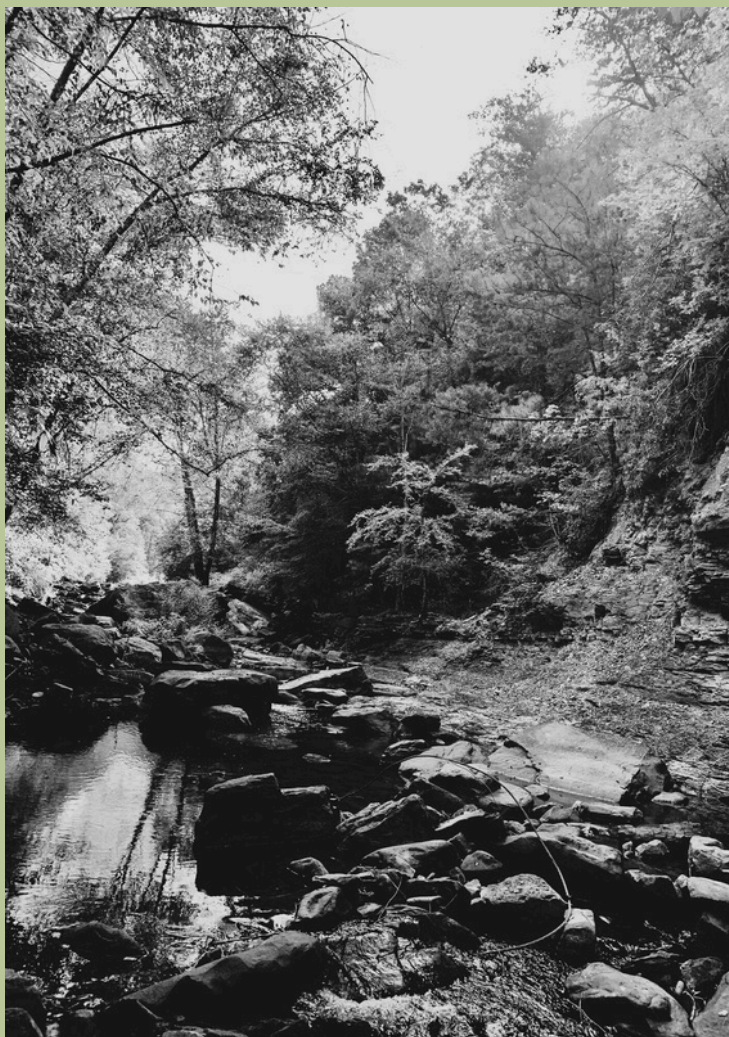
“Favorite Places”
Alina Oberglock




“Writings of Relaxation”
Stephanie Diaz Rocha



“A Breeze of Life”
Stephanie Diaz Rocha





“Hunting Spirits”

Alexia Poulin

Jaime and Nico knew distinctly that they weren’t supposed to be there. The giant “*warning*” sign was enough of a dead giveaway that anyone with a half functioning brain could understand it meant to stay the fuck out.

But Jaime insisted it was alright, and Nico listened. They were inseparable in most ways that mattered, and this was one of those ways; wherever Jaime went, Nico followed. Nico liked it this way, it meant as long as he was around, he’d have direction. Jaime didn’t like it as much as his friend did, but he guessed he didn’t mind it as much as he probably should’ve.

The two boys, one tall and broad, the other smaller and lanky, crept into an abandoned hospital. The smaller, Nico, kept looking around as if someone would appear and shoo them out; the other laughed at his partner’s worry, insisting everything was alright.

As they entered, Nico shushed the other, listening closely,

“Did you hear that?” He asked, voice trembling.

Jaime pretended to be listening, as well, “Wait yeah! I think I do hear something!”

“Really?” he asked, feeling his anxiety rise.

Jaime leaned in closer and, with a mischievous smile said, “No—now come on.”

Nico rolled his eyes and followed him.

Saying the hospital was creepy was an understatement. It was gross, water dripping from the ceiling, mysterious stains (that Nico prayed to the gods wasn't blood, but it certainly looked like it, didn't it?), used medical equipment and beds shoved to the side.

He wondered, passively, what would cause a hospital to be abandoned: plague, poison? but he supposed it could've been less exciting: financial issues, not enough patients, damage from a storm.

Jaime, on the other hand, thought about his friend's nerves. Should he be nervous? Or was this Nico being Nico? Nico who— despite his best efforts, was perpetually anxious about everything. It would've been exhausting for anyone other than himself, he thought.

“Nico,” he whispered, deciding to take his nerves a bit more seriously, “You doin’ okay?”

He nodded, looking around the corner into another hall, illuminating it with his flashlight.

“You sure?” Jaime asked, not believing him. “You were freaking out about coming in here.”

“I’m fine,” He insisted.

The pair walked down the hall and Nico looked over his shoulder, “I think here is good.”

“If you say so,” the other replied, looking around.

Nico set the Spirit Box on the floor. Jaime looked at it, unimpressed.

“I don’t get any of this, for the record.”

“I know,” Nico said from the floor.

Jaime knelt down beside the radio. “What does this do again?”

“It helps you hear the ghosts.”

“Why not just use an ouija board?”

Nico looked at him like it was obvious.

The smaller boy extended the antenna on the radio and messed with some of the dials on the top of it. He sat back on heels with a satisfied smile and said, “Now we wait.”

Jaime didn't believe in ghosts. He didn't believe they're real, and, most importantly, he didn't think, even if they were real, they could be spoken too. But Nico did, and that's all that mattered to him. Smiles came so rarely to his friend's face, and he wasn't enough of an asshole to take that from him.

So Jaime leaned against a wall and waited for this whole ordeal to be over.

The radio spit out mostly gibberish, but even so, Nico listened, leaning in, intentful. In all their ghost adventures, they've never proven ghosts to be real. There's never been a single thing on the radio, on his EMF, they've never seen any signs.

Jaime sighed. He knew they'd be here for about an hour before the other gave up, disappointed. As much as he wanted this to be over, he also didn't want Nico to be upset; he didn't know how many we'll find 'em, don't you worry speeches he had left in him.

Jaime yawned, and passively looked at the time on his phone:

11:51 pm. I should be in bed, he thinks.

Nico's head jerked up.

"Did you—" His question was cut off by the radio spitting out one distinct word, "Who?" "Did I what?" Jaime asked.

"*Shh!*" Nico hissed, leaning into the radio.

"Sorry," he murmured, half-heartedly.

Nico's head whipped around again, his hand going to his hoodie string and spinning it between his fingers.

"You had to have heard that," He said more to himself than to Jaime.

Jaime looked around hearing nothing but the creaking of an old building and a distinct tap, tap, tap-ing sound somewhere in the hallway in front of him.

"Mmm— no," He said, confused and a little alarmed.

Nico looked at him, even more confused. He could have sworn he was hearing... something. A huffing sound, like an animal fighting to breathe after being hit by a car.

“Maybe we should go?” Jaime said, assuming that Nico’s anxiety was messing with him.

“I swear to the gods there is something,” Nico insisted. He ran his hands through his silver-dyed hair desperately trying to calm himself; Jaime could see his hands trembling.

The radio continued sputtering out gibberish between them and Nico stared at it with an expression that Jaime couldn’t describe: somewhere between pure fear and curiosity; disgust.

He looked around desperately again. Jaime looked around with him, unamused and half-expecting him to be fucking with him.

“Nico, dude, I don’t-”

The radio said “go,” and he rolled his eyes. He remembered what he was doing, where he was. Nico’s nerves were getting to him, that’s all.

“Okay, let’s go,” Jaime said, grabbing his friend’s arm.

He heard a sound. It was a disturbing and wet sound, like something choking on blood. Like something fighting for life.

“What was-”

A figure in shadow stood at the end of the hall. The radio shouted the word “out” again, this time more aggressive.

Nico looked up abruptly.

“What the fuck is that,” Nico said, his voice breaking.

Jaime pulled him up by the arm, “We’re not staying here to find out.”

But he wouldn’t move and that thing was moving towards them, in Nico’s hands was the Spirit Box, still sputtering nonsense.

“Nico,” Jaime warned. “If you don’t move, I’ll leave you here!”

Nico looked at him, he was ashen. “Ghosts are real,”

“Yes, yes, ghosts are real now let’s go.”

Nico fumbled for his camera in his bag.

“Come on!” Jaime said, pulling his arm.

“Hold on!”

As the thing approached, the radio seemed to get louder, hissing and spitting.

Nico held up his camera and snapped a photo. He looked at it, checking it.

“Alright, great, you got the picture, how’s about we run?” Jaime was getting desperate. At first he thought, hoped, really, that the “ghost” was just a regular, perfectly alive person, but as it got closer, he could see that there was something not right about it.

It walked by putting most of its weight on one leg. Its whole body seemed to lean that way. Its head looked too big, its arms too long, and its torso too short. Jaime now understood where the dripping was coming from; a blood-like substance was dripping from its arms, down its fingers. Stringy black hair fell around its face.

Oh saints, its face Jaime thought. He wanted to cry just from looking at it as it came into the light of the torch.

He found himself as frozen as Nico, both of the boys gripping onto each other, the camera still in one of Nico’s hands.

He held up the camera in a stunted motion and took another photo.

The Spirit Box hissed, “Go.”

The thing was now completely in the light of the flashlight, maybe two yards from them now, and Nico dry heaved at the full sight of it.

Its jaw was pulled just a little too wide and crooked. Its skin was bunched and bleach-white, its eyes too large and bulging. Something in its open mouth shone.

Inside its mouth were an over-abundance of teeth. In-human teeth.

The thing moaned as it approached, then abruptly stopped. It tilted its head.

The radio screeched something high-pitched causing Nico to drop it, the radio hit the ground and broke, the sound ceasing.

The thing started moving in haggard momentum towards us.

The radio sputtered out, "RUN."

Jaime grabbed Nico's hand and began to run.

He struggled to keep up, tripping over his own two feet; the seven years of track-and-field being forgotten.

“Run!” Jaime yelled at him, Nico found his footing, and began sprinting.

The thing clamored behind them and Jaime was pretty sure he was crying now. He didn’t know what the thing was, but he knew he wouldn’t let it get them.

He wouldn’t let it get Nico.

He gripped Nico’s hand harder, and looked over his shoulder. The thing was a short ways behind them, it was gaining speed as it went and Jaime was sure it would catch up before they escaped.

He debated letting go of Nico and staying behind; doing something noble like in the movies, allowing Nico to escape, allowing Nico to define himself as one.

But he knew that if he let go, if he stayed behind, he wouldn’t leave him no matter how much he begged. He knew Nico would want them to die as they lived: together.

So Jaime urged his legs to go faster, to pull them through the hospital, to get them home safe.

He gripped his friend's hand to assure himself that he was still there.

"Jaime," Nico heaved. "I can't-"

The thing made a grab at him and Jaime pulled him to him and just out of its grasp, causing Nico to trip over his feet.

He hauled him up and shoved him ahead of him: the hospital door now in sight.

"Run!" Jaime yelled.

Nico grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him behind him.

The door was now ten yards away; the thing was ten feet behind.

Nico was crying and struggling to breathe, Jaime's heart slammed against his ribcage. Nico looked behind his shoulder and he knew by the look in his eyes that the thing was right behind him.

Nico reached the door and the two slammed through it, tumbling onto the grass.

The thing passed by the door, before disappearing into a different part of the hospital.

Jaime looked over at Nico laying in the ground beside him; he had his inhaler in his mouth and was breathing hard. Nico grabbed his camera out of his bag and looked at the picture, smiling wildly.

The two boys looked at each other, “Told you ghosts are real,” Nico heaved, before taking another puff of his inhaler; and all Jaime could do was laugh.





“Fly Away”

J. Phillips

Finch hits the top of the train car with a resounding thunk, rolling forward on her shoulders into a scrambling sit, now facing the overpass she just jumped from. She takes in a breath that fills every corner of her lungs, releasing it heavily as tension melts from her body. Wren and Crow cheer her on from above, only their silhouettes visible to her in the dark. The train steadily creeps closer to them, traveling under the overpass.

Finch stands and turns quickly. A sharp gust of wind slaps strands of her blond bobcut into her face, causing her to stumble. She hears the two cry out above her, so she raises a hand.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” she declares. To prove her point, she steadies herself and releases a determined breath, now starting to jog down the train. She needs to give the other two room to jump.

Momentum builds as she starts running down the car, tennis shoes battering across the metal and her worn flannel jacket flapping in the wind. She launches herself off the car with practiced skill that

she's adequate at. She lands on the other car, hissing in pain from putting too much impact on her ankles. She rolls gracelessly but stays on top of the car.

Finch rises to her knees and peers back at the overpass, looking right in time to see Crow land on the other car. Crow stumbles forward, landing flat on her front with an *oof*. She then settles into a crawl to make her way down the train. Instead of jumping cars, Crow takes the safer, though slower, approach of hopping onto the metal platform below. She's not a wannabe jock like Finch. Her hands grip at the metal bars of the built-on ladder to climb onto Finch's car.

They both make their way down the train car and look up at Wren. There's only one last car behind the two, about half the height of the one they're on.

"Come on, Wren! You don't have much train left," Finch shouts over the commotion of the train.

"Yeah! Don't be a wuss!" Crow yells even louder, hands cupped around her mouth.

Wren trembles at the edge of the overpass, clutching at the side. He has a fear of jumping from high places and dying. He makes some jerky, aborted movements, trying to jump but unable to let go. "I-I've never hopped a train before!"

"None of us have!" Crow points out.

Finch watches as the overpass gets closer and closer. Soon, there won't be any train for Wren to jump on. "Go to the other side! Hurry!" she instructs, motioning for Crow to crouch down with her as they go under the overpass.

Wren wastes a few precious seconds processing what Finch says and then clumsily makes his way to the other side. Finch and Crow aren't visible, but he knows the two will reemerge soon. Wren now has a fear of jumping and accidentally crushing his friends. He waits until the two appear, then, with a curse, he leaps.

Crow and Finch hold their breath as Wren disappears behind the car they're on. That same breath escapes them as they see Wren's

arms come up onto the car, pulling himself up, “Landed on the small car,” he mutters.

Finch’s shoulders sag dramatically as she groans, “Oh, thank god.”

Crow points at Wren as he perches himself on the car, “I swear to god, I will kill you if you die!”

Wren rubs the back of his head, tussling his hair. His black hair and onyx eyes contrasts his pale face, which appears lustrous under the silver beams of moonlight. “I’ll try to avoid it,” he murmurs.

Finch flops down onto her back, letting the biting cold of the metal train calm her. Crow tucks her skirt against her leggings and sits down with crossed legs. It perhaps isn’t the best choice for fall attire, but she hardly ever gets to dress the way she wants. “So, what now?” she directs to Finch. The latter sits back up, leaning on the palms of her hands and looking over her shoulder to where the train is heading. To where *they* are heading.

“When will Swallow-” Wren cuts himself off, neutral expression faltering as he starts to fidget with the drawstring of his hoodie.

Finch understands that slip up well. One thing she’s learned about suddenly losing a loved one is that sometimes you forget they’re dead. Forget that you’re supposed to change “is” to “was”, “are” to “were”. But that isn’t right. Swallow is still her friend, will always be her friend. She just can’t talk or hang out with them right now.

“I’m sure they’re keeping up with us however they can.” Finch reassures, though her voice is burdened. She turns around fully to face down the train. A part of Finch blames herself for Swallow’s death. She’s the oldest of them. She knows how to drive a damn car. She could have done *something*. Swallow’s too young, the youngest of the four. They have two years left in high school while the rest of them are supposed to graduate this May.

Swallow’s the one that had the idea to hop a train and get the hell out of here once they graduate. Swallow’s the one that said they

should choose new names so that they could all fly away. They're supposed to be flying too.

Finch clenches her hands, fisting the fabric of her jeans. "If God doesn't take him out, I will," she decides. She doesn't need to specify who she's referring to. The report says it was an accident, but they know that's not true. The whole damn town knows that's not true. The whole town has failed Swallow. Every. single. one of them. She can never forgive that.

Finch shifts gears, not wanting to dwell on her anger for too long and risk it consuming her. Crow's earlier question comes to mind, "We should count up all the money we have, know what we're workin' with." She shoves her hand into the pocket of her men's jeans—the pocket space is always better—and wrangles out a coin pouch, handing it over her shoulder to Crow. Wren takes a small billfold out of his sweatpants while Crow retrieves a fistful of change and cash out of the trench coat that she took from her mother.

The two get to work counting up the funds, but Crow quickly relieves Wren of change counting duty when he messes up three times in a row.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he mumbles in complaint, thumbing through the bills, “Why do dimes cost more than nickels? They’re smaller.”

“How the hell should I know?” Crow retorts.

“Maybe it has to do with the material they’re made out of,” Finch suggests.

“Well, they should change it,” Wren says with quiet exasperation. “We’ve got forty-one dollars.”

“And seventy-two cents,” Crow adds.

Finch hums, “Crow, you keep the money. I’d probably end up losing it.”

Crow snickers, “You’d lose your head if it wasn’t stuck to you.”

Wren nods in agreement as he hands over the cash, cringing as Crow crumples it in her hand. "At least fold them up in order."

"Yeah, yeah," Crows says dismissively, but does fold up the bills like he insists before pocketing the money. Then, she pauses.

A sound from the woods running parallel to the train catches her ears, too distorted to truly make out. She cranes her neck and listens, catching the sound again. Crow whips her head around, some of her long braids getting tossed over her shoulder. "Guys!" she exclaims, scooting over to the edge of the train closest to the woods. Finch and Wren both turn their heads in that direction. Crow squints, deep brown eyes peering into the woods to try to make out anything in the dim light, "I heard wolves!" And sure enough, clearer, more frequent howls are heard.

Wren scoots closer to the edge as well, gasping as he catches sight of streaks of fur through the trees. "Do you think they'll come back as a wolf? Wolves were their favorite."

“You idiot,” Crow snarks, “They didn’t like wolves. They liked coyotes.”

“They like both,” Finch murmurs, barely audible over the train, “but wolves are their favorite.”

Crow curses under her breath, ashamed at having misremembered her friend’s favorite animal. It may seem silly, but it feels terrible now that Swallow can’t correct her herself.

Wren notices and tries to change topics, “So... Where are we going exactly?”

Finch doesn’t have a solid answer to that. This whole idea came into existence a couple years ago, but they thought there’d be more time to work out the details.

“I guess,” she eventually mutters, “we’re going home.” Crow and Wren both look at her a bit curiously, but the quiet certainty in her voice makes them believe it’s true.

They don't know where they'll end up. The future is uncertain. Maybe they'll find a job that'll hire all three of them and a place willing to let them hunker down. Or maybe they'll hop off at a cannibalistic town just itching for some fresh meat. Both seem just as likely. But it doesn't matter where they end up if they're together.

Gusts of air billow around Finch, cradling her. She closes her eyes and outstretches her arms. Her flannel jacket soars behind her like wings.





“Gallery Wall”

Alexia Poulin

Joan would never say he knew his grandmother. In fact, he would say he purposefully avoided her and her peculiarity. He would also avoid discussing her peculiarity with the rest of his family. If he called her that, he knew his mother would simply reply,

“No, dear, your grandmother isn’t ‘peculiar.’ She’s simply prone to ‘peculiarities’.”

He hated talking to any adult about any concern he had with another adult for condescension like that. As if he can’t see what’s directly in front of him. As if he’s stupid. Joan was many things, but he was not stupid.

Which is why he elected to say nothing when, for the third day in a row, he found his grandmother sitting and staring at the paintings that decorated his family home’s gallery walls. She always stared, unblinking, at one. A lonely house on a lonely hill, dull and as lifeless as her eyes.

It weirded him out. How could it not? What is she looking at?
What is so interesting about that painting that it would cause her to
stare?

He didn't know. He didn't want to know. He had more important
things to attend to, like holiday dinners and aunts and uncles he hasn't
seen in years.

No one seemed to notice his grandmother's staring.

On the fifth day, Joan decided to say something. His grandmother was
sitting on that bench, in that hallway. *Staring*. Her chest rising and
falling. Twitching. He couldn't take it. It was the main hallway. The one
that led to the rest of the house and she was just sitting *there*. *Staring*.

He walked into the kitchen.

"Mother," He began, trying to act uninterested and discreet.

"Why is grandmother just sitting and staring?"

His mother laughed. "Don't worry yourself. She merely likes that painting is all."

This did nothing to calm his nerves, but he didn't push the matter any further.

Seven days. A week. She's still sitting there. He could vaguely see her shadow from his bedroom door. He groaned. Why does no one care? He was starting to question his own sanity.

Ten days. Eleven. Twelve.

That bitch was still sitting there. Staring. Her eyes were cold and lifeless. She twitched. Her chest moved. She looked half alive. Or, better yet, half dead.


Joan figured she was dead. Maybe her brain thought she was. Maybe he was hallucinating. Maybe there was no movement at all.

It was the thirteenth day when things changed. Joan walked into the hallway. He sat where she once did. He looked up at the lonely house on the lonely hill. Fingernail marks gouged into the floor, up the wall. Into the painting.

He could see them. See the blood dripping from under the frame. But he could not move. He could twitch. His chest rising and falling.

He did not blink.





“It’s Gonna be Ugly”

J. Phillips

You're going to be Bruised and Bloody,

One black eye and a broken nose.

You're going to have to take your meek hands-

grime caked beneath your nails,

and do something gruesome.

You're going to hold yourself together

and stitch yourself up,

as blood pours from your wounds.

And I’m sorry to disappoint,

but there’s not always going to be someone to help.

You will have to contort your body

just so you can fix those hard to reach places

that no one else wants to touch.

It’s gonna be Ugly.

It’s gonna be Gross and Gnarly,

You are gonna be Ugly,

Battered and Beaten.

You are going to be mean.

Biting and Scratching at the hands that reach for you

Indiscriminately, whether they give you Help or Harm

You're gonna want to give up,

but you will keep on Sewing,

even when some of the seams come loose.

Have you not heard that the seams will come loose?

Because they will.

And you will keep on Sewing.

This angers you, I'm sure,

But know that you can be angry

You can be angry,

and sad,

and bitter,

and empty.

You can also be happy.

But you will keep on Sewing and Stitching.

You're gonna want to give up,

But you will keep on living.





“Zonah”
Nunmarie

Bloody

Fearparts the red sea
I praythat it should not hurt me
Blasphemous were my action
Daughter most unholy

Cold

I serve to em cold
Thy Body of naked gold

Alone

My poor young bones
Are my sins forgiven, or am I gone below

Betrayed

Thy Soul at its highest risk
Sacred within its tight tissues
Thy Body at its highest risk
Broken in glassed virtue

Twisted

My knees outstretched

thigh's beat a tiny tremble
Longing for mother's chest
stripped from her protective cradle

Smothered

Tough Latex: Numbing Lube
Lips chapped Light blue
Strangled deep throbbing tube
Exposed her private pubes

Penetration

Fingers are not tools
Cruel, No moral justification
Ordained by legal certification
Doc says, she is ready after first menstruation

Mourning

The Aggressive performance of forces
As I thrust to the rhythm of the clock
Tick Tock
Again, and again

Bright

That light

That fluorescent bulb blinding my bravery

My eyelids began to shutter in shock

As if it was a photo op

Birth

Thief of innocence

Technologies fantasma's pleasure

How could we measure

Nature's true treasure





“A Call Home”
Stephanie Diaz Rocha

A Call Home

Calls are a requirement

Twice a week, at different hours and when everyone is there

Or perhaps they are not a requirement – perhaps

Perhaps they are a link

A link to an already bursting chain

They hold the “*how are you?*”

The “*I love you*”

They hold the wish that becomes a lie

The “*I will return to see you*”

That one is the weak link

How you wish it wasn’t

But it is

Arriving to the land of dreams only to dream of returning

A deep breath and the call ends

Will it be the last before the wish turns into a lie

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Each ring is countdown to a never-ending fear

You call out to everyone to gather, smile – and lie

Maybe next year you will return to see them you say – and wish

And perhaps you will take a stroll down the hometown

The one you hardly remember

Walking past the faded memories of the downtown stores and parks

Not forgetting to visit the cemetery

Not forgetting to place flowers over every grave

Of all the call filled with wishes

That turned to lies



2025 Scholarship & Chapter Award Winners

Dr. William C. Johnson Sigma Tau Delta Transfer Scholarship

Madison Black, Northeast Alabama Community College

Dr. Don Perkins Service Scholarship

Stephanie Diaz Rocha, Northeast Alabama Community College

Dr. Susan LeJeune Service Scholarship

Chloe Bell, Northeast Alabama Community College

Dr. Sheila H. Byrd Service Scholarship

Glynnis Stout, Calhoun Community College

Ms. Joan S. Reeves Service Scholarship

Gina Peduto-Sly, Northeast Alabama Community College

2024 Outstanding Chapter Award

Kappa Epsilon Chapter, River Parishes Community College

2024 National Literary Magazine

Aurora, Northeast Alabama Community College (Winner)

Aims Review, Aims Community College (Honorable Mention)