



Southern Voices

XXV, 2013

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*The Art and Craft of Fiction:
A Writer’s Guide*
(Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012)
One Last Good Time (Press 53, 2011)

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Off Track

Kristen Walker

First Place- Short Story Competition

The Chris Read Award for Fiction

“All cows eat... All cows eat... *Shoot!*”

Hattie sat at the piano trying to remember the last note to the chord she had played so many times before. “All cows eat apples... no, Hattie, that’s not it. All cows eeeeeat...” *Booooooomp.* The train sounded and threw Hattie completely off track. A glass vase sitting on the baby grand piano crashed to the floor as Hattie sprang up in frustra- tion. She went to grab the broom and dust pan from the hallway closet while saying to herself, “Look at what ya done did now, Hattie. You can’t remem- ber, and then on top of that you broke the vase.”

Just as Hattie swept up the last few pieces of the vase, her daughter, Ahja, came through the door like a mad woman. Out of breath, she said, “Hey, Ma, how you—what happened in here?”

“I broke the vase, Ja-Ja. Ain’t that what it looked like happened?”

“Well, why you got all the lights off? You might’ve seen that the vase was gonna fall. Have you taken your medicine?”

“Have you taken your medicine, Alice?”

Ahja looked at her mother, confused. “Mama, my name is Ahja; who is Alice?”

Hattie looked her daughter up and down as if she was meeting her for the first time. “I’m just pullin’ your leg, girl. I know your name—Ahja, after your great grandmamma.”

“Mama, don’t do me like that; you know it scares me.”

“Oh, girl, be quiet. I forget, but I haven’t forgotten everything,” replied Hattie.

Ahja rolled her eyes to the popcorn ceiling, and as she did, her nose picked up a smell. “Mama, you forgot you had somethin’ on the stove *again?*” Ahja said, and ran into the kitchen.

Hattie lowered her head like a child who had disap-

pointed her parents. She knew she was forgetful, but lately, she forgot the simplest things. She knew that Ahja could tell that her Alzheimer’s was getting worse, and even though she hated to admit it, she could, too.

Hattie and Ahja sat in silence as they sipped coffee and ate the new, greasy batch of fried green tomatoes Ahja cooked to replace the burned ones Hattie had left frying on the stove. Hattie watched Ahja slurp her coffee and gaze around the room wide eyed, almost as if she were playing “I Spy” with herself.

“Remind me to replace that light bulb before I leave,” Ahja said. She stared up at the dim, flickering bulb and began to tap a beat with her fingertips across the oak wood table.

“Mama, who gave you this table?” she asked.

“I bought it with the money I used to make alter- ing clothes at the Dillards. I told you that before.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, girl, I’m as sure as these walls are white. Why you askin’ me all these questions anyhow? Just say what you got to say, Ja. The room been stiff as a board since we been in here, and if it’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s beatin’ around the bush. Don’t beat ’round no bush with me, Ahja.”

Ahja took a deep sigh. “Okay, Mama, listen. I’ve been thinkin’ it’s you and only one of me. I can’t be here all the time as much as I would like to be. James is three years old and a handful. You know Gerrie’s not around to help take care of him. On top of that I have work, and I just can’t take care of you by myself anymore. Mama, how’d you feel about moving into a home?”

Hattie clutched her coffee mug tight and looked at her daughter in disbelief. “Ahja, I *am* at home.”

“No, Ma. I mean, an assisted living home. You need to be someplace where someone will always be there if you need them. You know just like I do that you’re getting worse. You pretend like you’re jokin’, but, Mama,

sometimes you don’t even remember who I am. I can’t have you in here burnin’ tomatoes all the time. You be done burned the whole house down!”

“Well, it’s my house that I’ve lived in all these years; lemme burn it if that’s what I’d like. I’m not goin’ to no old folks’ home,” Hattie said.

Hattie got up from the table. She placed both of her hands firmly on the table. They were shaking, her eyes filled with disbelief, her lips pursed. “You see yourself out of *my* house, Ahja. You got some nerve comin’ up in here tryin’ to tell me what I’m gone do. I’m the mama! You remember that!”

“Ma, I’m just trying to help you!”
“Do I look like I need your help?” yelled Hattie.
“You want the truth, or you want a lie, Mama? You ain’t as young as you used to be. It’s time you realize that and humble yourself.”

“It’s getting dark, Jah. I think it’s time you go.”
Hattie folded her arms and walked out of the kitchen letting her pink, satin house slippers drag across the hardwood floor as she headed towards her bedroom. She stopped to hear Ahja speak as she walked out of the front door.

“Mama, just think about it. I think it’ll be good for you. And it doesn’t mean you—.”
Boooooomp. Ahja was interrupted by the train.
“I don’t know how you’ve stood livin’ right across from a train track for so long, Mama.” said Ahja.

“That train runs at the same time every day. I’ve been here for so long, sometimes I forget that it’s there.”
Hattie trudged to her room and turned on the lamp that was closest to her bed. She sat down on the bed and opened the drawer of her nightstand. She took out her pink sponge rollers and began to section, comb, and roll her hair. Some of the rollers were missing snappers, and some of the spongy material was gone off of a few, but she made them work. “They old, but they still work just as good,” she said. Hattie looked at herself in the mirror across from her bed and a look of disappointment made her face droop.

“Hattie, you done got old, but you don’t work as good.” Hattie said this to herself. She rubbed her hand across the wrinkles on her face, and before it could fall, she wiped a stray tear away from her eye. Hattie’s face hardened, and her lips closed as tight as a zipper. The look on her face turned into anger as she looked at her

reflection and said, “I ain’t goin’ to no *home*.” She struggled under her sheets, looked up at the ceiling, and let out a deep sigh. “I ain’t goin’ to no old folks’ home,” she whispered.

Hattie woke at six the next morning and got dressed. She put on a plum blouse, black trousers, and a string of pearls. “You look sharp, Hattie. Sharp enough to go walkin’ before everybody ’round the neighborhood wakes up,” Hattie said to herself. She went around the house, making sure that the stove wasn’t on, and that all the lights in the house were turned off. She looked at her baby grand. “Might as well take a crack at that scale before I go,” she said. Hattie placed her hands gently on the keys of the piano and tried to play the scale she had been trying to remember. “All cows eat...no, that’s not right. Try again, Hattie. All cows eat...” Hattie sighed and her shoulders slumped over the piano. “Just give up, Hattie. You just don’t remember no more, and now you just wastin’ time.”

She grabbed her walking stick and made her way out of the door. Hattie walked down her driveway towards the street. She looked out and saw the train track across from her. She took a deep sigh, and moved on across the street. “I’m not goin’ to no old folks’ home,” she said. Hattie pressed on towards the track and before she realized it, she was there. She looked around and saw nothing but dogs tearing into trash. She saw the sun beginning to rise. She dug her shoes into the dewy grass, looked down at her feet and thought, “*Grass*. That’s it. They eat *grass*,” and dropped her cane onto the ground, then flopped down to her hands and knees, rolling over so that she was sitting on the train tracks. She saw her house and her eyes began to water, but she wiped them with the sleeve of her blouse. *Boooooomp. Boooooomp.* Hattie gazed out into the distance, then lowered her head back to the ground. “Now, Hattie,” she said, “you just got to forget how to get up.”



Kristen Walker grew up in Newton, Mississippi, and is currently a senior at MSMS. Kristen is urged to write whenever she gets a hold of a fresh idea. “Good writing isn’t forced,” says Kristen. Her philosophy: write first. Then, after it’s finished, go back and tweak it.

The Chris Read Award For Fiction

The Chris Read Award for Fiction, instituted with the 1994 issue of *Southern Voices*, honors a member of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science’s Class of 1991. Christopher David Read was an active leader at MSMS as a member of Emissaries, the Debate Club, and the *Southern Voices* staff. Chris’s first love, however, was writing. Southern style.

Chris often wove his Southern tales late at night. Chris would compose either on the computer or on (his favorite) the old, brown Royal typewriter he had bought from the pawn shop down 13th Street South. Faking sleep, I would watch the grin on Chris’s face as he worked out the next great story. When he finished, Chris would always “wake me” and excitedly read his new story to me. He never knew that I had been hiding, watching his creative process with admiration. I was not the only one to admire Chris’s work. This award stands as testimony to the admiration that we all held for Chris and his work and as a memorial to the Southern writing tradition which Chris loved.

Chris had the potential to become a great writer. Unfortunately, Chris never reached this potential: he was killed in a car wreck on January 17, 1993. Though Chris will never attain his dream of writing a great novel, all of those who loved and respected Chris hope that the recipient of this Award, as well as all the other aspiring writers at MSMS, will achieve their dreams.

Michael D. Goggans
Class of 1991



The Other Side
Korilyn Baudoin



Midnight Stroll
Ashley Henderson
Charcoal

The Tree of Life

Nija Owens

First Place—Essay Competition

My grandmother's house, trimmed in chipped navy blue paint, stands hidden in the Mississippi Delta near the little town of Money. A ramp leads up to four cement steps and a ripped screen door. This house, built by my grandfather, a brick mason, was the only world I knew for the first thirteen years of my life, where an endless dirt road and forty acres of land surrounded me. I remember sitting with my grandmother under the pecan tree in the shade, peeling peas while chucking the sweet ones into my mouth. While I fed my tummy, Grandma fed me words of wisdom.

Underneath the shady tree, Grandma would sit across from me, all five feet of her wearing a yellow housecoat, the one with missing buttons, coffee stains, and floral patterns. King James Bible in hand, she would push her reading glasses up her nose, and shift from one side of the chair to the other. Making sure that I did not slouch down or strain my back, I thought twice before reaching into the tin bucket to grab more peas. Whenever I did slouch, Grandma would smack me on the thigh and say, "Girl, sit up straight! Good posture ain't 'bout health and child-bearing no more." She often told me stories about how good carriage would affect my body just as it would affect me mentally. Early on, she conveyed to me that good posture is a sign of confidence, good manners, and good sense. I appreciate her candid efforts to keep me grounded. By chastising me under the tree that day and every other day of my life, my grandmother not only molded my posture, she also molded my character.

Peeling peas was an escape for my grandmother and me. The longer we peeled, the more unrestrained and genuine our conversations became. Grandma always gave it to me straight, and when coaching me about life, she portrayed the world as an open sea. She'd say, "You gotta learn to row whatever boat you find yourself in." This tidbit of wisdom taught me how to endure difficult situations. Through the power of my grandmother's voice, I was trained to accept the pain of all struggles, because pain in her eyes was the liberation of all weakness. She never told me what I wanted to hear, but she always told me what I needed to know.

The most valuable lessons I have learned were taught to me under that pecan tree by a woman who did not receive a formal education of her own. She even taught

me the nine senses. Besides the five I learned in school, Grandma revealed to me that four others were left out: "Honey, it don't take much to peel peas, but you won't make it nowhere in life if you ain't got book sense, street sense, people sense, and common sense," she reminded me. My grandmother explained to me the importance of education and logical reasoning. I became more aware of my surroundings and learned how to carry myself in unfamiliar areas. She also instilled in me the ability to adjust to individual personalities and respect their morals and values even if different from mine. Practicing my grandmother's ideas has also shaped me into a well-rounded member of society

Grandma also had a blunt way of expressing her thoughts, so I was not penalized for saying exactly what was on my mind. Underneath that tree, I became a free spirit. I learned to be myself. I learned to love myself and others. I gained insights into many aspects of life from

my grandmother's perspective, even if I did not agree with some of them. Listening to her stories sometimes led me to argue her assumptions; however, those verbal contests were not always limited to stories. They often involved her ideas towards philosophical views, life experiences,

and intellectual perspectives. My grandmother had all of the right answers, but my most treasured piece of advice was when she said, "Work hard today, because one day you won't have to." Even though, at that moment, she was talking about peeling peas and such, I knew deep down inside and beneath the surface, she was saying so much more. Advice such as this has contributed to the person that I am. Laughs were shared, tears were shed, and lessons were learned underneath the pecan tree. To this day, I still live by those words of wisdom that she gave me under what I call my "tree of life."



Nija Owens, a senior at the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, is a native of Itta Bena, Mississippi. She enjoys writing in her bedroom where her mind expands beyond the walls that surround her. Her inspiration comes from her family and personal experiences. Nija explains that she writes everything, from her daily to-do lists to her dreams and aspirations. As

a hobby, Nija will continue to write throughout her college career during her spare time.

Mississippi

We're so nice we even let the Florida Maple take claim as one of our native plants.

Brendan Ryan

So this is Mississippi
A Jasper wall built
Around a land
With Clairborne air
And it is not Rankin like many think
We be Lincoln east and west
With our river so wide
And it Noxubee our thing to be rude

We be Covington each day
Under a Greene oak
In a beautiful Forrest

As the moon Waynes over us
We welcome all
And say God bless Yazoo if you sneeze
And if you need someone to Lee-n on
We be here

Leflore in our houses
Always be clean
And no Leakes ever come
From our pipes
We always be shining like Pearls

Our Hinds always be covered
For we be conservative
And we never be Harrison the ladies
For we be gentlemen
Who shake visitors' Hancocks politely
Not too strong or too weak
Quintessential Southern hospitality

Each person Amite
By George they be nice
They never Jones around
Or make me Madison
They'll Washington your clothes
And dry them on a Webster
Made from the finest clothing line
I might be Marion one
Of these Chickasaws
From Mississippi
Where I feel most at Holmes



Something Rotten

Victoria Chen

Pen and Ink
Most Original



Love of a Guitar

Stearman McCalister

Johnny & Reed

Victoria Chen

“Dang it, Reed; what are we doing here?” Reed glanced at Johnny’s face from the reflection on his one-pixel desktop monitor.

“Um, what exactly do you mean by that?” Reed muttered. Sometimes, the best method to shut Johnny up was to respond to his trivial questions.

“Dude, come on. You can’t tell me that you like sitting in this cubicle all day. I feel like a hamster,” Johnny said. Reed let out a sigh of frustration. He noticed Johnny’s eyebrows were furrowed; the guy was serious.

Reed sat up in his faux leather seat and flattened out the wrinkles in his Oxford with his sweaty hands. His shirt looked like crumped fax paper. He glanced back up at his screen to see Johnny staring back at him.

“Johnny, what do you want me to say? It’s like you think we’re the same person or something. Just tell me what’s in your head,” Reed said. He shook his head in annoyance. Johnny nodded and took a sip of Reed’s coffee.

“I got us something. Check it out.” Johnny pulled out a pocket knife and snapped the blade out and in. The blade had a scarlet cross engraved into its handle: it was Swiss made. Reed grabbed Johnny’s wrists.

“What the hell, man! Are you crazy; you’re going to get us both fired! This job’s the only thing paying my rent,” Reed hissed through his gritted teeth. He released Johnny’s hands, which he had dug his nails into, but the knife remained snug between Johnny’s fingers.

“Calm down, Reed. It’s just for pranks. I used it to cut slits into the bottom of the water-break cups this morning before everyone got here,” Johnny snickered, grinning. Reed rubbed his wrists. Somebody shouted. Reed and Johnny peeked over their cubicle walls to see Pat from Accounting stamping her soaked shoes in disgust. She had become Johnny’s first victim.

“That’s not funny, Johnny.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I was the one restocking the paper cups this morning for the water fountain, Johnny. They’re going to think that I did it. Thanks a lot.” Reed shoved Johnny back into his seat and fell back into his own.

“But wait—there’s more!” Johnny giggled; he flipped his Swiss knife in and out.

Somebody shrieked. A wave of murmurs swept over Johnny and Reed—something about dead fish.

“What now?” Reed said. He gave Johnny a hard look, and shook his finger at him.

“I swear, Johnny, if this is you—”

“Is that a threat?” Johnny scoffed, interrupting Reed. Johnny stood up, still flicking his pocket knife, and walked toward the center of commotion. Reed followed

him a step behind.

“*This must be serious,*” Reed thought, “*even Cubicle Charlie is over there. He never leaves his cubicle—not even for a coffee break.*” After rounding a few corners and shoving through a small crowd of onlookers, Reed managed to see the cause of distress: the office’s thousand-dollar Tosakin goldfish floated belly-up in their bullet-proof aquarium. Somebody whispered that the motor that fed the oxygen to the tank had been snagged or torn. Reed glanced around: Johnny had disappeared. Reed turned his heels in the direction of his cubicle. Somebody grabbed his shoulder.

“Reed, Boss wants you,” Pat from Accounting said.

“Oh...okay, I’ll go see him now. Thanks Pat from Ac—I mean Pat,” Reed responded.

Pat from Accounting grimaced at him. Reed found great interest in adjusting his tie until she left. Reed approached the oak doors of Mr. Stellar’s office. The timing was perfect; he was going to tell his boss about Johnny. Reed twisted the stainless, executive door knob and stepped into Mr. Stellar’s office. The room had a view of the Manhattan skyline; natural light flooded the room with a warm glow—a contrast from his cubicle’s fluorescent lamp light that turned his desk items a saturated façade.

“Mr. Stellar, Pat told me you wanted to see me?”

Reed asked. Large oil paintings portraits of past executives hung on the adjacent walls, watching him.

“Yes. Look, Reed, Pat told me that someone had slit all the paper cups—.”

“—yea, I refilled them this morning, but Johnny told me he cut slits in them. I think he messed with the fish tank, too, sir. I think he has a serious problem.” Mr. Stellar looked at Reed with raised eyebrows. His unblinking eyes conveyed curiosity and concern.

“Reed, I saw the surveillance tapes; you were here this morning handling the cups. You were also feeding the office goldfish.” Reed rolled his eyes.

“Yes, I *was* here this morning. Mr. Stellar, with all due respect, sir, I just said that. I *also* said that Johnny confessed to me that he had messed with it.” Feeling his impatience rising, Reed dug his hands into his pockets in frustration.

“Can you please tell me who this Johnny is?” Mr. Stellar had stood up.

“Seriously?” Reed said, angry.

“I would sure like to know. Reed is everyth—Reed! Put that away!” Mr. Stellar yelped, pointing at his hands.

“W-What?” Reed said, perplexed.

Flick, snap, flick. Reed looked down at his hands. His thumb rubbed a scarlet cross while his fingers snapped a Swiss blade in and out.



Hoot

Adina Harri

Clayboard

Honorable Mention—Drawing

Dear Dad

Kristen Walker

“I gotta do what I gotta do.”

That’s what you said

When you left me and Momma here to live

In this one bedroom, one bath apartment

With metal bars covering the windows,

Making light seep through parallel.

I gotta do what I gotta do

To make sure that’s not the only light we have.

That we have food, and my brothers have what they need
for school.

I was in school once.

Advanced student, star athlete.

I had to do what I had to do.

Now, counting dope money is the closest I get to math.

The streets are my playing field.

I wonder what life would be like if I could have stayed.

I watch my old peers and long to walk in their world.

But this is my world.

This is the life I chose

So my brothers can one day choose their own.

They will be better than me.

They will be better than you,

Dad.



Howlin’ Wolf

Phillip Liu

Charcoal

Lines

Daianera Watkins

I'm crazy. My therapist tells that I'm not, yet I'm seeing a therapist. Isn't that a contradictory statement for him to say? I know that I am crazy, because everyone is. Just in varying degrees.

Since I started seeing him, it seems as if the burden of my life hasn't lessened, but instead has gotten easier to bear. But I suppose that is the whole point of spending an hour every week sitting in an armchair and talking about...well, everything. And maybe it's simply that I'm talking about it that has made all the difference. Perhaps it's the fact that someone is listening, and really opening their mind to what I need to say.

Today he's wearing tan slacks to complement his simple olive green striped shirt, and he's reading a novel I've never heard of when I tap my knuckles on the door. He looks up with a hint of a smile on his lips, placing his bookmark between the pages, and he motions with the book that I should sit on the office chair near the desk. My feet barely touch the floor, which only adds to the nervousness that has plagued me since my final class dismissed half an hour before. As I'm setting down my bag, he strides to the propped open door and closes it, shuffling aside the stone with his loafers, and then returns to the armchair I usually sit in. That we've reversed our sitting arrangement creates an odd atmosphere, and I press my knees together, pushing against the supports of the chair so I can swirl slightly from left to right and back again.

He clicks his pen, but sets it down on the notepad. It's a fresh page this time, and I wonder what he's done with all the notes he's taken over the past few weeks. It worries me to think that he's tossed them away because they were unimportant. I assure myself this isn't the case. He smiles at me, and asks how I am. I haven't seen him since before Christmas break because my family had taken a long vacation, so I respond with, "Today? Or over the past two weeks?"

He chuckles softly and leans forward, elbows on the crease of his slacks at the knee, chin resting on his fingertips, glasses upon the bridge of his nose. "Whichever," he says. So I begin by telling him how I've felt quite happy today or at least I've been in a good mood. I explain that I'm mending broken relations with old friends, and that my schoolwork has been frustrating because sometimes it's hard to understand. Then I tell him about my vacation; how my parents let my brother do anything he wanted but not me, even though I'm older;

how I spent quite a bit of time on my own wandering around the mountains; how especially alone I felt because my cellular was out of service the whole vacation; how close I came to jumping off the cliff side several times....

Now he picks up his ballpoint, and begins to scribble light blue lines that look menacing in the soft light of the standing lamp. He asks me to backtrack; why do I think that my parents treat my younger brother differently? My eyes feel hot, like they do when I get upset. But I'm not upset, just tired and uncertain. I don't know how to explain at first, then I think about my father, how he loves my brother more. Or at least it seems so. My father doesn't love us unequally, I tell him, but it feels that way. My therapist just nods, and I take that to mean I haven't explained enough, so I traipse through examples of how I feel every time my father treats me differently. I talk about how I wish that my father would just listen to me and understand.

Then I shift. I pause first, and my therapist seems to understand that I don't want to talk about my father anymore because he sets his pen down again, placing the notepad on his knees and leaning back into the armchair.

I start to weave a story about the last time I really conversed with my mother, about how she reacted to my decision to go to college in another state, and about how she seemed taken aback that I would move so far away. I tear up a little now, not in sadness but in anger, because I recall how upset she made me that night when she tried to pretend that she had any control over the next step in my life. He stops me here, wanting to know why it upset me so much.

This leads us into a discussion about why the relationship between me and my parents has been rocky as of late. He hands me a few tissues from the box on the coffee table, and I start to twist my chair side to side, attempting to call my senses back into check. I don't like to cry when I'm talking to my therapist, because I feel that it wastes time that could be spent talking.

He has a clear voice, a deep one, the kind that makes you want to stop and listen because it rolls along through your mind like the Mississippi River, sweeping all your thoughts downstream so that you can examine them better. He likes to stand up and stretch his legs when you're talking because sometimes his back troubles him. I don't mind a change from the picture that grows stagnant after about a half hour. Sometimes he will step out of his loafers, and walk around in his tan socks, making

me wonder why they're always tan, and perhaps that means something about him. Maybe it just means he likes his socks to match his pants, like the rule that you should never wear white socks with black pants.

It's when he does this today that he turns our discussion to the mountain vacation, and he prompts me to explain why I wanted to kill myself over Christmas break.

I tell him because I felt alone.

This isn't enough of an explanation it seems, because he slips one of his feet from his shoe and he stares at the ground pursing his lips and blinking his eyes. I try again. I begin by explaining that I haven't felt like I am part of my family for months, like they don't pay any attention to me and how I always feel as if I might as well be a piece of furniture that no one ever uses. I talk about the fact that I felt rather unnoticed while we were in the mountains, and that while I was off on my own, I spent a great portion of my time thinking, which for me is never good because my mind tends to dredge up old memories I'd rather leave buried. He doesn't bother me about that statement, though I suppose I'll have to talk about those eventually, seeing as they are the reason I ended up here in the first place.

Instead, he poses a question I never would have thought of. "What makes you want to hurt yourself?"

I pause for a great many moments before replying, "Because sometimes I feel as if I deserve it." I pause again, then continue with, "Depends on how I feel, because sometimes I also can't think of anyway else to get it out."

He asks what it is, and I tell him I don't know; I just know I can't keep it in. I tell him how sometimes I can't even write in my journal because I'm so upset that I can't focus. I explain that this is how I began to hurt myself in the first place, because I couldn't get it out and I heard somewhere, probably on the Internet, that letting out blood helped.

He ponders this for a moment, then wonders if I thought it helped, and I tell him that it did.

Then he begins to talk, in that slow wonderful voice, and I watch him walk back to his chair and sit down, never ceasing except for my comments. He looks me in the eyes, and tells me that I must stop letting everyone around me influence me and my decisions. After all, this is my life. And I agree with him. I listen intently to all that he says, nodding along because all that he says is right, I can feel it.

I tell him that I don't like who I have become since I thought about killing myself, that I want to go back to the person I was before. He corrects me, tells me that I

mustn't, and instead go forward. My eyes heat up again, watering slightly, and I whisper brokenly, "I don't know where to start, I don't know how."

He says that I've already started, because I'm trying to understand why I am who I am, because I'm making decisions for my future, and that is important. I feel as if a weight has been lifted from me, which reminds why I have become rather fond of these sessions, because it actually helps.

Then we both notice the time, and conclude with goodbyes and promises to see each other the same time next week. I leave his office in a cloud, not noticing the girl sitting on the bench outside his door, not caring that it's now dusk and the day has grown unbearably chill. My mind feels as if it's been strung along a clothesline, and beaten dry; or perhaps a better analogy would be to say it feels as if my mind has been scrubbed against a washboard until clean and raw. But at least it no longer feels like an expanding globe of iron whose air pressure was threatening to burst its perfect spherical exterior.

I drive away in this haze, like I do every time I leave my therapist's office, my mind still jumping and swirling.

I realize talking to him helps, that seeing his blue lines, however menacing they may seem, is more helpful than drawing crimson ones has ever been. And perhaps that is what has made all the difference.

I agree with him. I'm not crazy.



Throw Caution

Emma Robertson

Third Place—Photography

The Woods

Emma Robertson

Third Place—Short Story Competition

She sat as still as possible, her piercing blue eyes glazed over with fear. Clasp ing her hand over her mouth to try to muffle the sound of her own breath, Katherine listened for the noise. There it was again. *Crackle creak crunch*. The green foliage surrounding her closed in inch by inch with every short breath she took, and the fallen tree she crouched behind was no longer a safe haven. It was getting closer, whatever it was, and her eyes darted in every direction to find an escape route.

A tear made a clean trail down her dirty cheek as she recalled her father’s warn ings about entering these dangerous woods. “There are dark things in those woods, Katherine. Once they have you, they won’t let you go. I never want you to set foot in those woods, you understand? I can’t lose you, too.” She usually respected her father’s wishes. She knew that he was only trying to protect her.

It had been a year now since they had lost her mother to the woods. Katherine’s father had sent out search party after search party, but no one, not even the bravest men in town, would enter the woods. They had heard the rumors and feared they would be lost as well. Months went by, and Katherine’s father had come to believe his wife was dead. She refused to believe that, and she waited up every night for her mother to come home.

Three days ago, Katherine had sneaked away from

her chores and traveled to the edge of the leafy wall of the dark woods. She had called for her mother as loud as she could and the only reply she had received was an echo. After she had called out a few more times, her echo had transformed into something much sweeter. Her mother’s voice had interrupted Katherine’s and called for her to join her in the woods. She ran after the voice that seemed to be coming from every direction.

The woods had drawn her in and swallowed her up. She had been there for three days now, drinking

water from any source she could find, and eating the red berries she had deemed safe. The notorious woods had played cruel tricks on her mind, like her father said they

would. She wondered if her father had tried to search for her, or if he had already given up, just like he gave up on her mother.

Katherine’s mind stopped racing and snapped back to the present. Still huddled behind the fallen tree, she found herself in yet another moment of warfare between imagination and reality. *Crackle creak crunch*, this time, much farther away. Her hand dropped to her side and her chest heaved as she tried to regulate her breathing. Was *it* gone? Was *it* even there in the first place?

Making small, silent movements, she inched her way out of the crouching position and observed every tree and moss-covered boulder surrounding her. She could still hear the noise, but it was so distant now that

she considered it negligible. As she rose, a twig snapped under her foot and she whipped around to make sure it went unnoticed by anything else that might be lurking in the woods. Something in her peripheral vision caught her eye. She was terrified to focus on it, but forced her eyes to look in its direction. All she saw was a flutter of golden hair before the image vanished behind a tree. A vision of her mother crept its way into Katherine’s mind. Even though she was forty-six, she still possessed youthful beauty. Her mother was tall and healthy with just the right number of curves. Her golden locks framed her face like a fine piece of art and flowed down to her shoulder blades. She had the same blue eyes as Katherine, but they were deeper, more experienced. The woods were now completely silent. Katherine’s eyes were still fixed on the tree where she saw the glimmer of hair blowing in the wind. The thought had occurred to her that it might be her mother, but she repressed it to avoid disappointment. She decided to ignore this occurrence, predicting that it was just another illusion produced by the woods.

All of a sudden, Katherine remembered that she had had no water that day. Her lips were cracked and her throat bone dry. She tried to recall the direction of the lake she had found on her first day in the woods. *I remember walking past this fallen tree*; she thought to herself, *it can’t be that far away*. When she had been hiking for about five minutes, she began to hear the familiar trickling of a spring that ran into the lake. She picked up her pace and as soon as she reached the lake, she fell to her knees and thrust her hands into its icy waters. She brought the water to her mouth and drank it without hesitation.

She was about to lower her hands back for more, but something froze her. A reflection of her mother’s beau-

tiful face appeared as the ripples in the water settled. Katherine stared into the eyes that were so similar to hers, and recalled what she had seen earlier. “Is it really you?” Katherine asked in a timid voice. Her mother smiled, and the reflection faded, as though it was sinking into the depths of the lake. Overtaken by desperation, Katherine dove into the frigid water to chase her mother. The temperature of the water took her breath away, but she could see her. She swam deeper and deeper below the water, beckoning Katherine to follow her, as if she had something to show her. Katherine kicked as fast as she could and pursued her.

Her mother turned into a shadow as she approached the bottom of the lake. Katherine began to panic, and just as she felt as though her breath was completely gone, she saw her mother’s hair sparkling just a few yards below. She used every last ounce of strength she had left to swim to the bottom where she had seen the glimmer of hope. She got closer and closer, and her mother’s figure started reappearing, but it was different now. Her curves were gone, her youthful skin, disintegrated. Katherine’s sobs were swallowed by the lake as she looked at her mother’s corpse lying before her. Letting the cold water invade her lungs, she looked around and saw piles of bones stacked on the floor of the lake. She wondered if they were people like her that had gotten lost while searching for a loved one in these hellish woods. The last thing she thought of before her life slipped away was her father’s warning: “There are dark things in those woods, Katherine. Once they have you, they won’t let you go. . . .”

Backwoods Mississippi in Drought

Joseph Payne

Honorable Mention—Photography



Headed Home

Tanvi Rao

The weekends I do not have a debate competition, soccer games, or a project to work on, I have something else that keeps me at the Mississippi University for Women where the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, the residential school I attend, is located. The weekends I get to go home are few and far between, but when I do get to leave, I spend the two-and-a-half hour drive home riding in the passenger seat of Blake Shaw's silver Honda-CRV.

Blake is pretty tall and usually wears solid colored t-shirts with a Polo symbol embroidered where a breast pocket ought to be. On dress-up days, he switches to khakis and a collared blue polo the color of his eyes. He also has wavy brown hair, which I think has a reddish tint. He is fairly quiet in public with the exception of class, and most of the school regards him as silently intelligent, justifiably elitist, and slightly unapproachable. This image is only perpetuated by his keeping company with a band of mathletes who have unusual talent for combining sexual comments with scientific terminology. He prefers McDonalds to Taco Bell, Coke to Pepsi, and trucks with oversized wheels to baby blue Volkswagen beetles, but he is unable to decide whether to major in physics or mathematics.

Often, our rides home consist of my asking Blake a series of questions that pop into my head. Questions are a sure-shot method of creating conversation in the car. Blake is polite, so he usually answers questions I ask if I am persistent enough. Sometimes I ask him outrageous questions that he either has no answer to or would not like me to know the answer to. Typically when I ask him one of these questions, he looks at me with a particular expression on his face. This look kind of scares me, not because it is a scary look, but because Blake is looking at me rather than at the road.

I think I would prefer that my parents never read this because they adore Blake and allow me to ride home with him because "he is the kind of boy who would not drive recklessly and would take particular precaution on long trips." They are right, though. When he is not looking at me, Blake is a great driver. He never goes over the speed limit, takes the wrong exit, or stops to pick up hitchhikers with tattoos and no hair. He even has a special pair of sunglasses that he wears when the sun decides to shine

directly into his eyes. These sunglasses are the sporty men's kind with polarized lenses that are multicolored, transitioning from a shiny vibrant blue to a sunset orange.

Luckily we spend most of our trips on what is probably the best road in all of Mississippi for Blake to give me looks on. It is fairly straight and uneventful, with the exception of a particular "T-shirts for Sale" sign located on a hill next to a small house with peeling white paint and a Cadillac parked in its driveway. I always ask Blake if we can buy a t-shirt there, but he smirks to himself and shakes his head *no*. This sign, of course, is nothing compared to the scandalous liposuction billboard we pass just before Starkville en route to Jackson. It displays a busty-brunette in just her underwear against a pink background. I only know two people who have gotten liposuction, and both are over the age of forty with children. I assume the brunette on the billboard had liposuction surgery, too, though. I wonder if the doctor who performs the liposuctions had a mental dance-party when he saw this young, pretty twenty-year old walk in for surgery. I bet he thought, "Hey! Now that is someone I can put on a billboard. That is the kind of girl that is going to make MSMS mothers consider getting a liposuction when they drop their kids off at school." Since neither Blake nor I am his target demographic, we usually pass the billboard without comment.

One time, Blake gave me "the look" while wearing his sunglasses. The sun was shining brightly enough that my black hair looked like it had been indiscriminately streaked brown and even bronze in some places. I had just asked Blake some question and he turned to look at me, sunglasses on. I suppose I reacted differently than usual, because he adjusted his glasses and asked, "Is it less effective when you can't see my eyes?"

Prior to this, I thought that Blake's look had just been his subconscious, somewhat shocked response to certain questions. The realization that it was a special look he reserved and actively chose to give me was kind of flattering. I nodded yes in response to his question. Rather than removing the glasses, Blake chose to lift them so that they were tucked into his hair. He scrunched his blue eyes just a little bit and flattened his nostrils the right amount, but before he was able to twist his mouth to complete the expression, his sunglasses fell and bounced

against the bridge of his nose before landing in an awkward position on its tip. Blake is one of those people who almost always does the things he sets his mind to. I think he had set his mind to giving me the look because after the sunglasses fell, he pulled them right off and shot me the most concentrated reaction-inspiring dose of "the look" that I had ever received.

Just last week, I received my mother's silver Toyota Camry. I now drive to school on my own. Unfortunately, because this car is the most popular in the nation, I doubt Blake will be able to distinguish whether it is my car he is passing. Blake may be driven, but he lives life a comfortable distance from the edge. He would never flash "the look" without full confirmation of my presence in a car, for fear of angering an elderly crown-club attendee. I'm going to miss riding home with Blake. He is like a tightly corked bottle of mystery, leaking only during rides home to release a unique mix of sarcasm, insight, and entertainment. One day, someone will pop his cork, and I think I'd like to be present for the celebration. On that day, I will give Blake "the look."



Kili

Erin Graves

Charcoal/Graphite/Colored Pencil
First Place—Drawing

A Saturday Morning

Dana Wesley

The road switches from gravel to
Pavement at regular intervals;
Dead dogs and armadillos
Appear at regular intervals, too.

Barbed borders run along each
Side of the road, preventing the
Fresh and luscious grass from escaping
Greedy, sluggish cows.

So this is Mississippi. A Saturday
Morning. Spring. With the windows
Down, the warm, moist air frizzes
Your hair.

Pine trees outline vast fields where
Cows block the view of Mt. Pisgah Church.
Cotton clouds cover the sun,
Enhance the calm of morning.

You feel like pulling over and blasting gospel
Music in your truck, feel like being a leisurely cow,
Feel like relieving the cotton clouds of
Their duty and absorbing the sun's gentle rays.
You feeling like swaying back and forth,
Back and forth, in time with the pines.
Before you give into your desire,
You pull into the church parking lot.
This is Mississippi.

Adios, Amigo

Phillip Liu

Second Place—Poetry Competition

I remember when we picked you up in rainy downtown
Atlanta.
My seven-year-old hands wiped water from the window
As I saw you and Dad smoking Marlboro Reds
And talking beside the open sign of a Taco Veloz.

Your clothes reeked of bleach and mildew;
On the ride back to West Point
I almost threw up,
Because you took my window seat.

Your stench made itself at home in our guest room.
Bringing in your luggage was easy:
Only one bag—a plastic one
With cargo shorts, jeans, three shirts,
And a wrinkled picture of an old woman.

That was the only picture you liked;
Every year when we bought you cake for your birthday,
You resisted,
Allowing only one Polaroid shot
Before hermitting off to your room

Where you stayed for almost eight years,
Only coming out for work.
You, Dad, Calvin, and I rode to the restaurant
Together in the moldy van every morning.

At work, you weren’t afraid to get dirty:
Taking trash out though it leaked juice on your pants,
Scraping muck from the bottom of the stove,
Scrubbing down walls of the century-old freezer,
Cleaning the after-effects of a clogged toilet,
Or killing that mouse.
Your smell didn’t seem so bad then.

You took care of us when Mom and Dad left
To renew Dad’s green card.
We played basketball in the driveway;
You shot like a girl,
But you still beat us.

Another time, when I was fifteen, I saw you drinking on
the back porch.
The street lights reflected tears on your face
As your back hiccupped with each sob.
In one hand, I saw a Corona Light
And that old woman in another.
You saw me, offered me a bottle, then sat in silence
As I drank my first beer.

The next morning, Mom said you were leaving.
“He misses home,” she said.
I helped you buy a Te Quiero Mexico card at the store,
So you could call home.
You stayed locked in your room all week.
I guessed you were packing up.

One night we came home from work,
And the smell of bleach and mildew had faded
Leaving behind eight Polaroid pictures.

More than Just Notes

Shawn Gompa

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

What to do with this pristine No. 2?
Only one ounce ready to debut
Some part graphite, some part clay
Not pure in body, but pure in gray

.2 to rebuild what’s lost to me
A small creek that roared like a mighty sea
Its muddy banks, yet white waterfall
Otters floating aplay without a care at all

.3 to sketch the veins of my own heart
A family whose likeness is now torn apart
A mother alone, a father who chooses to sleep
Two brothers so close, with distance still so steep

.1 to remind me that this heart still beats
Three boys, telling stories below pitched sheets
Man and wife, locked in eternal embrace
Maternal warmth through a smiling face

.4 to envision a world too immaculate
Barefoot citizens making homes of silicate
People cry only with joy, animals could too
Beauty is the world to which sadness never knew

.1 left for everything I see that is unseen
Her giggle’s form, Thymine to my Adenine
The skies that weep for the waning moon
The true reason the cock crows at noon

What did I really do with my No. 2?
My hand danced and my time flew
I believe that I spent my ounce the best
While my neighbors spent theirs getting Le Châtelier stressed



Jolly Idol

Mariah Cole

Pencil/Graphite

Honorable Mention—Drawing

Making Purple

Joseph Messer

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

“Blue and red make purple.”

“That’s right, Scott,” John said patting him on the back. “Guys are blue and girls are red. No holding hands because that’s purple.”

“I’m glad we’re blue. Blue is a way cooler color than red.” Scott said this with great enthusiasm, like it was a known axiom to life.

“Oh, really.”

“Yeah, everyone knows that.” He rolled his eyes.

Then Scott sat there for a minute in what must have been a trying exercise for his attention span. “Why would anyone want to hold hands with a girl, anyway? That’s icky.” He made a face of pure disgust like licking mayonnaise off a toilet seat. “I mean, girls aren’t even good at soccer, and they don’t like snakes.”

John laughed. What it was like to be eight: a mind filled with cartoons, sports, and running away from girls. “You know, Scott, girls aren’t all that bad.”

Scott looked at him like he was crazy. “I would rather be sick than be kissed by a girl! I even heard that cooties were almost certainly fatal.”

“Oh, yeah, who told you that?”

“I don’t know.” Scott looked at John as if he were dumb and then moved on forgetting all about the mortality rates associated with close contact to women. “Come on; enough about gross girls. Let’s go to the creek!”

Scott rushed off down the hill and into the forest, hollering all the way, “Last one there is a rotten egg!”

John jogged to catch up with him, ducking onto the trail and chasing the little blonde figure in the Power Ranger t-shirt through the woods. Soon, John was surrounded by vegetation. He watched the path, looking out for poison ivy as he headed towards the creek. The dense forest opened up into a small, cleared grove. Through the middle ran a stream of white water slowly cascading across smooth black stones. Those stones were great for skipping, perfectly round and thin, and on a given day campers would be collecting them to take to the lake. However, no one was there today, including Scott. John stepped into the ice-cold stream looking for the boy. He didn’t see him but heard splashing from downstream.

As he neared the clay wall where the creek forked to the right, John heard Scott say, “Hey, Maddie.”

“Hey, Scott,” John heard her reply. “Who are you with?”

“Oh, John is right behind me.”

“Well, shouldn’t you stay with him?”

“No, he won’t mind,” Scott said. Then uninterested with Maddie, he walked over to a little rock dam and start to poke it with a stick.

Oh, Lord, John thought. Maddie is here. John reached down and splashed water onto his hair, then tried to straighten it with his hand. He looked a mess: his new tennis shoes were soaking wet and covered in creek mud and, having run out of clothes the other day, he was wearing the same shirt he wore three days ago. He hoped it still smelled good, wishing for some Axe. John finally gathered himself and turned down the stream. He saw

Scott and then with barely a second’s delay his eyes went to Maddie. “Uhh...,” John stumbled, “what are you doing at the creek? I mean that’s not what I meant... you know?” The camp Aphrodite, Maddie was wearing pink Nike shorts and a

t-shirt that read “I like Big Bucks” with two ten-point racks prominently displayed. She seemed to pull it off as it complemented her shoulder-length blonde hair and bronzed skin. Oh, man, was she hot!

“Oh, hey, John. I see Scott got away from you.”

“Yeah,” John stumbled at being addressed, then said, “he’s really fast. I think it’s all that red bug juice they serve in the mess hall.”

She laughed. “Too much sugar. My campers never sleep. They just gossip about boys the whole night.”

“Really?” John asked. “I mean that’s cool. My guys just try to beat me up and climb in the rafters. They all think girls are icky.”

She smiled, “Do you think girls are icky?”

“I mean of course not.”

“I do!” yelled Scott who had been listening to the conversation. “They have cooties!”

“Oh, Scott, come here.” Maddie picked him up and kissed him on the cheek.

“Ah!” Scott yelled. “Get it off! I got attacked by a

she demon.” He plunged his head into the creek trying to wash off the kiss.

“He is so adorable,” Maddie said.

“Yeah.” *I wish I had that much game*, John thought.

The day began to wane, and Maddie and her cabin trudged up the creek. John had to pry Scott from a fort he had built complete with stick figures and a pile of stones and sticks that was supposed to be an evil dragon or something like that. *More like a giant blob*, John thought.

“Hey, John?”

“Yes, Scott?”

“Do you like, like “like” like Maddie?”

“No, we are just friends.”

With all of the wisdom an eight year old could muster, Scott started to sing, “John and Maddie sitting in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

“Come here,” John said, running after Scott. John caught him and rubbed his fist against Scott’s head.

“Hey! No nuggies.” John continued with his playful torture and Scott said, “That’s not fair. I’m smaller than you.” Finally, John released the boy, and they went back to the cabin to get ready for supper.

After a feast of Sloppy Joes and untouched green beans, the campers with much moaning and groaning prepared for lights out. John sat in his bunk listening to the roar of a King Fan turned to three and the constant chatter of crickets. The kids must have been tired because they went to bed without the normal objections of not being tired or code-induced talk of apparitions. Once John was sure the campers were sound asleep, he slowly rolled out of bed, trying to stand on the points of his toes and navigating the maze of dirty clothes and suitcases that littered the ground. Eventually, John made it to the side door with all of the campers still fast asleep. John pushed open the door trying not to make any sound. The door creaked from its rusty hinges, and he thought one of the campers would have woken up, so he stood there ready with an excuse about having to go to the bathhouse if any little feet came calling. But by good fortune, everyone remained asleep, and John slipped outside into the night and crisp camp air.

The moon hit the lake by the cabins, casting a silver gleam across the water. The camp looked like a secluded land of fantasy with the sublime light, the long expanse of water, and a dense forest to either side. John thought himself lucky as the only visitor into this land of night. He made his way along the dirt path and down to the forest. The landscape looked different from earlier. It seemed more majestic, more wild—like virgin soil waiting to be explored. On the first day of camp, everyone was told that the forest was out of bounds at night, but

tonight John was following his caprice alone. He was a criminal, breaking the rules as he stepped over the boundary that was the tree line. He went down the path until he could hear a trickle of water far off and then a steady rush as he neared the creek. Through sticks and stones, bushes of wild ivy, and overgrown shrubs, he made his way to the edge of the creek. He had the world to himself. Slowly, he moved his foot into the water, bringing a chill shooting through his leg. Toe by toe he let the water move over him.

Creak! Creak! Someone was there. *Oh, crap*, he thought, *who could be out here tonight?* He ducked behind a tree as someone stepped out onto the bank. The figure just stood there, then it started to move foreword. Silver moonlight caught blonde hair, and he saw her face. *Maddie*, John said to himself.

“Who’s there?” the figure turned from left to right.

“It’s me, John,” he said, stepping out from behind the tree.

“What are you doing out here?”

“The same as you, I guess—night air and an adventure.”

“Yeah,” she seemed to contemplate his answer. “I guess I came here for the same reason. To explore, you know,” she paused. “I thought I was the only one out here. You scared me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t think anyone else would be out here.”

For a moment it was just the gargle of the creek and a slow symphony played by insects’ legs, then Maddie sat down on the bank, stretching her feet into the water. “It’s so peaceful here at night,” she offered in an attempt to bridge the silence.

“Too bad it’s our last night. Tomorrow, we have to go back home.” John thought of the real world, a world that was far from the wonder of the one he currently inhabited. Home was a place that he wished never to return to.

“I’ll miss camp. I can just be myself here. It’s kind of like a vacation from normal life, a brief escape, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way.” John moved to sit beside her. “If only we could stay here forever. Just the stars, the trees, and the creek. How great would that be?”

“But you can’t just live in nature. What would you eat?”

“Ms. Smith makes the best Sloppy Joes; the green beans aren’t that bad, even if the kids won’t touch them, and the apple pie is straight from heaven.”

“What a dreamer,” she kidded, tapping him on the arm. “You know, I have never talked to you before.”

“Well, you’ve been missing out. Haven’t you?”

“Maybe a little.” She looked up through the canopy.
“The sky is beautiful tonight. It’s so romantic.”
John’s heartbeat jumped. It was going faster than the current of the creek. “Yeah,” he managed to get out.
“We are alone out here. Nothing else but nature,” she said. She seemed to draw near as the wilderness became blurry—out of focus.
John was quiet, and then his heartbeat tried to beat out of his chest as Maddie leaned in and their lips met. The chill of the creek could not compare to the cold rushing down his spine.
Soon, the real world returned. The moonlight grew dimmer. The sunlight began to creep over the horizon for their last day in the wilderness. They would have to return to the cabins and then to their homes, leaving fantasy behind. John watched as Maddie walked away, her blond hair disheveled but her pretty chin high in the air. She turned around for a last smile as she disappeared from sight.
John made the trek back to the cabins, and he had almost made it back into the bed when he heard a little voice say, “Where have you been? I got scared in the night and you weren’t there.”
“I had to go to the bathroom, Scott,” John said quickly and not with much thought to the excuse.
Even so, Scott seemed to be satisfied until he saw something on John’s leg. “Ah!” Scott screamed, “you have been touched by a girl.”
John looked down to see a purple rash on his leg. He must have come in contact with poison ivy. “Scott, wait. I just fell in the woods on the way to the bathroom.”
Scott would have none of it. “John made purple!” he yelled at the top of his lungs and rushed in to the cabin to tell everyone about his medical proof that cooties were a contagious illness. “John is going to die. He’s been infected by cooties!”
Before six o’ clock the whole cabin of eight year olds knew that the Purple Cootie sickness was real, and that John was infected; by breakfast, every camper knew that John had made purple much to his embarrassment.
Maddie walked by after the pancakes were put away. “So I hear that you have been infected by some horrible girl.”
“I’m going to kill Scott,” John said.
“He’s just a hyped eight year old. He will forget all about the purple cootie plague as soon as a new video game comes out.”
“Yeah, I guess so.”
“Besides, making purple is not all that bad.” She walked away, turning around when she reached her cabin. John saw her quick wink before she closed the door.



On Guard
Ashley Henderson
Clayboard

Blood and Iron
Shawn Gompa

Under his Foot, mud flattens to rock.
Atop his Skin, water beads away.
Across his Face, winds bend.
Within his Lung, a flame burns.

To his Eye, beauty cannot make.
Inside his Ear, music cannot dance.
On his Tongue, song cannot thrive.
Through his Heart, love cannot break.

He Speaks, only when Spoken to.
He Moves, only with his Purpose.
He Touches, only with his Tools.
He lives, with more Iron than Blood.



Butterflies
Joseph Payne

A Mississippi Afternoon
Joseph Messer

The dirt road disappears
Beneath the wheels of a pickup truck
Whose paint is barely visible under a mud coat
Picked up from off-road ventures.

On either side,
A partition of pine
Glow's profound amber
In the vanishing sun.

Afternoon light illuminates
The crests of rolling hills.
A crown of tranquility
Peaks the sylvan knolls.

Over the miles,
A breach in the wilderness,
Tilled russet soil,
Awaits a farmer’s seeds.

The cow grazes content,
Chomping grass.
A horse roams the green fields
That stretch for miles and miles.

So this is Mississippi: a Saturday afternoon
March, driving along with the wind
Whipping through the rolled-down windows
As a mockingbird sings.

Her feet are on the dashboard;
Bright pink nail polish blooms like Spring lilies;
She rocks back and forth
To Taylor Swift on the radio.



Road to Forest
Prithvi Singh
Acrylic
First Place—Painting



Seeing in the Dark
Phillip Liu
Oil
Honorable Mention—Painting



The Sweetest Sounds

Rachel Jones

Acrylic

Second Place—Painting



Sisters

Stephanie Smith

Encaustic

Honorable Mention—Painting



Box of Tomatoes

John Aaron Howell



Sugar Skull

Cathy Choung

Honorable Mention—Photography



Beach Bench

John Aaron Howell



A Lonely Road to Nowhere

Matthew Steed

Acrylic



Sunset Tide

Claire Caprio

Acrylic

Third Place—Painting



Peace of Mind

Korilyn Baudoin



Spy vs. Spy

Erin Graves

Markers

Third Place—Drawing

My Two-Fingered Wave

Phillip Liu

Third Place—Poetry Competition

Each puddle's mirrored sheen
Shatters in way of my worn-out Nike Trainers.
Water drops explode toward me,
Like an old cartoon man saying, "Darn you, kids!"

In the wind I can feel Autumn
And its menthol touch.
But the trees bustling around me like rioters
hang on to Summer, protesting Autumn with green leaves.

Tangled barbed-wire fences
Hold back the rioting oaks and evergreens.
They've stood their ground and have yet to fall,
And now, immersed in weeds, they don't move at all.

Leaving the forest behind, I come to an open field.
The aroma of fresh manure streams
Stirred up by green and yellow mechanical beetles
Crawling along a cornfield
With wheels bigger than Yao Ming
And a "hungry-hippo" appetite

This is Mississippi in late September.
"Hickassippi," says the one-strap overalls
Of the old man I pass on my daily run.
He's enjoying an afternoon beer on the side of the hill
Overlooking those beetles working the fields.

There's no "Hi. How are you?" between us.
Just a tip of his bottle, answered by my two-fingered wave.
Nothing more is needed or wanted
Like Mississippi, the old man is content
Just sitting there, drinking his beer.



Superior Morning

Claire Belant

Acrylic

Honorable Mention—Painting



Amongst the Destruction

Joseph Payne

On the Cover



Double Take

John Aaron Howell



Unforgettable Sunset

Ashwin Naidu

Acrylic



Kissing Cuties

Michelle Licci

Pencil

Best of Show



Separations and Divisions

John Aaron Howell

Honorable Mention—Photography



Radiant Elegance

Michelle Licci

Clayboard and Watercolor



Pier

John Aaron Howell



Dancers

Rachel Jones

Encaustic

Crayola

Camille Dent

Valentine's Day in Kindergarten:
"Draw what you love the most,"
Instructed Mrs. McDonnel.

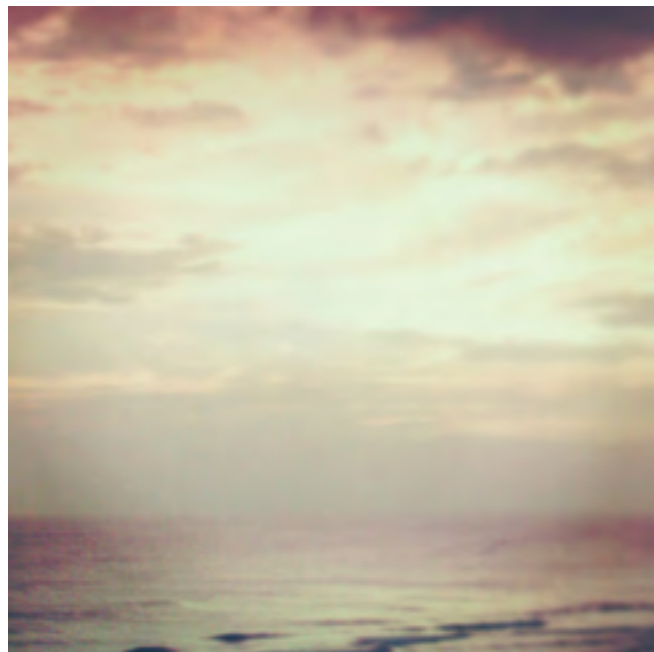
I looked to you and stared into those windows
Of crystal green and brown
And saw a charming soul behind.

I rummaged through my box of 64
For a single shade that could do justice
To the hazel hues in your eyes.

I discarded Tumbleweed and Sepia at once
Along with Burnt Sienna and Copper;
Antique Brass was the last brown standing.

A perfect green was no easier to find;
Fern was simply too dark, Shamrock too blue
Sea Green a bit too pale, but it would have to do.

It crushed my childish affections to find
That Crayola doesn't make a color for your eyes.



Calmness

Damonta Morgan

Second Place—Photography



Mattie's Rose

Mariah Cole

Acrylic



Gold Rush

Emma Robertson



Sunset Sea

John Aaron Howell

Hungry

Victoria Chen

“Just remember, Ba Ba’s forty-nine!” laughed the man. He and a young, wispy-haired girl sat adjacent to an arithmetic-covered whiteboard. The grinning man continued, “So tell me now, what is seven times seven?” Bouncing up and down, the crisscross apple-sauced girl chimed, “Forty-nine!” Her father, a self-proclaimed actor, fumbled back and gasped in corny disbelief: “So smart! Who taught you that?” This sent the girl into giggles: “You did, Ba Ba! Don’t you remember?” From spoon-feeding multiplication tables to a preschooler confined in a car seat, to force-feeding trigonometry lessons to a recalcitrant teenager, my father has spent seventeen years molding me into the hungry learner I am today.

I wasn’t always hungry. In fact, I was once full—of excuses. When I was younger, I spent late afternoons tracking the footsteps of my father when he returned home from working as a fulltime math professor at the local university. Why? Well, my father took his “full-time” job literally. Once his red Civic pulled up in the garage, my siblings and I became his next targets as students of his impromptu math lessons. My father believed an early exposure to math would establish a beneficial attitude of discipline and assertiveness, and he lugged home college books from his office to pour a foundation. He scattered these fist-thick, hard-cover books strategically throughout the house: on the kitchen table, next to the ten-inch “tube telly,” and even on the bathroom magazine rack. I could tell if Ba Ba had arrived home *just* by opening the fridge. If I saw a classic, red palm-tree-print In-N-Out Burger fountain cup half-filled with flat Dr. Pepper chilling next to last night’s leftovers, Ba Ba was home, fueled, and ready to teach. “Quick,” I would think, “either run to the piano or run to the bathroom.” But one day, my father made a shocking confession in an effort to convert my notorious, fleeting nature: “You know, I didn’t like math when I was growing up, but I forced myself to like it—and now, I like it.” The man who boasted his profession as a “*mathemagician*” and “math doctor” (his PhD gave him a “Dr.” title) to house guests had once hated math? At the time, it was just as shocking as finding out Elmo was a puppet. Pigs flew that day. My father’s proverb opened up a new perspective for me to approach obstacles. Soon,

I too began to appreciate math amongst other previously despised things such as school, writing, and raw tomatoes. In a way, he taught me to conquer my fears of the intellectual *and* physical world. With a swig of my father’s saccharine Dr. Pepper, I washed down revolting “how many feet do twelve cows and ten chickens have” problems and mugs of two-percent milk, and after a while, they didn’t taste so bad.

More than a decade later and into my final year at a residential high school, I sit here under the never-setting sun of my fluorescent desk lamp, pushing aside loose-leaf papers and postponing Cal-Two homework, to bask in a moment of nostalgic bliss. Only a year ago, I had sacrificed living snug between golf courses and country clubs of Canebrake subdivision and had sacrificed accompanying my lonely mother and younger sister while my father was working across the world to support us and to pay the tuition of my college-bound brother. Call me crazy, but it was all in the name of better education. Over the few Skype conversations we had, my father would always remind me: “Ba Ba is working hard. How about you?” and “Be prepared, then grab opportunity—not wait for opportunity, then prepare.” Finally taking his words to heart, in the summer of my sophomore year, I packed my single, buckle-strapped suitcase and left home for a new life in a residential high school. This residential school picked me up where my father and his whiteboard left off, satisfying my appetite for learning with university and honors courses while putting my father’s heart at peace. During my junior year, I had completed three years’ worth of honors and university-level Pre-Calculus, Trigonometry, and Calculus courses. Sometimes I can’t believe the progress I’ve made, but my assignment-littered desk is the topping totem that reminds me: this is reality, and, boy, am I still hungry.

A smile stretches to the corner of my cheeks when I get a scholarship or a worthy test score; these accomplishments are candy to my father. When I report these feats to him over Verizon’s unlimited weekend minutes, I can hear the family actor gasping, familiarly saying, “So smart!” But Dad, what I’m trying to say is *Look, after seventeen years, I can finally feed myself.*

Guns and Busts

Rachel Jones

Growing up, I found my grandfather to be the epitome of the Southern man. The only time I heard the deep resonance of his voice was after church, when his grandchildren misbehaved, and when he shared anecdotes with his elderly friends about “that there fellow down the road.” It was always a surprise to hear a rumbling chuckle escape from his smooth, full lips. I saw the effects of picking vegetables, working on cars, and eating grits for years in the callouses on his dark, dry hands and the protruding of his old, firm belly. With pride he would let me know that he hailed from the streets of New Orleans, Louisiana, as he rolled his tongue when saying the word “oil” and pronounced it “arl,” when he would refer to any type of cereal as “cornflakes,” or when he sat me down to teach me the “right” way to crack and eat a crab. He never failed at making me laugh with his excuse for not sharing, which was that an individual needed to be at least twenty years old to eat a Twinkie or drink a Coca-Cola.

His wife’s prized possession was her squash garden, which was placed about a half of a mile behind their home on a mound of dirt that resembled a small mountain. Unable to harvest the fruits of her labor on her own, Grandma would always drag her grandchildren through the hard-packed, chestnut-colored mud to join her in watering and picking her squash. In an effort to maintain a minimum level of cleanliness and organization, Grandpa started to keep a collection of multi-sized, black rubber boots for the grandchildren to wear to the garden. The boots began to reek of stale rain water from the squash garden and they became our permanent work boots. Along with his collection of boots, he kept a cared-for collection of old and new cars. He saw value in his granddaughters knowing how to do things on their own, so he used his rusty black pickup truck to teach my cousin how to drive a stick. However, what defined him most as a Southern man was his carefully watched collection of guns. Across from Grandma’s washer and dryer was a wooden closet that enjoyed announcing when it was being opened with a loud creak. Inside this closet, there were four guns that each slumbered upon two nails Grandpa had put into the wall. There was the largest gun, which belonged to him, and which cast a shadow over the smaller, daintier BB guns that hung below it and belonged to my cousins.

Some nights, Grandpa would pull one of the smaller guns from the homemade rack and head outside to scare off a deer-sized armadillo, and other times there would be a real deer and he would carry his real gun. My cousins would always make a shooting a main event and crowd around the window to watch and give their colorful commentary. I would ignore the meaningless hype and focus on the deep red and bright orange embers of the flames in the fireplace if it were winter or the delightfully confusing curls of the carpet if it were summer. When he took his gun, a bang always followed my grandfather’s departure. While it sparked a flame of excitement and perhaps purpose in my cousins, it took a small part of my being along with the life or health of the animal on my grandfather’s lawn.

Despite the fact that we are related, my cousins and I could not be more different. While they found excitement in explicit music and loud noise, I found excitement in a *Star Wars* marathon. When I confided in them that my favorite child actor was Shirley Temple, they furrowed their brows while asking, “Ain’t that a drink?” My female cousins were always the best-dressed girls in a room, while I was at peace with my soccer hoodies and Keds. While I wished to research Green Peace, my male cousins wrestled and screamed over which video game they would play next. However, we all had one thing in common, which was our love for our grandparents’ home. We all scrambled over our parents for a chance to go visit our grandparents, where awaiting us was a big-screen television, a warm fireplace, plenty cans of soda, three warm meals a day, and in my cousins’ case, their precious guns.

When my cousins and I would visit, chaos ensued as they would climb over each other to grab their weapons and wage war on anything outside that moved. I, on the other hand, failed then and now to see the excitement of using a gun for entertainment. Its only uses were to either take an innocent life or produce unnecessary, peace-shattering noise. Perhaps those who spend their pastimes with guns and I differ in upbringing, or I simply have appreciation for the placidity nature provides. So, as opposed to disrupting nature with barbarity, I would wait until everyone except my grandfather was gone and have him give me something much better than the harmful pieces of plastic my cousins used to entertain themselves.

On the walls, in closets, and on tops of mantels rested parts of Grandpa’s most prized collection. Artifacts full of history lay hidden in plain sight to the eyes of those who did not notice things like the intricate artwork or the coarse paper used for the drawings that lay in the background of the living room and matched no type of American product. I’d choose one of the many artifacts that lay around the house moonlighting as dust holders, and I’d have him give me its story. The framed drawings on papyrus from Egypt, the busts from a different part of Africa, and the Matryoshka dolls from Russia all carried tales of adventure, excitement, and wonder. Grandpa had bought one from a vendor whom he could not understand, a strange man gave him another one for luck, but my favorite was the bust that lay in his closet because Grandma thought it was for voodoo. I added each story he gave me to my collection just as Grandpa added things to his collections. And while my cousins yearned for the day that they could use their guns whenever they wished, I yearned for the day that at least one African bust or Russian nesting doll would be mine.



Summer City Street

John Aaron Howell

First Place—Photography

Andrew

Emma Thompson

I’d edge around the air mattress where your dad would lie
dormant

In the dim den, network television pulsing the room like a
strobe light,

The only other movement would issue from the thin wisp of
smoke

That drifted from a cigarette smoldering on the coffee table.

Tiptoeing past, I would reach the kitchen

And stare into a miracle rainbow of plastic

All jumbled in the wicker basket atop your counter.

King-size Reese’s and Coke in hand,

I would admire your world and wish

For my own candy bin and cable TV.

We never would stay long inside your house;

Instead we would play family in the fuchsia bed of azalea petals

That littered our neighbor’s lawn,

Or dance in roadside sprinklers,

Or hold school amongst the clutter of

Lawn mowers, potting plants, and work benches

In your daddy’s shed; when we grew too big

To hunch beneath azaleas or dance in sprinklers,

You found your way patiently outside my front door

After the bus dropped you off every afternoon.

Momma gave me the news, that you

Won’t be around so much, now that your daddy

Can barely walk a straight line these days;

Now that you’ll be spending school nights at your Aunt’s

And your mom will too.

But I’m happy for you because

Beyond the candy baskets and cable TV,

I know that your children will play in beds of azaleas,

And when they get home from school,

You’ll be there at the front door waiting

To welcome them in to warm arms and cool linoleum.



Illusion

Janine Nowak

Be Nothing

Elise Cannon

Be nothing but a memory.
Be only a flicker in my life.
Be something I can forget one day.
Don't be love.
I know it's not real.
I know it will leave.
But it has captured my life.
No one around me will know.
It will go away.
It always does.
Fly away, wonderful feeling.
You're a deceitful fellow.
You blind me from life, and show only one face,
A face I don't really know.
Be gone with you, feeling.
You only ever end in despair.
Nothing comes from you.
Nothing for me ever will.
You only steal my life.
You only take my sense.
I only want it to be real.
But I know better.
I will wait for it to be real.
I will wait forever.
If God blesses me with something real,
It will be worth forever.
So heart be still.
You know nothing.



Stygian Bayou

Egan Peltan

Mississippi Mud Ball

Goodloe Chilcutt

A Cypress branch as a bat
And gumbo mud as the ball.
Lily Pads as bases, Great Herons as the umps,
Played by men and boys with mud-covered faces.
No rules, no calls,
Spectated by fishermen with cigarettes and dirty overalls.
It's a game played for generations
By the men in my family.
Laying everything on the line
In hopes of having their name
Written in the Tombigbee slime.

Killing

Phillip Liu

Third Place (Tie)—Essay Competition

Five years ago, the fence separating the front and back yards of my family's two-acre property neared completion but did not keep Oscar, the loving mutt we adopted from the shelter, from roaming freely between the two sections of yard. His eight-month-old broad shoulders, muscled chest, and large jaw hinted at his pit-bull descent but still allowed him to slide under the unfinished fence. "Here, pup!" I hollered into the crisp November air, while his pink tongue flopped in the cool wind along with his brown ears as he obeyed my calling. He reached me huffing, puffing, and soaking in early morning dew; I patted his head and gave him those encouraging words that every pet looks for – "Good boy!" – until he rolled over giddy with joy. Times like that let me forget the killer instincts of my sweet pit-bull mutt.

Oscar let out a deep guttural growl towards three large vultures as they landed in the farthest part of our property, behind the unfinished fence. He rolled onto his feet and aimed his tensed body directly at the red-headed, mangy birds, but I caught his collar before he took off. Then, for the same reason people watch street fights, I let go. Oscar's body resembled a torpedo, speeding towards a cluster of enemy ships. The birds' wings sounded like small jets tearing through the air in order to evade the missile. The birds reached eye-level when Oscar, by some genetic gift of athleticism, reached five feet into the air to pull down a vulture twice the size of his own body. Biting the large bird by the wing, Oscar tossed it around and snapped its bones; I realized why he loved tug-o-war so much.

Breaking my stare from the gory action, I grabbed Oscar's blue leash from the garage and ran out to stop my dog. When ordering Oscar to stop and stepping in his way did not keep him from thrashing the vulture about, I kicked my beloved mutt in the side and quickly leashed him to a small tree. I stepped past the beast, which pulled against the leash restraining him, and crunched dead leaves until I reached the mutilated bird. Its broken left wing bones stuck out of its flesh, and its left leg bent backwards from the direction it should have. The creature's head turned towards me with its black, rainbow-tinted eyes; I half expected it to whisper a few last words to me. Instead, it let out a sharp screech and thrashed

about spraying blood onto my shoes. Oscar's growls turned into grumbling barks as he continued to tug on the small tree; it shook so much I thought it might break.

I decided I should put the bird out of its misery. With an air-powered BB gun as the only firearm my family owned, I ran back to the garage to search for a different weapon. I came out with my blue Louisville Slugger baseball bat. The bird seemed much calmer by that point. It must have accepted its fate and began to wait for the end – which I would speed up by bashing its head; I picked the head based on my limited knowledge of the anatomy of vultures. "Without a brain, it can't feel pain," I repeated to myself while raising the bat overhead with shaky shoulders. Those black, rainbow eyes looked at me one more time. Then,

I brought the bat down on the bird's skull with more force than I had ever used to hit a baseball. Thud. The bird began to flail about in a tantrum; I failed to break through its skull. Instead, the bird's head sat imbedded in the soft soil, probably adding to its pain. In a panic to end the bird's suffering, I reached down, grabbed it by the still writhing neck, and threw it against a tree. I proceeded to bash the bird. Whack! First, in the neck. Second, on the head. Third, through the abdomen. I followed up with a fury of blows aimed to kill the bird as quick as possible. I stopped swinging and noticed my entire body shivering, stains on my jeans, and tears streaming down my cheeks. The bird's right leg jerked once or twice and then stopped. I grabbed my still grumbling dog by the leash and walked back to the house.

Five years later, the memory of that vulture has made me question my actions: why did I let go of Oscar's collar? And why did I continue hitting the bird after it had died? I believe something about my nature as a human wanted to see that violence—to be part of it—just as many people rush outside a party to see two drunks trading blows and wrestling on the front lawn as an excited mob forms around to catch the action. Some part of the human psyche, possibly leftover from our more primitive stage, finds violence interesting and exciting, causing humans to strive for that violent behavior. I reached that behavior with killing the vulture, and though I felt regretful and pleaded for the bird's forgiveness.

I am unsure if I desire to feel that sensation again.

Gardening the Soul

Claire Belant

Isquatted low to the ground next to Grandma Jo, plucking resilient weeds from the garden, forcing my finger into the soil to dislodge stubborn rocks. She raised me on hard work and never quitting. With her get-the-job-done-and-no-excuses mentality, always accompanied by a wink, Granny nudged me forward with the gentle prod of someone who has been a mother for a long time.

My grandmother didn't have the life she expected; she moved from the bustling crowds of Chicago to the gravel roads and corn fields of Wisconsin as a teenager, bringing her determination and spirit in her suitcase. Stooped over in the garden, yanking leafy intruders with deliberate jerks, she would smile, and tell me there was nothing she would rather do than weed. Granny decided to be happy, and I always admired her for that. Working in the garden, she grinned and told me when she was young she dreamed of being a model living in a neon city. Now she lives on forty acres in the pastel farmland of Merrill, Wisconsin, and she is joyful. Her resilience lit a spark in me and I strive to mirror her optimism in my own life.

In the spigot behind the house, Granny and I plunged our hands into the icy well water and scrubbed the blackish half-moons from under our fingernails, revealing

battle scars from ornery quack grass blades. The water cleansed my hands and cooled the sting of raw skin. Time with my grandmother does more than that: she cleanses my whole being with the courageous example she sets for me; and cools the sting of disappointment with her gentle, but firm belief that no one should feel too sorry for himself because somebody else always has it worse. She tells me she never had a job she didn't like. Her years laboring in a canning factory with temperatures over a hundred degrees are a part of her life she treasures. When she made heels for women's shoes with risky machinery capable of removing fingers, she did not pity herself or the other women workers—she relished the friendships she made and was grateful she had work.

At Granny's house, I learned how to till and sculpt earth into rows, pull weeds by their roots, and pack the soil firmly when planting, but more importantly, I gained a sense of purpose. Using her creased, calloused hands, well-worn with work, she gently steered, molding me into a woman. My grandmother planted a resolve in me to be the hardest working, most persistent person I can be. As I go through life, I know I am capable, but not all powerful. From lessons in the garden with my grandmother, I know that I will be happy and cope with the unexpected, because that's what people do in life.



Rose

Colleen McDonald

Clayboard



Weeping Angel

Emma Robertson

Semi-Colon

Carissa Howie

Semi-colon;
Where a sentence could have ended but did not,
Instead adding a rejoinder.

The space between the dot and comma
There hovers the fate of lovers,
The whispers of hope for the hurting,
And the continuance for those
Awaiting the now postponed end;

Semi-colon;
The tattoo of a writer who has something
Left to say, the brand of those
Whose adolescent tendencies
Pull them from delivering
That much needed break, fracture,
Ending of the story.

The ghost of where you could
Or perhaps should, have stopped.

X

(To Vernace Freeman, 1917–2012)

Camille Dent

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

You would sit in your wooden chair
And cross-stitch—
Each tiny “x” so minor
Yet vital to the final design.

We'd sit at the table and play Kings in the Corner,
Matching suits and digressing in card value
Until we found all four kings and
Moved each stack to form the diagonals
Of a large X.

I didn't want to notice your frailty each time
You crossed your arms around me
When you'd embrace me and kiss my cheek,
But your age was catching up to you.

X is a symbol of love,
A kiss at the foot of the stationery page
Formed by your handwriting.

But X also designates a target,
And Death marked you.
Now you lie beneath the dust of the earth,
Your arms crossed over your chest with chilling peace.

The Emerald Curtain

Emma Thompson

Second Place—Short Story Competition

The damp marriage of urine and cherry tobacco greeted Patrick as he restocked a fresh roll of nickels into the cash register. He looked up from inside his counter enclosure at a man with dirt peppering his face, particularly around the bridge of his plump nose. The man was in his mid-forties, but his tan trench coat clung in wrinkles to his body and, coupled with the facial hair that hugged his chin, made the age seem ill-fitting.

“Nice to see you, Mr. Lewis,” Patrick nodded coolly. “What can I help you with?”

Patrick was a sophomore in college, a pre-med student, and a part-time employee at Oxford’s Wal-Mart Superstore. After eight months assigned to all odds and ends of the store from unloading shipments to networking the sprinkler system in Produce, he had graduated to a position of responsibility. Now twelve-gauges and semi-automatics accented his domain like wallpaper. They sat suspended under glass and behind iron cases where they ornamented the cream walls in a hodgepodge of grays and browns.

Mr. Lewis did not reply to Patrick. Instead, he moved closer to the glass casing and peered into it for several minutes before he redirected his gaze to one of the wall mounts.

“Can I take a look at some .22 Long Rifle?” he finally responded.

“Sure. Let me get that for you.”

At least twice a week, Patrick could count on a visit from Willie during his graveyard shift. In a way, the constancy was comforting, Patrick thought. With as few workers as administration could feasibly staff and even fewer customers, it was almost nice to have the monotony of register refilling and counter sanitizing broken by company. But Mr. Lewis wasn’t someone Patrick wanted to see. He wanted Mr. Lewis at home, with a cup of black coffee, a mutt, and a typewriter. But here he was. As usual. Not the esteemed author of his childhood but a broken old man. The boy pulled a ring of keys

from his pocket. He began flicking through them one by one until he finally settled on a stubby silver one. The crooked teeth jiggled into place and unlocked the counter block beneath the register. Patrick withdrew a box of ammunition.

“Here you go.”

Lewis inspected the box and began to open it. One by one he pulled out each bullet, rolled it in his palm, and then set it upright on the counter. All in file, they reminded Patrick of a row of army men, with copper bodies and curved tips like the M1s soldiers wore in

World War II. Patrick was fascinated by the old wars. As a kid he’d spent evenings by the television milking the last minutes before bedtime to listen to stories of guerilla warfare and nighttime raids. The reports were often colored with yellow journalism, but this only excited him

more. He wondered if Mr. Lewis had been in Vietnam; it seemed like most everybody’s dad or uncle had.

While Mr. Lewis inspected the bullets, Patrick returning to his work at the cash register. He had emptied the pennies and begun peeling brown paper from a fat quarter roll when Mr. Lewis caught his attention. From his jacket, he had pulled out a pistol; it was coated gray except for the wood paneling that accented either side of the gun butt. Two .22 LR bullets were docked between his right ring and middle finger as he worked his index finger to nestle the third bullet into the hand held. Patrick instinctively grabbed the gun from Mr. Lewis’s hand.

“What do you think you’re doing, man?! You can’t be loading guns in the store!”

Mr. Lewis seemed confused by the exclamation and reached for the gun which Patrick was presently emptying on the counter. His words were viscous and his breath reminded Patrick of musty blankets. “I need to see if these bullets fit my gun.”

“Sir, you can’t do that here. Your gun is supposed to be checked at the front desk. Let me get someone to assist you with that.”

Patrick turned to the wall phone lodged by the display guns at the back of his cubicle. It was cream, and, were it not for the cord that spiraled out from the receiver, could easily have been camouflaged against the muted wall. Wilson Green, the night manager, responded to the situation and made plans to escort Mr. Lewis to the front to check his gun. While waiting, Patrick examined the confiscated gun. It was a single-action semi-automatic, a service pistol; *probably used in Vietnam or one of the World Wars*, Patrick thought.

When Wilson arrived, he retrieved the pistol from behind the counter and led Mr. Lewis towards the front. The fluorescent lights shone harshly on the author’s skin as he walked away. It highlighted the splotches of red that smeared over his tan skin and made the sweat at the nape of his neck shine in beads.

Mr. Lewis didn’t return that night. Patrick didn’t know whether he had avoided the Guns and Outdoors area or simply left the store. But Patrick thought about him anyway. Men who told tales of favorite dogs and childhood hideouts, men who held Purple Hearts and PhDs shouldn’t end up here, looking like that, smelling like that. Patrick hoped Mr. Lewis hadn’t fought in Vietnam. He hoped that residency and family and white picket fence would keep him from smelling like wet cigarettes and cheap beer. As the heated glare of the fluorescent fixtures blanketed the store in empty light, Patrick hoped that *this* wasn’t what lay behind the emerald curtain.

Brown-Eyed Girl

Rachel Jones

I despised even the ground
you stood on as you
would allow your high-pitched
laughter to trickle from your glossed lips,
piercing not only
the interior of my ear,
but also every morsel of happiness
my soul possessed.
I watched over your shoulder
as you disregarded the immense power
of your beautiful mind,
instead embracing the fleeting power
of your cosmetically enhanced face
and newfound womanhood.
But once I saw
the unwanted tears you
struggled to keep hidden
as another of your loved ones abandoned you,
I understood your desire
to live the “easy” way.
Now, whenever you bawl
in the corner as a result of
your latest goodtime gone wrong,
I simply watch and hope
with every fiber of my being
that you’ll be okay.



Audrey
Claire Belant
Pencil

“You Missed a Spot”

Nija Owens

“And now we will have a selection by the MSMS Choir,” said the announcer.

Michael Stamps sat in the fifth seat of the third row in Rent Auditorium. Unable to keep still, he flipped through the booklet, counting the number of segments left on the program. Even the exhaustion from taking pictures all morning didn’t faze his excitement. He tapped his black penny loafers to the smooth melody in the air. Searching the crowd for his mother, he caught eye contact with Mr. Bob, or the *Sanitation Consultant*, as he called himself. With a smirk, Michael waved, and then turned his attention back to the stage. His thoughts wandered off to his first encounter with Mr. Bob. It all started with an email:

To: Michael Stamps

From: Bob Marks

I need to see you in my office right away.

Michael, fidgeting and looking out of the window with an uneasy glare, had twirled his thumbs together. He wore a blue sweater with “MSMS” embroidered in white letters. Outside the window stood the returning Class of 2013 chattering and jay-walking across from Hooper to the “W” lobby.

“Why didn’t you do your work service?” Mr. Bob asked.

“I forgot,” said the timid MSMS Junior. The junior class of 2014 officially started school the day before. Mr. Bob leaned back, propped his feet on the desk, and placed both hands behind his head, full of silver string.

“If I had a nickel for every time a student told me that, I’d be rich.”

Michael wasn’t sure if he should tell Mr. Bob his condition, or not. *He’ll probably think it’s another excuse.*

“What should your punishment be?”

“Well, I guess you could let me go with a warning, sir,” he managed to say. *I hope he doesn’t write me up. Boy, that’s probably a level three.* A deafening silence filled the office.

“Go do it now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bob.”

Michael went to room 118. He placed his overloaded book sack on one of the desks. Having spent fifteen minutes looking for it, he finally found the supply closet located directly in front of the classroom he was assigned. He grabbed the “yellow stuff,” the “blue stuff,” and a sponge. As water splashed from the rusted spigot, he filled three pails with water and dumped them into the oversized mop bucket. Didn’t know this was the *Mississippi School for Future Janitors*. He filled a smaller bucket with water and trotted back to the spacious classroom.

Michael wiped the windows with the “blue stuff.” In

a daze, he pictured himself walking to class, driving back from extended weekends, and finally, turning his tassel in Rent Auditorium. He reminisced about the day he received “the big white envelope.” *Congratulations! We welcome you to the MSMS Class of 2014.* His mom called everyone in the family not ten seconds after receiving the good news. They partied the night away. Food. Friends. Family.

Michael Stamps wasn’t your average high school student. He was born premature and he often recalled his mother’s stories of past conversations with doctors:

“Between you and me, Mrs. Stamps, he’s going to be mentally impaired, his vision will be weak, and without a doubt he’s going to have learning disabilities.” His mom always told him he was a miracle baby. Michael had been a straight-A student since elementary school. He switched from glasses to contacts at age thirteen, and he no longer took medicine.

“Excuse me,” his thoughts were interrupted by a husky male voice. He slowly turned, in hopes that it wasn’t Mr. Bob again.

“Yes?” To his surprise it was Dr. McConley. Placing the torn white rag on a nearby desk, he walked towards his new principal. With a firm handshake he asked, “What can I do for you Dr. McConley?”

“Well, I just want you to know that all of your teachers are aware of your condition, and I ensure that we will work with you to the best of our abilities.” Diagnosed with cancer in 2006, Michael Stamps suffered daily from a severe brain tumor. It caused him to have massive headaches and forget things often.

“Somebody really oughtta tell Mr...” Michael and Dr. McConley turned their attention to a knock on the door. Mr. Bob came in with his yellow notepad and blue pen stuck behind his ear.

The two men greeted each other with a handshake.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” said Dr. McConley. Stopping in his tracks, he turned back around. “And Michael, welcome to the family.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“How you coming along, Mr. Stamps?” asked Mr. Bob

“I think I’m done, sir, but I need to tell you something.”

“I need to tell you something too, Mr. Stamps... you missed a spot,” chuckling as he pointed to the half-washed window filled with white streaks.

Michael felt someone shove him. “Hey, bro, they just called your name.”

“Michael Stamps,” repeated the announcer.

Not realizing how long he’d been out of it, he jumped to his feet. Michael walked across the stage, received his diploma, and turned his tassel.

Sweet Autumn

Karien Dixon

The first chill creeps down your spine

Leaves of green

Now red, yellow, and orange

But it’s not here yet.

A massive carpet of leaves

Lawnmowers obsolete

Now rakes and leaf blowers

But it’s not here yet.

Tank tops, shorts, bikinis, and beach towels are stowed away until next year

Beaches and pools empty

Sweatpants, sweatshirts, scarves, and hats awake from hibernation.

But it’s not here yet.

Blinding stadium lights light up the field

The roar of the crowd is heard for miles around

“T-I-G-E-R-S GOOOO TIGERS!” cheerleaders rant.

“TOUCHDOWN!” the announcer shouts through the microphone.

The band blares out “The Hey Song”

But it’s still not here yet.

The aroma of apple cider lingers outside Nana’s house.

A sweet smell guides me to the kitchen;

With a mouth full of sweet potato pie and a milk moustache,

I nod my head thinking, “Now it is here.”



Out of the Dark

Janine Nowak

Clayboard

Honorable Mention—Drawing



Midnight Sailing

Tanvi Rao

Clayboard

Happily Ever After

Elizabeth Whipps

At the close of each day,
Once I had taken my bubble bath
And donned my Veggie Tales pajamas,
I would wait for my parents to approach,
Book in hand.
They would settle onto my Pocahontas sheets,
Then I would rest my damp head on their shoulders
And wait,
With great impatience,
for the crackling of the aged spine of our latest novel.

Mom read to me about
The Little Women of the March household,
Introduced me to my first crush, Laurie,
And taught me how real ladies behaved.
I laughed and I cried and I said goodbye
To friends that I had grown to love and adore.

Then it was Dad’s turn.

Dad read to me about
The Pevensie siblings that I desperately wanted to meet,
Aslan, the great lion ruler of Narnia,
Tumnus, the kind fawn who befriended Lucy,
And the first person that I ever hated, the White Witch.
I never wanted to leave Narnia.
Dad cultivated my imagination,
And introduced me to new worlds I had never considered.

I miss the days that I could cuddle up with Mom and Dad
And listen to their soothing voices
As they painted a perfect portrait of a foreign world
Where the hero vanquishes the villain
And the story always ends with
“And they lived happily ever after.”



Common Goal

John Aaron Howell

The Beautiful Pavlova

Mary Mackin

She could always make the most beautiful Pavlova,
A soft shell of creamy meringue holds the
Mountains of soft, snowy cream,
Banana slices circle the edges like the sea shore,
An ocean of kiwis sits inside the beach of bananas,
Strawberries float like lone ships,
And passion fruit bubble like sea foam
The soft cloud sits like a lone island on a
Ceramic blue plate, a calm ocean.

Meditation at Seventeen

Emma Thompson

Second Place—Essay Competition

My mother has drawn from her rural life a depth of understanding I admire. Hers hasn’t been a glamorous life or a conventionally cosmopolitan one, for she’s had little opportunity to venture north of the Mason-Dixon Line. But Momma’s life is rich. She tells me of times spent in the top of a Florida Cypress, how she would hug its branches until the trunk narrowed to a limb and she could just graze its crown with her fingertips. There, hidden in the tree top, she enjoyed solitude. Not away from the world but enveloped by it. Momma has waded through the cane fields of the Everglades, dug her hands deep into Mississippi soil, and emerged with a unique and sound faith in her connection to

this world and the next. It’s the kind of knowing that’s not compounded weekly in a pew with a prayer book or assured with the passage of time. It’s the sort that trickles to you as your dirt-stained hands turn the pages of *His Dark Materials* and discern religion in the writings of an atheist. It’s the knowing that touches her as she reads “Meditation 17.” *Never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.* Yet I only hear silence.

I looked for faith in church, but, as I got older, I found God to be suspiciously absent. At least my God was. The pale yellow walls and thin carpet flooring of St. Paul’s reverberated the preachings of an angry God, one who disapproved of me slipping a silly grin across the altar at my sister during sermons or leading the procession at the commencement of the second hymn verse instead of the third. With each parish argument, the youth community shrunk until I was the only kid left to distribute the offertory plates and ignite the candles before service. But when the church began to fracture under petty political stresses, I decided that there was nothing left for me there.

Peace comes to me in curious ways. It dances in the falling leaves as I step outside to greet the first cold front of the season; it shelters me when I escape into

the safety of Daddy’s lap as he hums “Big Rock Candy Mountain” and strokes my hair; it accompanies my childhood memories of feeding grubs to our duck, Picasso, as I gardened with Mom. These are the times when I know the world can’t be simplified to chemical connectors that clutter my brain or even the assertions of *Genesis* and *Revelation*. This is when peace whispers the preamble to an understanding of the world I do not yet possess. As

“It’s the kind of knowing that’s not compounded weekly in a pew with a prayer book or assured with the passage of time.”

the youngest, I’ve done my fair share of waiting, and, in turn, watching and wondering. These factors of my childhood have inadvertently imbued me with a powerful curiosity. I yearn to understand all that surrounds me. I ache to immerse myself in an environment of curious customs and foreign

faiths that I can learn from and in turn enlighten with lessons whispered to me by the battle-scarred magnolias of Mississippi. Then maybe I will finally be able to understand what makes Momma cry when she reads “Meditation 17.”



Dancing in the Dark

Ashley Claytor

Charcoal

Second Place—Drawing

Golf and Granddad

Joseph Messer

Third Place (Tie)—Essay Competition

The chemotherapy wasn't working. His hands felt gaunt, a faint remnant of earlier days when he would grasp me in a firm handshake, saying, "Boy, this is how you shake a hand. You've got to be strong." Those same hands also showed compassion. They'd give a pat on the back after a bad day, a helping tug while reeling in a fish, and an outstretched hand after falling down in soccer. Now, his skin stretched over the muscles like sickly drapes: too much skin and not enough muscle. The fight with lung cancer was taking its toll, and his hands told the story.

Sometimes golf, like life, throws a triple-bogey at you on the front nine, and then a man's character is measured by how he reacts and plays the back nine. Granddad played a heck of a back nine. As death crept up, Granddad's hands stretched for one thing—golf. Just as Granddad held on to life, his hands held on to a golf club. Long past the time other golfers had packed up their clubs and the waning sun failed to illuminate the green, he kept swinging. He wasn't playing for sport; he was playing for life.

Golf was Granddad's cure. It wasn't easy, but that's not what Granddad wanted. A game that demanded perfection and often caught its players in the rough, golf gave perspective, and to a man with little time and most of it sitting squarely in the rough, good perspective was needed. A great game of golf is not one characterized by the eighteen holes at par but by the miracle eagle after the shot into the woods. Granddad played for that eagle—he played for the long shot—and with every stroke, the edges of cancer seemed to regress.

It was a wonder to watch Granddad play. His frail body would twist and turn with the vigor of his youth. It would be hard to find the sad toll of cancer under his wide smile and vital countenance. When he hit, Granddad would adroitly land the ball right on the green. The small, white sphere would soar into the air and fall in an arc just like a rainbow and hit the grass with the soft-

est of thumps, and *stick*. Then, Granddad would walk to the top of the green, reach into his bag, and pull out his favorite club, the putter.

His withered hands held the putter tight. His knuckles grew ghostly white and his veins bulged through transparent skin as the veneered wooden rod pressed against his palm. With only the slightest sign of outward discomfort, Granddad fought not only a struggle against nature and the temperament of the green, but also a struggle against himself, a fight to persevere in the clutch of debilitating illness. He'd furrow his brow as he aligned the ball's path. He'd squint with his one good eye--the

other was glass, damaged from a high school dirt clod fight—and in one swift motion, he'd bring the club back, and like a pendulum, carry it forward. The ball

rolled up and down the miniscule nuances of the green, finding its way into the cup.

I remember the last time Granddad hit a golf ball. The ball sat on the fairway after one stroke. Facing 300 yards, a good lie, and a strong chance for par, Granddad picked out his three wood. Determined, he squared up and brought his club back. The club, an old Callaway, whipped back. A wound spring, Granddad used every muscle in his body; each muscle, an autocratic part tediously connected to the other muscles, worked at full capacity to wind up his swing. The club head came through at speed, and impacted the ball. Whoosh! The ball soared into the air, a white messenger lost in the clouds. It wobbled and started to fall. Landing with a soft thud, it rolled from the fairway catching in the rough. The ball was in bad position, sunk deep into tall grass. The hole wasn't shaping up to a par with two strokes down and a tough 100 yards to the green.

Granddad was in a hard place, again. Caught in the sickly grass and the deep mud, Granddad seemed to only sojourn in the fairway as most of his life was spent swinging from the rough. However, he persevered and lined up to take another swing. He squared his body,

knees slightly bent, the ball near his back foot, four iron in hand. Then, he took a breath in-and-out, brought back the club, and hit through the ball. The ball soared into the air only leaving a clump of dirt and a divot. The ball was free, released from its earthly fetters, and it soared far down the fairway. It curled and sliced toward the green, then hit the fringe and kicked towards the flagpole. The ball landed six feet from the hole. Granddad had an exuberant smile on his face. He walked up the slope to the green, and I watched as he selected his favorite brass putter, worn from use and age. He kneeled behind the ball, stepped up to it, and squared his body. Granddad pulled the putter back and carried it through the ball. Ages seemed to pass as the wind held still, and both he and I held our breath: was the ball going to make it? Did he hit it too hard? Losing momentum, the ball neared the black hole, that gaping mouth in a field of green. With its dying breath, the ball tipped over the edge and fell into the hole. Clunk! With a sound like a raindrop hitting in a wooden pail, Granddad had shot a birdie. It was a miracle. Granddad had won! He walked to the hole with his body showing the signs of sickness, but his face showing only a broad smile. He picked up the ball and handed it to me as I replaced the flag in the hole. "Son, that's how you play golf." I stared open-mouthed at the pearl in my hand, pristine white with only a blemish of black dirt and green turf like an earned battle scar. In that moment, his real message to me was, *Son, that's how you live*.

Ten years later, I stand on the eighteenth green. I go to my bag to select a club. Among the metal gleam of Callaway, an old brass putter rests alone. I take it out, rubbing my hand down its worn wooden handle. This club holds Granddad's memory. The countless putts. The fight against cancer. His brilliant life shining in the cold grasp of illness and death. A gust of wind rustles the nearby tree, and I can almost hear Granddad say, "Son, that's how you play golf," after sinking a fifteen footer.

I align my shot, set up behind the ball, breathe in-and-out, and swing the putter. The ball rolls smoothly over the green. Time passes and the moment blurs as I watch Granddad putt the eighteenth. His hands didn't look so weak then. I hear the thump as the ball rolls over the edge and drops into the hole. I look up into the sky and feel the pat on the back. "That's how you live," he says, as I reach into the hole to pick up my ball.

There and Back Again

Emma Thompson

It was in the grocery yesterday,
While I was sifting through damp produce
Slipping flat-leaf parsley and yellow peppers
Into flimsy plastic bags
That my hand intercepted the basket of cherries
An older man had reached for.
"Oh, excuse me, sir," I said, as my eyes
Followed the slender creased fingers to their owner—
"No problem at all, none at all."
Mr. Tolkien was so genteel
I had to invite him to brunch.

I baked blueberry scones, but,
Not wanting to typecast him,
I made some cinnamon rolls too.
I accidentally charred those a little darker
But he was naturally so kind about it
He choked one down with the tea I boiled for him—
Not exactly Devonshire or Darjeeling
But Great Value can taste nice too.
I asked him how he liked his second breakfast
And he gave a chuckle
Just like you'd imagine,
Quiet but warm, wise, like the weathered men
Who play chess in the park.
Mr. Tolkien has quite an appetite;
By the time we'd moved past talk of the Shire
On to stories from the Great War and
Anecdotes about C.S. Lewis,
Crumbs had accumulated on his lapel
And I found myself scavenging the pantry for Christmas
cookies,
Stretching past the barrel of Red Vines and Nutella
In search of something more appropriate.
We finally settled on Oreos, which he liked quite a lot,
He pulls them apart too, by the way.

It wasn't until we'd retired to the back deck,
Warmed our worn wooden rocking chairs with the
midday sun,
After we'd listened in peaceable silence to
The cry of the mourning doves, the ripples in the pond,
the creak of our rockers,
That I finally summoned the courage
To ask him
What happened to Frodo when he went into the West
And would Grandma go there too.

Window Pain

Victoria Chen

After the rumble of takeoff,
The Boeing 767 ascended
Into the September sky.
She slid back the plastic blind,
Welcoming the flood of light
That poured into the dreary cabin,
Chasing the shadows
From every crevice and crack.
Nine or eleven fellow
Economy passengers followed suit.
Below, green, rugged patches of trees
Surrounded cerulean, satin rivers,
And blacktop roads threaded nature
Into one perpetual quilt,
Woven of different textures and hues.
The jumbo plane rose higher
And soon, wispy clouds obscured
Any view of the textile earth.
This is what heaven looked like,
Blinding and of the purest white.
When the clouds disappeared
And turned into steely towers,
She just didn't know
Until her window shattered
In a blistering, fiery red,
Returning vengeful shadows that suffocated
Every aisle,
Every seat,
And every passenger.



The Robin
Janine Nowak

Sunday Morning Memory

Nija Owens

I walk inside and turn left
To a brilliant little room with
Four effulgent mustard walls;
Papa is cooking breakfast.
Across the room I see the window
Draped in fruit pattern curtains.
He let the blinds up, and then hands a plate to me;
Steam rises from the buttermilk biscuits;
They crumble at a pinch;
I squeeze and tap the bottle of honey,
Watching as it drips in zigzags,
Sticky hands on my dress.

Perfect Silence

Goodloe Chilcutt

They say the sun should have stopped shining the day my daddy died. Even old Mr. Winlock said my father was the reason God made humans. Granted, I never knew him too well, but I heard enough about him. I remember sitting in that old rockin' horse in the farthest corner of the faded pink parlor, opposite Mama and all her lady friends indulging in all the town gossip. They would all be sitting around in their big poufy dresses whoopin' and hollerin' about who did this and who did that. I mostly just wanted them to go on the porch for tea so I could hear myself think in peace and quiet. Had I known that's what I was lookin' for, I would have gone off and found it. But I could never leave that room because of the slight chance I might hear my daddy's name mentioned. That dusty horse was the closest I ever got to my father. It's a shame I'll never get to shake the hand of the man who made it for me. It's a shame I'll never look into his eyes and tell him how much I love him and want to know him. It's a shame the Lord works in mysterious ways.

At least that's what Mama says. She said that God had a greater plan, and that's why Daddy had to die. I don't know why she felt the need to try and comfort me. After all, I'd only heard stories about the man, and none of them really explained why he killed himself. People would tell stories about how he gave this town spirit and excitement when he was younger. How all the old ladies could count on him to paint their fences or trim their azaleas. All the men told me about how they never saw a single project in town that didn't have signs of my father's handiwork. I heard all these stories, over and over again, for every one of the eighteen years of my life. I even grew up with my friends telling me about my daddy and the stories their parents told them, about how they were lucky to have the chance to meet a man like him.

Now, I never got angry with all these people talkin' about my old man and how great he was; I just took these stories as an opportunity to get closer to him. I heard story after story, week after week, and year after year. But something never seemed quite right. Me and Mama never talked about him because I was never able to contribute to the conversation. I would just listen to about how romantic he was and how strong his hands were, until she would eventually work herself into tears and leave me at the supper table by myself. I wasn't happy Mama was upset and missing Daddy, but I did enjoy the sound of silence. There was something about it that made me feel closer to my father, and that was something I never wanted to lose. I just wish there was a more permanent way to hear the silence and have that feeling; the tingle of his presence over my shoulder on all those nights when Mama left the table crying about her dead husband.

Another year went by, and around came my nineteenth birthday. After the day's usual routine, me and Mama were at the table by ourselves once again.

"I met your Pa when he had just turned nineteen. He was so happy to be talkin' to an older girl, even if it was only by two months. He said it showed just how mature he really was."

"I can only imagine how mature he was. I bet he thought he was something special."

"That's what I thought, too. We were so in love. We would sit in perfect silence. There were some days that would go by in full without us saying a word. He said the best thing you can share with someone was a moment of silence, uninterrupted by talk or work. He would even hold his breath as long as he could to get as deep in the silence as possible."

"I can understand that. Do you think he can hear the silence wherever he is now?"

"Oh, I'm sure God wouldn't make him sing or worship. Your pa just loved the quiet far too much."

And with those words the emotions swelled and forced Mama to tears. She looked down at her plate and let one single tear fall from the tip of her nose and "clink" against the plate; and I knew it was coming. That blessed pure and surreal sound of silence; that tingling sensation of my daddy behind me smiling down on me. The solution finally clicked that summer night, alone at the table where I had sat so many nights before in almost perfect silence. This night, however, I knew exactly how to get that perfect, everlasting silence and be closer to my father.

I listened to Mama's sobs of grief as she sat in Daddy's old rocking chair upstairs and wondered why it had taken me so long to realize there was no such thing as silence in this world. Aside from her miserable sobs, the chirping crickets and buzzing June beetles would always interrupt the silence. I finally understood why God had to take Daddy to heaven. There was no way he could find his peace on this earth with all the noise filling his life. I stood up from the table, as to not disrupt the silence, and made my way over to my rocking horse. I ran my fingers over the smooth surface of the faded red saddle, and laughed at how similar it felt to the handle of my old man's Colt Forty Four. I sat in silence until I decided to add my last disruptive noise to the world.

Forty Fours are much louder than crickets, June beetles, or tears falling onto plates. They are louder than most sounds I had ever heard, especially from that close. At least the one shot gave me the silence Daddy had been blessed with after he gave himself to God.

Mama was right about Daddy's hands being strong, but they are smoother than I had imagined.

All Work and No Play

Tanvi Rao

After battling through a stretch of snow between the metro and office this wet Tuesday morning, Ellie had no smiles to spare as she walked into the atrium of Anderson Health, Inc.. Goopy half-melted snow covered the wet floor of the turnstile door, making it difficult to keep balance. As Ellie slid into the office, she wondered why dress code required women to wear heels. Surely, that qualified as sexism enough to get the ACLU on the company's ass.

A self-righteous flash of her building badge at the receptionist flirting with security only earned her a smirk. It was too cold to be wearing a dress that short, no matter how nice your legs were, Ellie thought as she clambered onto the elevator and punched the third-floor button.

Ellie worked in Business Intelligence Administration, so typically she was the first to get off the elevator. Most people on second floor had common sense enough to take the stairs. Today, however, just as the elevator doors were about to close comfortably, Todd Johnson from Human Resources stuck his hand between the large metal doors and "whoosh!" they opened again.

"Hey, Ellie," he said. He grinned over at her as he tried to clean the coffee stain spreading across his blue-checkered shirt while he bent backward to balance the coffee cup tucked into his armpit and responded to an email on his Blackberry with his left hand. Ellie suspiciously glanced over. "Hey, Todd, how are things?"

"Pretty good; this is my stop," he said as the elevator stopped on second. He inched his way over to the doors, but the wet metal floor was too much. Ellie watched as if it were all happening in slow motion. Todd teetered forward, the napkin fluttered to the ground, he grabbed air instead of Blackberry, and the lid popped off his coffee as he squeezed his arm to his body. A waterfall of coffee cascaded to the elevator floor, soaking Todd in the process, and splattering onto Ellie's shoes and pants. A blushing Todd apologetically looked over at Ellie.

"You should go to the bathroom and clean up," she said. She picked up the empty coffee cup and napkins scattered on the ground and handed them to him through the closing elevator doors. Ellie looked at herself in the reflective golden of the doors. She looked pretty rough, and it was only 8:45. Fifteen minutes were enough for a quick hair and make-up fix-up and an apple from the floor pantry. After all, she thought, she only had a year left on the better side of thirty and single was no longer attractive after that. As long as it wasn't Todd Jones from

Human Resources asking, Ellie thought she would enjoy going on a date.

After returning from the bathroom Ellie sat down at her desk at nine sharp. The tiny four-by-five-foot gray cubicle was visually monotonous. For some reason, the presence of the ugly plastic walls only intensified the noises behind them.

"Clack-click-clack" went hundreds of keyboards in the office. At 9:35, Ellie heard the giggle of her new blonde co-worker entering the cubicle just down the aisle. Christy was always late and often wore oversized men's dress shirts, hastily tucked into short black skirts with a pair of red stilettos she must have kept from her sorority years. Ellie was just waiting for her to get fired. Sometimes, it seemed as if all the annoyances of college had followed her to Chicago from Tucson, leaving behind the fun. Ellie remembered the bittersweet excitement of college graduation; it had made tangible the reality of trading in youth for a lifetime of stability as a cubicle-stationed programmer. Late nights stumbling out of O'Malleys screaming "Wildcats!" to the sky without a care in the world; Ellie missed those.

At 12:17, as indicated by the menu bar on the lower-right corner of her screen, Ellie heard someone clear his throat behind her. She paused mid-click, her arrow on a little gray mine-free square on her screen; thirteen minutes to kill before lunch break was ample time to break an office-wide minesweeper record.

"Betcha ten bucks that one has a mine," announced Todd Jones entering her cubicle, smirking in all his dry-coffee-stained glory. Ellie's suspicions that the office had bought fun, fascinating, foam soap dispensers to compensate for cheap, sub-standard soap were confirmed. It made sense; the dispensers were an expense that would eventually result in long-term gains. The only thing in jeopardy was workers' health. Ellie made a mental note to buy Germ-X to compensate for the 99.9% of germs the crappy soap wouldn't kill.

"Come for this?" Ellie asked. She reached in her desk and pulled out some Tide-to-Go, holding it up in the air. Todd pouted and grabbed the pen.

The felt tip of the pen and the stain on his shirt began turning a puke-colored green.

"Oh, my god. First my pants, now my pen." Ellie rolled her eyes, snatching the pen from Todd's fingers. Todd looked down at his shirt with a mildly horrified expression. The stain was much larger and uglier than it had been. Ellie began laughing at Todd's face.

"As the most skilled minesweeper player in this office, reflected in our work-wide minesweeper-IM, I simply came to offer my aid. Yet I was ridiculed, and now I have a huge VOMIT stain on my shirt." Todd made a dramatic gesture towards his shirt. Ellie continued to laugh.

"I was also going to ask you to lunch to apologize for this morning, but I think that I am going to go home and change instead," Todd continued. He turned to leave the office.

Ellie watched as Todd left her cubicle and walked down the aisle. She turned to shut down her computer and grabbed her purse. Through the gray wall of her cubicle, she could hear Todd flirting with red-stiletto-Christy just a few cubicles down about the vomit-colored stain on his shirt. She heard Christy offer to accompany Todd home and grab a quick lunch.



Life of Pi
Victoria Chen

Ink

So This is Mississippi

(After Ted Kooser)
Janine Nowak

First Place—Poetry Competition

The blacktop road winds
Like a pygmy rattlesnake;
Beside spindly longleaf pine trees
And river birch, the low fence posts
Enclose the forest.

On the other side, in murky water,
Where lily pads float atop,
Green moss and algae cover the water,
And white cranes standing motionless.

So this is Mississippi. A Saturday morning
In early October with your boyfriend
Driving down a country road,
And your two best friends squealing in the backseat.

Behind a live oak, surrounded by
Dandelions and clovers, a beat-up
Ford nestles in the tall grass.
Three children and their father
Lie on the truck bed and gaze at the clouds.

You feel like that: you feel like
Rolling in the grass under the live oaks,
Like splashing in the creek
Behind your grandfather's house,
Like chasing butterflies
On a Sunday afternoon. You feel like

Stopping by the peeling house you pass
Where an old lady sits in her rocking chair
On the porch,
Watching the cars go by. But
You wave instead,
And keep driving.

Contributors’ Notes

Korilyn Baudoin (Carriere) To Kori, creativity is an outward expression of an inward reflection. She is inspired by Salvador Dali and Will Smith.

Claire Belant (Starkville) Claire believes in the words of Fitzgerald: “You mustn’t confuse a single failure with a final defeat.” She plans to become a physical therapist.

Elise Cannon (Byram) Elise’s favorite book is *Little Women*. She aspires to be like her mama, Lisa Cannon.

Claire Caprio (Starkville) “Creativity is the only thing you can’t be taught,” says Claire. She plans to become a dentist, move to Seattle, and own an excessively large house.

Victoria Chen (Las Vegas Hattiesburg) Victoria is inspired by any quotation from Albus Dumbledore—so long as it’s read by Morgan Freeman. She would like to work for “Saturday Night Live.”

Goodloe Chilcutt (West Point) Goodloe believes that “everything is better with music.” His hero is Huckleberry Finn. After all, he says, “Who wouldn’t want to raft down the Mississippi River?”

Cathy Choung (Gulfport) Cathy would like to own her own clothing store. She is influenced by Michelle Phan and Dulce Candy.

Ashley Claytor (Starkville) Ashley would like the ability to read peoples’ minds. She lives by the motto that “It is not about what you are called but what you answer to.”

Mariah Cole (Meridian) Mariah’s favorite book is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She is inspired by Romans 12:12.

Camille Dent (Jackson) A junior at MSMS, Camille admires the work of Ted Dekker. According to Camille, “Scholarship and practicality will take you from A to B. Creativity and imagination will take you everywhere else.”

Karien Dixon (Macon) Ms. Dixon is most influenced by Langston Hughes. If she could meet anyone, she would like to meet her great-grandmother, Lover Vaughn Hairston.

Shawn Gompa (Clinton) Shawn would like to manipulate time and space—to live without limitation.

Erin Graves (Columbus) Erin values creativity and hopes to one day work as a computer animator at DreamWorks or Pixar.

Adina Harri (Starkville) Ms. Harri would like to meet Winston Churchill so she could “understand the way he thinks.” She would also like to live through the “Roaring Twenties.”

Ashley Henderson (Itta Bena) Ashley would like to research ecological systems and meet Charles Darwin.

John Aaron Howell (Bentonla) John Aaron finds creativity an outlet for the happiness and stresses of life. Mr. Howell is influenced by the work of Ansel Adams.

Carissa Howie (Madison) When it comes to writing, Carissa believes that you have to “just let it go.” Her favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Rachel Jones (McComb) Rachel aspires to run a marathon and take her mother to Africa. She lives by the creed, “Be kind. Remember that everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

Michelle Licci (Nesbit) To Michelle, “Art is the opportunity to wake something out of nothing, to bring life to what was once lifeless.” She would like to meet Luna Lovegood.

Phillip Liu (West Point) Phillip’s favorite book is *The Fountainhead*. According to Phillip, “creativity is needed in order to make this life worth living.”

Mary Mackin (Starkville) Mary writes to “escape to a world of [her] own creation.” The work that most inspires her is *Little Women*.

Colleen McDonald (Richton) Colleen’s favorite work is *Pride and Prejudice*. She would like to live through the fifties and meet Sasuke Uchiha.

Joseph Messer (Carriere) A junior at MSMS, Joseph hopes to one day travel the world. He is inspired by geneticist Craig Venter.

Damontà Morgan (Clarksdale) Damontà, a senior at MSMS, is most influenced by Clarence Thomas. He believes that “Through adversity we find our strength and through tranquility we find our character.”

Ashwin Naidu (Clinton) Ashwin would like to become a psychiatrist. His favorite book is *The Life of Pi* and his hero is his dad.

Janine Nowak (Gulfport) Janine would like to meet Hermione Granger. She would also like to study polymer science this fall at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Nija Owens (Itta Bena) Nija will one day become CEO of her own engineering firm. Her motto: “If your dreams don’t scare you, they’re not big enough.”

Joseph Payne (Starkville) Joseph aspires to design future car engines and supercars. He would like to live through the industrial era and meet Louis Chevrolet.

Egan Peltan (Cleveland) Egan’s favorite work is *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. His favorite dance is “The Cary.”

Tanvi Rao (Clinton) To Tanvi, “Food is inspiration” and “People are fascination.” Her favorite read is *The Picture of Dorian Grey*.

Emma Robertson (Columbus) Emma would like to meet Edmond Dantès from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. She loves to write because it allows “a glimpse of that wonderful mind.”

Brendan Ryan (Diamondhead) Brendan’s favorite artist is Ray Bradbury and his favorite work is Bradbury’s *Illustrated Man*. Brendan would like to live through the 60s.

Prithvi Singh (Madison) Prithvi’s favorite work is *Brave New World*. He hopes to earn a master’s degree in business administration.

Stephanie Smith (Columbus) This local admires the work of Renoir and hopes to become a doctor. Her dad is her Superman.

Matthew Steed (Madison) Matthew believes that “Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not a truth.” He aspires to be like Cary Nicholas Roy.

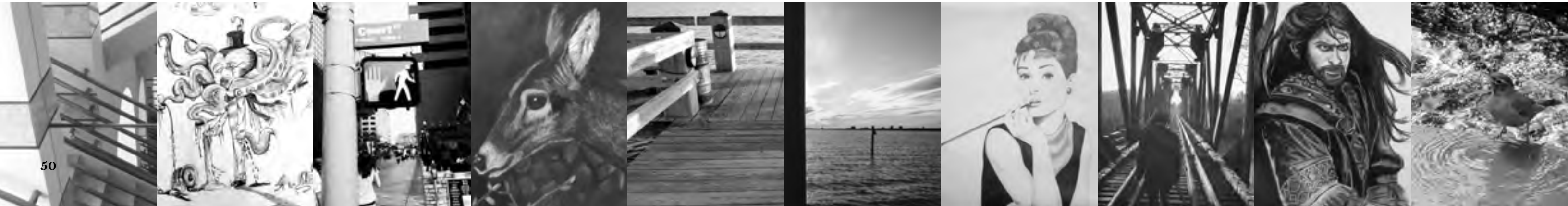
Emma Thompson (Picayune) Emma’s favorite reads are *Of Mice and Men* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. She would like to have coffee with Jimmy Stewart and dinner with J.R.R. Tolkien.

Kristen Walker (Newton) Kristen is inspired by the people around her: “None of them are artists or writers, but all of them have a story to tell.” Kristen hopes to become an educator.

Daianera Watkins (Saltillo) According to Daianera, creativity is “an opportunity to define yourself and the world around you.”

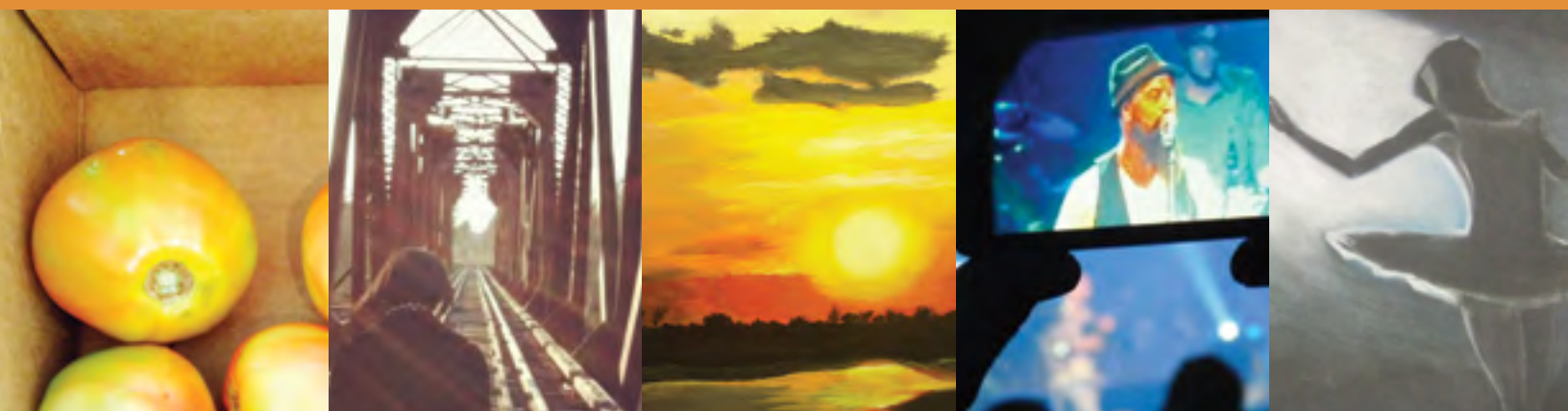
Dana Wesley (West Point) Dana’s favorite work is Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son.” She plans to double-major in theatre and literature.

Elizabeth Whipps (Diamondhead) Lizzie would like to have lived through the 1950s and meet Lucille Ball. She hopes to one day work as an editor at a publishing house.





Southern Voices



is a magazine of creative works by students at the
Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science
1100 College Street, MUW-1627
Columbus, Mississippi 39701

Southern Voices is available to read
on the Internet at
<http://www.themsms.org>

