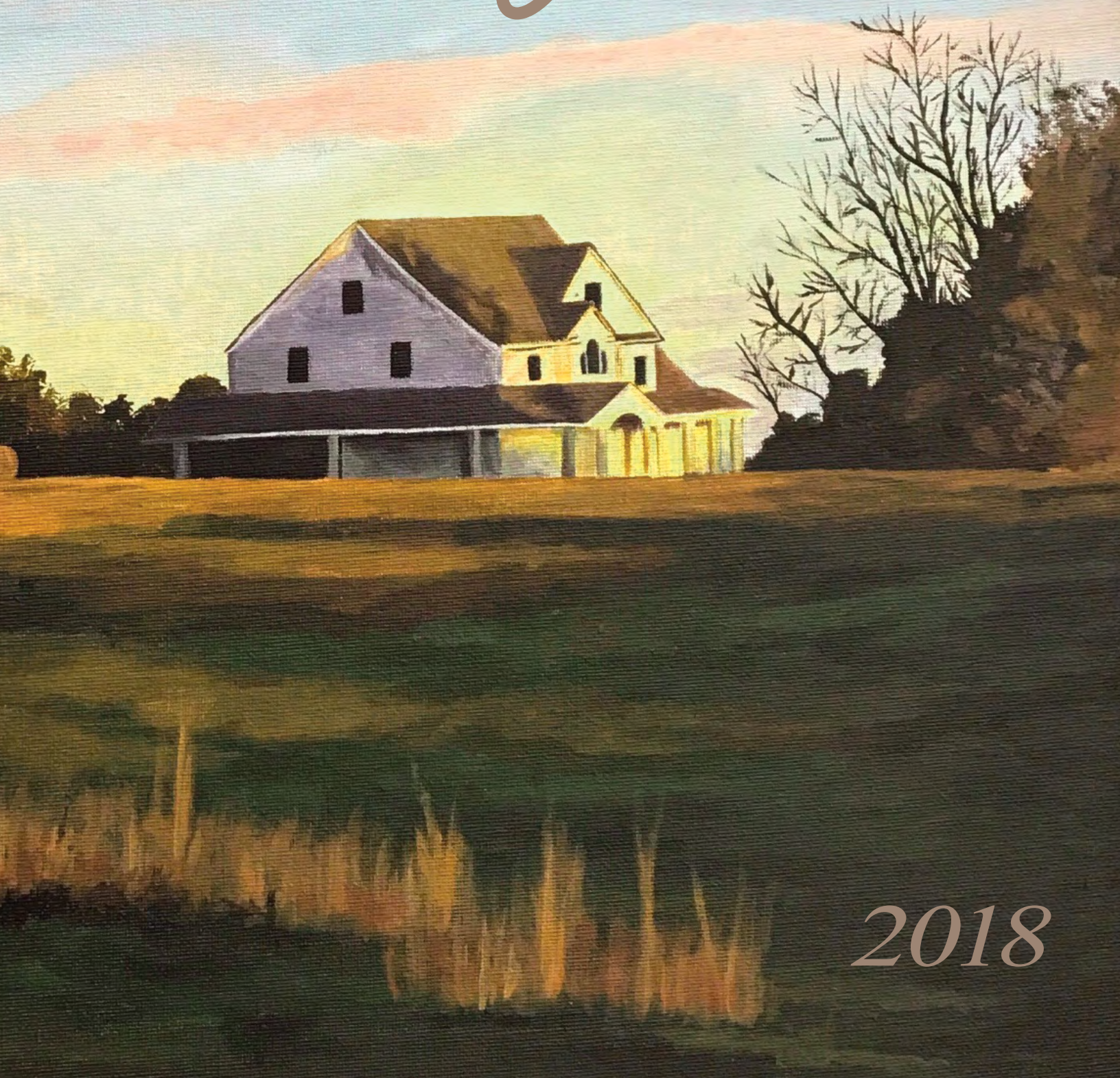


Southern Voices



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Southern Voices
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Judges

Art Judge

A native of Columbus, Mississippi, Virginia Evans Branch earned a BFA from Randolph-Macon Woman’s College. An international portrait artist with clients in the United States and Europe, she has also been a professional muralist and has had her own hand-painted furniture business. Currently, she lives in Columbus and paints acrylic still life and landscapes.

Essay Judge

Edward Allen is a senior production editor with Vintage Books at Penguin Random House in New York City. After graduating from the University of Southern Mississippi, he moved to New York and has spent the past eighteen years working in book publishing.

Photography Judge

A native of Newark, Delaware, Luisa Porter has worked as staff photographer at *The Commercial-Dispatch* and *The Starkville Dispatch* since 2008. She is also a photojournalist who has produced work for *Catfish Alley* magazine, *FYI* magazine, and currently *Progress* magazine. She received a BFA in Photography from Mississippi University for Women and lives in Starkville.

Poetry Judge

Beth Kander lives and writes in Chicago. She completed her MFA in Creative Writing at Mississippi University for Women in 2017, and also holds degrees from Brandeis University and the University of Michigan. An award-winning playwright, she is also an emerging novelist. The first book in her “Original Syn” trilogy hits bookshelves this September (Owl House Books).

Short Story Judge

Steve Yates authored *The Legend of the Albino Farm: A Novel* (Unbridled Books), the Knickerbocker Prize-winning *Sandy and Wayne: A Novella*, and the Juniper Prize-winning *Some Kinds of Love: Stories* (University of Massachusetts Press), among other books. He lives in Flowood and serves as associate director / marketing director at University Press of Mississippi.

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Sunflower
Danail Dimitrov
Third Place – Drawing
Pen & Ink

Saigon

Helen Peng

First Place—Short Story Competition
The Chris Read Award for Fiction

A cool day in Saigon is 85 degrees Fahrenheit, like the Tuesday of last week. Those days, the cobalt sky almost convinces me of serenity in our city, that air pollution is a figment of my anxious imagination. The air is sweet with tangy citrus that pinches the edges of nostrils as air skims against skin in fleeting blankets. Those were the days when you and I were as light as the swallows we watched dance from rooftop to rooftop—their weightless wings carrying them over the world that we could only dream to conquer. Those days we sat knee to knee with a single orange from your mother’s garden sheltered in the barrier created by our cross-legged limbs.

“Just enough time for us both to spare,” you said, as a perfect golden ringlet spilled onto the clay rooftop from your prying fingers. You’d apologize for the single orange and the fact that we would have to share. I’d promise that one day, I’d buy you a whole bag of them once we had all the time left in the world to spend together. And momentarily, as rich pulp coated our tongues in bursts of tart sugar, our dreams offered an excuse from the regular Saigon summer days.

On these days, the air is as volatile as the sticky syrup that sinks to the bottom of sugar-cane drinks. Scooters screech past the roadways that plead for new pavement, and voices screech deals, orders, and laughing gossip from across the street. Sounds relay from sign to sign and bounce off sunburnt clay buildings in violent leaps. The palm trees try their best to shelter us, but our Saigon sun is relentless.

On days like these, I stole glances at your family’s

bakery across the street from my butcher shop. “Golden Delicacies” it was named, and the men on the street used to joke that it was an accurate description of you.

“If only we could buy her for the price of a *bonbon*.” I watched men wink and buy more *bonbons* than they needed in a day for an “accidental” brush of hands. My throat clenched at their actions, but jealousy was absent to leave room for my faith in our dreams for the future.

“Rich pulp coated
our tongues in
bursts of tart sugar...
an excuse from the
regular Saigon
summer days.”

It was here where I also watched your hand first encased between that faceless man’s fingers. In my mind, I imagined that you cried and fought and screamed when he asked for your hand. Because Tuesday of last week, when you told me that you’d be off to America the next day, your face gave nothing away. You showed me the ring on your finger, a beautiful jade that

I could only dream to afford, and told me that you had already given your love to him.

The Wednesday after that Tuesday, I watched from the window as you were ushered into a shining black BMW—a color that absorbed our cloudless days into a uniform sheen of poised composure. *I’ll leave at Port 32*, your words echoed in my head. When the wheels started rolling, twisting my reflection in a crescendo of movement, I ran—across the street, past your bakery, and towards the nearest vendor that I could think of. I snatched the biggest bag of oranges I could find, and by the time I had arrived at Port 32, you were already climbing up the ramp. The oranges held the weight of all the time we spent together, and my shoulders started to cramp. When I threw the bag over the railings

towards your body and your eyes skimmed over the dimpled fruits, I thought I saw a tear peak the corner of your iris. But when the bag soared across the water to miss the edge of your feet by centimeters, I watched them plummet into the murky water of the South China

Sea. With it, our time in the world disappeared into nothingness. The vendor for the oranges had caught up with me at this point—and so had my realization of our future. △



Swerve

Jackson Sparkman

Third Place – Photography

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

Callused

Sarah Swiderski

Second Place—Essay Competition

Calluses riddle my mother’s hands. As a child, I would put my own hands inside hers to admire their parallel patterns. Doing so reminded me of similar shapes—the objects in geometry where one is a little larger than the other. Our hands now resemble mirror images, both with fingers just short enough to make playing the piano a challenge. The only differences are the calluses and scars across my mother’s palms, which run thick so that mine do not.

Sometimes, I tiptoe through the kitchen in the early hours of the morning to find my mother hunched over her computer, glasses perched on the edge of her thin nose, fingers racing across the keyboard, as my brother’s do across the piano. With her small frame, I can’t help but think she looks like a bird. The bags under her eyes only add to this effect, making her face seem somehow thinner. They became more pronounced when we first moved to Mississippi, in the days when my mother’s starting salary had to cover what our meager child support did not. Looking back, occurrences beyond my first grade comprehension click into focus:

Why my mother’s light snores could be heard in the movie theater.

Why my siblings and I were the last children picked up from school.

Why, when I came home crying because I hadn’t received a role in the school play, my mother told me not to be jealous until I had worked twice as hard as everyone else.

As these pieces of my childhood fell into place, I threw myself into the tasks placed before me, working in my grandfather’s belief that each generation must better itself. My mother says that I grew up at a young age, which is true; I learned to be self-sufficient, stretching to fill the gaps she sometimes couldn’t. I have worked my fingers raw as a student, but also as a daughter, sister, and granddaughter.

By the age of five, I had taken it upon myself to teach my three-year-old brother how to read. The wallpaper in our shared bedroom is still chipped from taping “lessons,” which I had scribbled out during kindergarten naptimes in blue crayon. It was not until after my parents’ divorce was finalized that these lessons became bedtime stories.

Most of these stories were of my own creation, but my brother would, on occasion, pluck a tattered book from the shelf. On these nights, the sounds of yellowed pages turning intermingled with my mother’s typing in the next room. Through a small crack in the door, I

could see my mother, face washed white by the glowing pixels before her. Sometimes, she would catch my eye, coming to tuck us into bed before returning to the screen. Most nights, I watched

stray moths flutter in the light of her laptop before climbing into my top bunk.

This was our ritual for nine years, during which my hands began to resemble my mother’s, with scatterings of paper cuts from schoolwork and thick calluses from playing musical instruments. My hands also cradled wounded animals and held heartbroken friends as their cries shook my small frame. My hands have poured agar plates and turned pages, each one yielding a more thorough understanding of the ever-accelerating and expanding universe. No matter the day, my hands have found themselves dialing my mother to deliver a static-filled “goodnight” and a quick “I love you.”

I have seen my mother work her fingers numb. Her hands are rough and scraped and burned, yet fit perfectly in mine when we say the Lord’s Prayer in Mass, or when, to this day, I hold her hand while crossing busy streets. In these moments, I note their acquired similarities: how my hands have grown and scarred and formed their own calluses. They are far from mirror images, but I wouldn’t mind my hands reflecting hers one day. △

*“I have worked my
fingers raw...”*

Leather

Victoria Gong

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

the only memory I have of you
is playing with your hands and
running my fingers over fissures in tectonic plates
tracing veins that snaked like rivers
through the canyons of your wrist
and vanished in the crook of your elbow

the only thing of yours that’s left is your jacket
(at least this is what Mama tells me)
hanging on the back of her closet door
I allow myself to touch it sometimes
the cracks in the brown leather cuffs
imagining they are your palms

the only solace I can find now
is that the word *leather* half-rhymes
with *father*
and that I can build
with words
a thousand images
of a man with a blurry face
and hands fine-grained like dirt —

at the sea those hands
push together a mound of sand
like a funeral pyre
the foundation of a castle
and slide away with the tide

I can’t seem to find
a single match in the house
to set your creation ablaze
because when you exchanged leather
for the wings of a moth
perched on a jungle floor
you filled the space between your gums
with the contents of a matchbox
and leered with a wooden jack-o-lantern smile
and ran into a firestorm

July Jettin’

Kayci Kimmons

A sweltering sweep of summer heat beats upon our foreheads
as we coast over loose rusty gravel
whipping up thunderstorms of dust
that would choke them Northerners dry.
My brother, recklessly thirteen,
and I, carelessly fifteen,
scream all the words not allowed to be spoken
while we fly past the endless Delta fields
full of plush, feathery white balls in bowls
and floppy green stalks with clumps of yellow poking through.
The weatherman from Memphis claims “it’s not safe”
flashing hundreds across the TV screen,
but Momma wants some cornmeal,
and we wanna ride.

Whipping winds whistle melodies
and the roar of the ATV provides the beat
shaking, quaking, vibrating thrill into our bodies
as we crush our enemies under rugged tires
and reject accusation after accusation
that “we ain’t true country boys and girls”
’cause I don’t say “aunt” like “ant”
and my brother refuses to wear camouflage
and Momma drives a BMW and not a pickup truck.
We might just be goin’ to the corner store
to pick up the secret to Momma’s famous cornbread,
but five minutes of ridin’ beats the heat
of a sweltering summer sweep in July.

Steamed Fish

Michelle Luo

Third Place—Essay Competition

Fish doesn’t come as a fillet, battered and fried,
served with tartar sauce on the side. It’s steamed whole,
in an oily gingery soy sauce. It’s paired with hot white
rice and stir-fried bok choy, not cornbread or hushpup-
pies. It’s the only dish my dad cooks.

Fish wait in a partition of the kitchen sink. I wonder
if they’re alive or dead. They’ve been writhing in meth-
ylene-tinted water for the better part of an hour on the
ride home, and they’re stiff and curled, but their gills
still flutter. The catfish has smooth silvery skin over a
broad head. “It’s a flathead,” my
dad says. He says channel catfish
and flatheads are good to eat, but
“mudcats” aren’t. There’s crappie
and bass, too, but I can’t tell them
apart, so I take his word for it.
They have scales that feel smooth
running one way, but catch on
my finger the other way. My dad doesn’t let me gut the
fish, but I watch.

He takes a dull paring knife and shaves off millions
of shards of scales from the fish into the sink. Then he
takes shears and jabs them into the fish’s belly, splitting
it down the middle, and hacks through the jaw. He tears
out its innards but sets aside the yellow roe. He rinses
off the blood. The fish is limp.

I’m too short to reach the counter, so I take in
the smells of fish guts and the strong umami odor of
simmering soy sauce and scallions. My dad tucks sliv-
ers of ginger into the cavity of the fish and lays four
fish in a metal pan with yellow roe on the side. Water
streams into the bottom part of a steamer, and the

whole contraption is assembled on the stove. The lid
of the steamer fogs up and obscures the metal pan of
fish inside. Twenty minutes later, my dad takes out the
metal pan with tanned, bare hands and drizzles the soy
sauce mixture over the fish whose eyes are clouded
over. He carefully spoons over the soy sauce, so it
flavors every part of the fish. He sets the scalding pan
on a dining table lined with junk mail and newspapers.
When it’s cooked, I can glide a fork down the side of
the fish and slide a whole section of clean white flesh
and glistening skin off its bones.

I drizzle over soy sauce and eat
it with rice, savoring the roe.

There’s usually none left over.

The gutted, uncooked fishes
go into a chest freezer in the
garage until next dinnertime. And
when my dad has had enough of

the house, he goes fishing again and takes me along. I
clamber down jagged rocks surrounding a wide reser-
voir while my dad takes deep steps carrying three
poles, a box of gear, and a cooler of minnows.

An artificial waterfall rains tons of water. I imag-
ine fish falling by the hundreds through the white
spray. Organic yellow foam lines the edge of the water
amidst cans of dip, bottles of black spit, and miles of
nylon line. Glints of sodium-vapor lamps oscillate on
the water.

My dad chats while he’s fishing with this man
wearing a camo jacket and a white beard, and he asks
my dad how we eat fish. My dad nods and smiles and
says we “*fillet it and fry it, fillet it and fry it.*” △

*“He rinses off
the blood. The
fish is limp.”*

George's Shop

Alex Monterde

Second Place—Short Story Competition

Leather, hairspray, old people, and something like burnt toast. The smells mingled in the air to form a homogenous scent that Daren just thought of as George's Shop. Daren's mom said that George was in "the late autumn of his life, honey," and the top of his head shone bright, bald for just as long as it hadn't been, cradled by stubble which came down through thin sideburns to connect to a salt-and-pepper beard. The tile floors, which made Daren dizzy when he stared at them, wore scrapes like stubble, too.

George abounded with energy. He sped around from green chair to green chair, pumping them up and down with his foot while asking the women in them questions. "How's Tom doing these days, Clarisse?"

Pump, pump, pump went the chair, and Clarisse's big hair bobbed as she ascended to George's shoulder level. "How's Bill doing, still feeling that bad hip, Jen?" *Pump, pump, pump.*

His scissors raced over silver heads like two fencing blades, meeting then parting then meeting again for another blow somewhere else. *Snip, snip, snip* as George talked and wiggled his hips slightly. "Millie, you sly fox, how are you and little Daren holding up these days?" George glided over to Daren's mother, who had only just lowered herself into one of the brown leather chairs by the wash basins.

Daren did not protest being called "little"—he was only four foot eleven after all. "We're doin' just fine, George. How's the business? How's Hue?" She set her enormous crocodile handbag down beside the chair and leaned back, letting her black curls fall into the brown basin behind her. The chair groaned.

Daren put his back to the counter across from the wash area and bounced on the balls of his feet one, two, three times before hopping up and sitting atop it.

He pulled a small paperback from his coat pocket and turned to his dog-eared page. "Hue is doing just fine, thanks for asking. We're thinking about taking the camper up north this year." George turned the sink tap and let the gushing water run over his fingertips until the deluge reached a comfortable temperature.

He pulled out an extendable shower head and squeezed its trigger. Within seconds, Millie's head was soaked with warm water. She and George gabbed about travel and campers and then Daren started actually reading the words before him. His small hands cupped a beaten copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five* his father had given him. His mother hadn't approved of giving a ten-year-old a book with a title that contained the

word "slaughterhouse," but once it entered Daren's possession he would not part with it. He planned to have it finished by their next weekend together.

Clarisse's hair was curled tight around pink curlers. She sat staring at herself from different angles in the large, wall-mounted mirror. Every time she shifted to see herself from a new vantage, to watch the shadows play on

her dignified face, the green chair she sat in squeaked. She thought it sounded rather like applause. The black plastic sheet wrapped around her, shielding her from hair trimmings, and hid her shimmering blouse and sleek skirt. She did not like that. The shirt bulged and folded in just the right way to make it look like the age didn't show, like her skin didn't hang off her bones, and her fat didn't sag in the way only elderly fat could. She was proud of the shirt and wanted to show off, even if her audience was just Genius Jen, George, the colored woman Millie, and her son.

For Clarisse, the world was one big pageant, a long runway on which to display herself. When she was

young, she showed off the pretty dresses she spent all the money she got working at the local five and dime on and did her hair up big and curly and blonde; once she got old, she aimed every day to have one young man tell her she "didn't look a day over fifty, Miss Clarisse." She had yet to fail in that goal. She kept her clothes flashy, her dyed curls tight, and her tongue sharp—every sap she had ever met was awed.

She sighed and finally tore her eyes away from herself. Doing so, she noticed Jen had been staring at her, too. Jen looked every bit of her age. She had flat silver hair, long cheeks, and wore a hideous pair of red bifocals. Clarisse thought her attempt at "wizened but wise" was sad and lazy at best. Jen licked her lips and made eye contact with Clarisse's reflection. She raised a thin eyebrow, flipped a magazine page with a flurry, and settled her eyes downward. The gesture made Clarisse angry. "George! George, I think these curlers have been in long enough!"

Clarisse's outburst shattered Daren's concentration. George dropped off from his conversation with Millie about "that man in the White House" and gave her a sympathetic look. "Be right there, Clarisse." He sauntered away, the bounce in his feet deflated somewhat.

Millie began taking a brown towel to her hair, patting it dry enough to walk without dripping. "How's the book, Daren?"

Daren considered her question for a moment, staring at the ceiling, and noticing for the first time the faint melody of music emanating from speakers in the walls. "What do you think about nihilism, Mom?"

Millie plopped the towel on the sink's edge, her hair sagging down around her neck. She put one hand on her hip and raised the other in a physical sign of her confusion, "What do I think of what, honey?"

"Nihilism. The belief that life has no meaning and that humans are entirely unimportant," Daren responded matter-of-factly. He had read that on Wikipedia.

"Honey, life has plenty of meaning. Look it up in a dictionary." Millie barked a laugh and moved to a green chair next to where Clarisse sat, George fussing over her hair.

Daren thought about that. "Do you have a dictionary on you, Mom?"

"No, dear. George, do you have a dictionary?"

George scratched Clarisse's head instead of his own to which she responded with an incredulous shriek. "Oh! Sorry, Clarisse. I might have one over in the waiting area, why don't you look over there, Daren."

Daren entered the waiting area consisting of four chairs facing one another with a small table in the middle. Two of the chairs had hair dryers that reminded Daren of torture contraptions in movies he had watched with his dad last Halloween; the tabletop couldn't be seen under a three-magazine-high pile. One of the chairs without the torture contraptions sat next to a bookshelf with a lamp on it. The lamp's shade matched the green and black pattern of the shop. Each of the partitioned areas of the bookshelf contained multitudes, and Daren began digging.

From one of the chairs with the torture devices, the woman, Jen, watched him. The hair dryer crouched over her head, hovering delicately above her silver spindles. Daren ignored her slight smile. The first layer of literature on the shelf was the thinnest, consisting of magazines. The first displayed an enormous picture of a woman in a tight-fitting white outfit with the headline, "How YOU Can Look Like This Fast." Daren wondered what the magazine could do to make anyone look like the woman in white. He'd have to read it later. He set it aside and picked up the next one. "WHAT REALLY HAPPENED ON THE PLANE," it demanded, the bold text covering up part of a woman with sunken eyes. Daren decided nothing interesting happened on the plane. All the planes he had been on were boring.

Daren set aside the rest of the magazines without so much as reading their titles. He suspected that the meaning of life hid in thicker volumes. He picked up the biggest book he could find on the shelf, which was not all that big, and opened it. "Mom, what is a C O S M E T I C?"

Millie broke from her resumed conversation with George as he cut her curls in fitful battles of his scissors, "Uh, it's like a beauty product, baby. Like something you put in your hair."

“Why is there a school book on it over here?”

George responded, his tiny rapiers not missing a beat, “‘Cause you have to go to cosmetic school to open a shop like this, Daren. I had to, and that’s one of my old books.”

“That’s what you did with your life?”

“Why, yes, it is.” George half-curtisied and raised his scissors above his head. Daren went back to his investigation, this new information filed away.

Clarisse came out of the bathroom, a small stall whose tile, though the same pattern as the rest of the shop, was shifted left some at the doorway. It irritated her. She shuffled to the counter in her most dignified walk. Her mother always told her that if you walked with confidence then you had confidence, and Clarisse found that to be true. The tightness of her beautiful curls helped, too. “George, your money’s on the counter. I’ll be by the same time next week.”

Daren noticed that no one said goodbye to the woman named Clarisse as she left. He wondered if that meant anything. He stood and replaced the books and magazines on the bookshelf, except for the one about

transforming people into the woman in white; he bet that would be fun to read on the way home. When he turned, the woman named Jen stared at him. He stared back at her, with her now thoroughly dry hair still under the dryer. She smiled, and finally spoke in a small voice, “Would you like to know what I think ‘life’ means?” Daren nodded once for her to continue. “I think it means whatever you want it to, Daren. I think that if you think humans don’t have any value, then they don’t; or if you believe that God makes everything meaningful, then He does; or that life is curiosity or life is beauty or vanity or—” she gestured widely, “it’s yours to say, Daren. Not some book’s, or your mother’s, or mine for that matter.” She nodded self-satisfactorily. Daren looked down at the rolled-up magazine in his hand and stared at a subheading that read, “The Hot New Scoop on Sex, Life, and Beauty with our resident experts (p. 16).”

“I don’t think that’s right. We can’t just make up what words mean.” Daren walked to his mom’s purse and dug out the keys to her red Toyota, “Mom, I’m going to go sit in the car.” △



Streetlights

Jessica Smith

Second Place – Painting

Acrylic Paint

In the Snow

Michelle Luo

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

Bright sheets of untouched snow lay flat on the Michigan plains. Weary ranches sat next to towering silos, and the sky was low and white. Could barely see ten feet out the car, but it was still an improvement. The blizzard had settled for now though wisps of ice still fluttered about.

The engine choked and rumbled and skipped and chittered running over gutters in the half-plowed road. The heating element in the old Chevy had burned out last winter, so the bitter cold seeped through the gaps in the rattling doors, and the cracks in the back windshield. Its tires were balding and the fender was about to fall off, but despite that I knew my love, Dean, behind the wheel would keep us going until we were across the border where we would be safe.

We were going about fifty on those straightforward roads. Red barns looked like miniatures on the white plains, like toys out of a farm play set or like dabs of paint on a landscape. They whizzed on by. I felt the brunt of the chill as a draft came in every few miles. But then Dean would take his free hand, lean over to pat and smooth the flannel blanket I had swaddled up in, and I felt all the warmth in the world.

The road came to a fork, and we turned to the right toward a dead fishing town on the shore of Huron. *Johnsons’ Fishing Co. est. 1902, St. James Apothec. Rx, Huron Diner “BEST CRAB CAKES FOR MILES...”* The storefronts looked abandoned besides a message of hope on the door of Huron Diner saying “OPEN NXT SPRING.” Tarry snow piled up on the curbside like another sign of life. We’d freeze in the car and had to find somewhere to shack up. So we did—in St. James where the resident pharmacist, John, took us in. He asked us where we were headed, and my love explained, “The border. Got a friend up there who’ll take us in.”

“Now for how long?” said John.

“We’ll be staying up north for a while.”

“‘Til when?”

“Long enough. But don’t worry, as soon as sunrise, we’ll be out of your hair.”

John touched his whitened beard. I saw generosity in his eyes and kindness in his face when he told us to suit ourselves and take the room up-the-stairs on the second left.

The room had a bed with a bare mattress and a desk with a drawer. An ashtray sat on a nightstand with a few sprinkles of ashes. The musk of tobacco coated the room. Dean turned on radio, which was playing a staticy weather forecast—cold—and tuned it, but nothing else would play.

We sprawled out our things: a couple blankets, a trunk of clothes, Dean’s school diploma, my mother’s ring, and a few wads of bills we had saved over some months. It was enough to get started. We would stay with our friend for twenty-three months; Dean would find work in oil, and I could sew.

Dean said he was going to check on the old Chevy. I told him to patch up the crack, so no water could get in through the night and gave him a roll of tape I found in a drawer. He kissed me and held me and left. I crawled in bed alone. I heard the front door click shut, the little bell above the threshold jingling.

In the morning, I wiped clear a spot on the window but only caught myself looking back. The storm kicked up snow about six inches up the glass, the rest fogged up with a lace of crystals. I remember his eyes were as pretty pale gray as the foggy scene outside. I wouldn’t cry, because I knew he would come back, and I got in bed alone again. The chilliness eased as John turned on the upstairs radiator and the woolen blanket wrapped around me. A snow drift piled up against the front door, but the golden light melted away most of the snow by the time I saw it out there. John put a heavy hand on my shoulder, and I palmed my mother’s tarnished ring. △

*“Tarry snow piled
on the curbside like
another sign of life.”*

Catfish Alley

Aidan Dunkelberg

First Place—Poetry Competition

Calling

Stephanie Dauber

Calling for his sinners and his disciples he will say:
Gather round, y'all, brothers and sisters,
We gotta get goin', for the light is summonin'
She's calling and coming for you.
Take to the streets, do what you must do!
Soap boxes, milk crates, the weight of your sin,
Will it propel you to fulfill your calling?

Onto the streets they pour, calling out His name
To all that bother to lend their ear:
Oh, the things He can do for you!
Answer His call, don't let it ring!
Why would you outrun the Holy Ghost?
He'll give you one thing and I'll give you a clue:
It's heaven! Oh, heaven!
Life after death, it won't take much.
Relinquish your life of sin to live in
Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The caller fights his way to a non-believer who
Calls to all that want to hear.

Daddy had Matthew's gospel clenched in his hands
When six feet of dirt heaped over his box.
Over his grave, Sissy went insane and Danny
Painted the town red. He was taken too soon,
Is there really a guarantee? Keys to the kingdom?
You can place your bets on life after death
But I will lie, cheat, and steal for a good life here,
Then have a guess at what's what when I'm buried
In the same dirt my daddy's under.

Catfish Alley—
In a small city it was
The touchstone of black culture.
In the years of Jim Crow and repression
It was the market, the meeting-place,
The bustling center of the city's melanin web.
Not much remains there now.
A restaurant and a dilapidated liquor store
And a mural commemorating its history.
A mural defaced two years ago,
White paint poured into a Bud Light bottle
And launched out of a car window,
Crystal shards catching the dull orange glow
Of pale streetlights.
In the morning
Two men surveyed the damage. Not too bad,
They said. We'll have it off in two weeks.
We put a special coating on just to make paint
Easy to remove. Two weeks came
And went. It was harder to remove
Than they thought—the paint was
Thick and gunky, and two weeks turned into a month,
Then two, then six, as winter came and
The paint froze in the north wind.
They never got it off—after ten months
They ended up repainting it, a lone man
Standing in a tan shirt and jeans
Mixing burnt orange in a coffee cup.

Some stains are too hard to get out
So we paint over them, let them fester,
Pretend that because we can't see them
They are no longer there. It's easy
To believe that hate is a memory—
Harder to walk down pale orange streets
On humid Southern summer nights
And admit to yourself that hate hangs heavy in the air
Like water vapor: that it is all too easy
To liquefy it, pour it in a bottle,
And hurl it bright and blazing into the night.

Mornings Like This

Stormy Gale

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

On mornings like this, the ones that cause the
ground to stiffen and noses to run, I rise long before the
lethargic sun at the beacon of my father, who is already
dressed in thick layers of camouflage. He presses his
finger to his mouth before leaving me to dress in my
own suit of armor made of shrunken Long Johns, dark
green cargo pants, and a pair of boots that previously
belonged to my brother before he grew an extra four
inches.

We travel down a beaten path shielded by naked
trees to the deer stand that matches my father's and
my attire. My father enters first,
checking for unwelcomed critters,
and I soon follow, holding the
binoculars and whatever paper-
back book he was reading that
week close to my chest. Without
saying a word, we settle into the
matchbox hideout; my father
stuffs chewing tobacco into the side of his cheek, and I
press my face to the cold plastic of the window pane.

When the fog from my breath clears from the
window, the greens and browns sharpen into flora,
heavy with last night's rain, revealed by the climbing
sun. It is this point of the day when my father closes

his book, switches off the small flashlight that barely
illuminated the words, and joins me in my search for
activity. It is this point of the day when they begin to
move.

The deer soon emerge from the coverage of the
trees into the clearing. A doe, sometimes followed by
her fawn or maybe another female deer, appears, ears
alert and tail flicking, begins her hesitant tread across
the field with grace that would require years of disciple
and practice for any human to master. Through the
binoculars, I can see her suddenly stop, head snap-

ping towards the stand, ears
high and nose acute. She prob-
ably smells us. Whether it be the
chemically enhanced tobacco or
my strawberry shampoo, small
traces of scent waft out through
the thin opening of the window
into the field, revealing our pres-

ence to the perceptive animal. After a long pause,
she continues across the field, her stride quicker than
at the beginning, and I release the breath that I held
unconsciously.

The sun continues to ascend, and other animals
shake off their sleep and begin their daily routine.

*"Without saying
a word, we settle
into the matchbox
hideout..."*



Freddie

Jessica Smith

Acrylic Paint

Coyotes, rustling in through the dead leaves, are searching for breakfast; squirrels, chattering insistently, are in constant competition with each other; and a mockingbird, perched on a limb near the stand, practices its calls. I inspect each of these animals through my worn pair of binoculars until the leading man struts through the trees into our view.

The buck proudly wears a crown of antlers imperiously on his head as he begins his dance towards the middle of the field where the best feed is sprouting. My father matches his slow movement while reaching for the 26-06 rifle that stands in the corner. Pressing the butt of the gun against his shoulder, he looks through the scope, placing the cross section on the chest of the animal while his finger hovers over the trigger. Suddenly, like the doe, the buck senses our presence, and looks in our direction, eyes wide.

During this part of the production, I would avert my eyes, not wanting to watch the fall of one of the performers. Yet, while I wait for the shattering loudness emitted by the rifle, silence ensues. I look over at

my father, who is still regarding the buck through the scope, but his finger has moved away from the trigger. He and the animal continue to watch one another until a branch snaps and the sound echoes through the woods, disturbing the deer and causing it to sprint out of view. A sigh escapes from my father's chest as he flicks the safety back on the gun, balancing it in the corner, and leaning back into his chair. I turn back to the window and watch as the rest of the woods come to life.

When the sun scares the rest of the darkness from the sky, we climb from the stand and walk the path once more, not as cautious as before. The silence has already been broken by other life forms that call the woods their home, inviting our noise into the melody. The sun has softened the ground by the time we reach the road, and cars begin to populate the asphalt. Once the gun is stowed into the truck, my father turns back to survey the woods and breathes a deep breath once more, saying,

“What a beautiful day.” △



European House
Vivienne Tenev
Acrylic Paint

Southern Truth

Helen Peng

Third Place—Poetry Competition

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose hands bend and curl
bluffs and valleys around river's veins
and whose pickup trucks,
dusted with red cinnamon around metallic bumpers,
groan with the need of new mufflers.
Whose foreheads glisten
beads of sweat
onto strings of a bracelet.

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose honeydew weather,
Supervised by a jar of syrup in the sky,
drips liquid sunlight onto bluegrass hills,
Sticking to sassafras skin in rolling waves of heat.
Whose Sundays mornings
are filled with clean powder and stiff button-ups
and thrum with hymns and hum with prayers
where a wave hello is a welcome for
heartfelt chatter.

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose words stretch and curl and spread
like butter on toast,
and when Patricia asks, “Do y’all go to church?”
—the “yaaall” turning into taffy,
She really means,
“Are you an acceptable person?”;
And if you answer *no*,
Patricia will turn to Linda, with a shake of her head,
“The new girl—God bless her soul.”

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose nights are filled with sticky cornbread
sweet potatoes, collard greens,

Where supper is served with a side of gossip
About the family who keeps the blinds closed,
About that girl who doesn't go to church,
About those boys who kissed under the slide;
“Bless their hearts,” they say.

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose conversations flow like its river
Stretching deep and falling wide,
And where pleasantries
Are a wide front porch welcomed with an open door.
Where soul food is sanctuary
for any soul,
Where family rides high like the weather:
Never to grow cold.
Where everyone knows each other's names,
“Shugah,” “darlin’,” “honey.”

I am writing a poem for Mississippi
Where the rolling hills
lie against the river,
And the plains of the Delta
harbor sunburnt skin.
Here in Mississippi where the blue waters
Are shadowed by grayness
of barrier islands
and whose hospitality is marred by skepticism,
Here in Mississippi where a simple hello
is really a funnel cake of complexity,
And where a compliment is meant to be stretched like
bubblegum;
And when I say
I want to write a poem for Mississippi
I really mean
I'm writing a poem for home.

Mississippi Road

Rachel Brady

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

We were traveling down the steamy countryside of the Mississippi Delta on our way home from Great Aunt Ida’s home in Greenwood. Aunt Ida lives in a large wooden house, strangled by a wide green porch, surrounded by crumbled dirt roads and skinny twig forests. She is the one for taking in stray dogs in Carroll County, a total of eight: Jake the Lab, Sandy the Lab, Rocky the German shepherd, Biscuit the Pitbull mix, Belle the mutt, Cupcake the mutt, Rufus the mutt, and Gracie the mutt.

After we left Aunt Ida’s, we had a two-hour-long drive ahead of us, only dirt and deer from Greenwood to Jackson. I was a new driver of fifteen at the time. My parents decided that I would have the privilege of steering the family minivan home, straight down the Hospitality State. About an hour in, my father had fallen asleep in the passenger seat and my mother and brother in the back. I was alone with nothing but the blank rushing path in front of me and the crunchy country radio singing to me. I stared for what seemed an eternity at Highway 49 East, stretching for miles until the horizon kissed the sky. With Willie Nelson and the Rascal Flatts tweeting and tapping in the background, I watched the summer heat swim at the end of the road, like an oasis in the desert, cool and smooth.

I was becoming numb with boredom when the car started clanking like a tin can after a country wedding, then slowed abruptly. Poison panic seeped through my bloodstream and my father woke with a start. “What’s happenin’, darlin’? Why’re you stoppin’ the car?” he said. I just stared at the steering wheel with confusion and disbelief. We pulled over to the side of the road as the car died and came to a halt. We were stranded.

The burning summer sun beat down on us as Dad raised up the front of the car. We were engulfed with

a cloud of gray and black. Our car was deader than a doornail. “Totally kaput,” my father exclaimed. He poked around best he could, but his inexperience with “large mechanical devices such as this here minivan” got the best of him.

We were not there for more than ten minutes when a bright red pickup truck pulled in behind us. This mysterious stranger made my father’s wildly suspicious mind spring into action. He whipped around to us kids, looked in our eyes, and said, “Alright, Sarah. If this goes south and that man pulls a machete on us, I want you to run as fast as you can that way and get help. Junior, you go the other way and do the same, son.

Linda, you run into the woods and hide. I’ll fight him off.” Dad puffed out his chest and stood firm in front of us as the driver killed the engine and opened his dirt-dusted door.

A skinny, stubble-chinned man hopped out and approached. “What seems to be the problem

here, sir? Ma’am?” He tilted his baseball cap to my mother. Dad, sweat beading on his forehead, explained our situation to the man and offered him, with a tone of caution and suspicion, a look at our misting minivan. “Well, we were just drivin’ down the road then we heard a bump and a screech and then nothing at all. I think I can get us up and running myself, but I suppose it wouldn’t hurt if you took a look.” After tinkering around for a minute, the stranger rounded back to his truck and pulled out a toolbox. With my father’s assistance, he got the engine humming like a bumble bee in no time. A polite man in his mid-thirties, the stranger made pleasant conversation with our family about our trip and where we were headed, though Dad remained in his tense, untrusting state.

When the man had finished his work, slightly greasier than before, he shook my father’s hand and

wished us well on our travels. He gave my father his business card in case we needed any more help down the road. It read, “Reverend John H. Cunningham, First Baptist Church, Carrolton, Mississippi.” He turned to the family and said, “I hope the rest of the trip goes

smoothly. God bless y’all.” The man smiled, bowed his cap once again, and promptly drove away.

“Not a word,” my father said, as we began our snickers and taunts. “Not a word.” Δ



Roadside View

Maggie Ellis

Honorable Mention – Photography

Loud Silence

Jaylen Hopson

The next time the sun goes down
and all the town’s sounds turn loud,
Look past the obvious and listen to the whispers of the night, then
hear the city’s secrets and cries of children to overcome the silence.

Listen closely in the country,
Hear the sweet sound of nothing, the grass under your feet, or
Hear the whistle of the wind or the buzzing of the bee;
Overcome the silence and hear things you would never see.

Overcome the silence of
The place you call home,
The sound when you are all alone,
The sound when you are lying in your bed,
The sound that makes you question if or not you’re deaf.

Basketball

Victoria Gong

First Place—Essay Competition

“Do you eat dogs?”

The air reverberated with the staggered *thud-thud* of a flaccid pair of basketballs wrestling in a game of Knockout. Boone’s question, though, spoken with a nonchalant air and a smirk, shot across the court with more alacrity than the cheers and jeers of fourth graders milling about the sidelines.

I didn’t know how to respond, so I stepped up to the free throw line and shot. The ball made a high arc in the air, licked the backboard, and rolled off. Behind me, I heard a whoosh as Boone reared and his basketball plunged through the net. I was out. I hugged my arms and moved off the court.

“What about cats? I hear the Chinese eat cats, too,” Boone called after me.

All eyes were drawn to me like iron shavings to a magnet. I shook my head and stood and watched as Boone got in the back of the line and, with nimble flicks of his wrist, sank shot after shot before the kid in front of him could react until Boone

was the only person standing in the center of the court. Like little robotic mice, we scurried into a single file behind the free throw line, and the game started over. Boone seemed to ride the air as he made his first throw and took his place behind me.

He stuck up his pinky finger before my nose. “Doesn’t this mean the same thing in Chinese as this?” he said, extending his hangnail-encrusted middle finger.

“No—I don’t know.” My hands clenched into fists by their own accord. I wanted to run off the basketball court—to free myself from the rusty, shoe-scuffed concrete—onto the adjacent effervescent green lawn, but I was rooted. Boone’s glowering smirk and middle finger, a sign of oppression half an inch from my face, held me in place.

I wish I could tell my ten-year-old self that Boone

was just a scrawny eleven-year-old boy slapping around a basketball—because at the time he seemed like a towering, buck-toothed, blue-eyed monster. Boone, it seemed, had the power to change my life with a gesture or a question uttered in his thick-tongued voice. I wish I knew then that the only power Boone had over me was what I had given him.

I gave over power to many people before I learned how to be proud. At first, the questions were curious ones, but I treated them all as if they harbored an underlying accusation: *You don’t belong here*. During lunch, I poured out the contents of my Rubbermaid or Ziploc containers—something goopy over rice—into the trashcan and told my mom to pack me sandwiches instead.

“Can you say something in Chinese?” countless kids asked me. I declined them all, but that still didn’t stop some of them from singing “*ching chong chang ching ching chong*” with a clown-lipped grin.

I remember one time a former friend was speaking faux Chinese to me as we walked to class. After her Asian-lady-in-a-nail-salon impersonation, she threw back her head, sending her blonde hair in waves down her back like a tapestry of unraveled gold threads, and laughed, expecting me to do the same. So I did. That traitorous laugh rushed through my windpipe like wind howling through the mouth of a cave, and when the last of it escaped, I felt emptier than ever before.

Self-confidence came to me in false starts, busted knees, and shaky steps. At first, I went grudgingly with my mom to informal Chinese classes with the daughter and son of Mrs. Liu, a family friend who owned a Chinese restaurant. I made slapdash efforts during lessons to complete the assignments. For the longest time, I felt having to learn Chinese—and being Chinese—was a curse. It was the speck that refused

“Self confidence came to me in false starts, busted knees, and shaky steps.”

uniformity in my small world; it wouldn’t have bothered me that I was different if people like Boone didn’t point it out. More and more, it disturbed me when I looked into the mirror as I washed my hands in the elementary school bathroom and saw that all the other girls seemed as if they were snickering at my reflection behind their pale hands.

But, gradually, I accepted the girl in the mirror. Gradually, I saw beauty in my mother and Mrs. Liu: in the way my mother’s pin straight black hair, when she tied it out of her face with a rubber band, shaped to the nape of her neck and Mrs. Liu’s stuck out like a hedgehog’s spine; in the way my mother served steamed rice, hot from the cooker, and ladled cabbage soup into etched porcelain bowls from my father’s hometown of *Nanjing* with gentle precision; in the way my mother’s fingers arched as they pinched together the shell of a dumpling; in the way she said, “There’s nothing you can do about being Chinese—you might as well be proud.”

It’s almost strange how a few years can dilute the sharpness of scathing words and wipe away doubt. The other day, I was walking to school with David Yang, a friend from Hong Kong, and we passed a yard with a yapping Labrador.

“There’s our dinner,” David joked and began to appraise the dog as if it were a T-bone steak.

I laughed. The phrase tasted like a fresh green grape, acidic but familiar in its caress of the tongue. Suddenly, I realized Boone-like insults had become something almost comforting, things I welcomed like old friends. I didn’t accept them with a bowed head anymore—I had risen above them.

I found solace in those insults because they were another part of my identity. They were like the weapons of a nation I had conquered, and now they rested under my belt, demilitarized and pacified.

The girl stuck to the basketball court had unglued her feet and stepped off. She cocooned herself and emerged with gossamer wings. The boy slapping around the deflated ball had forced her to feel shame and embarrassment, but he had also taught her how to feel pride. And she was grateful for him for that. △



Timed Masterpiece

Lilian Le

Acrylic Paint

Burgeoning Belief

Edith Marie Greene



Aidan Dunkelberg

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

Lonely river winding through
emerald and gold fields of corn,
crisscrossing the roads that lattice the landscape,
one a mile, ad infinitum—

Like the snaking path traced by
the tire of a weaving bicycle
the rambling course of a butterfly
the meandering trail of a garden snake—

Doodling curvy S's amongst
the lines of yellow ears standing
straight like millions of clay soldiers
but rebelling against it all is the S
of the river,

the letter
sāmekh in Phoenician, sōwulō in Germanic
runes, and both were all straight lines
but then the Greeks came, and the Romans
and crafted the S, the letter that was
half of infinity:

Just like this river takes the infinity
of lush Iowa cornfield
and cuts it down the middle
with a serrated knife—

Just like the infinity of
curved necks in a flock of geese
gold tinged leaves in deciduous forest
mackerel sky on a Friday morning.

*I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and
the Holy Spirit*

You don't believe in religion, you don't believe in God
But you believe in love and you believe in family and
that's close enough

I cross myself before disaster but you prefer to clutch
my hand tightly

We are both well catechized
Sometimes I wish it bothered me that you don't believe
But it doesn't, because I know you believe in me
We could spin through the night on tiptoes
Or laugh in the corner at a party full of grown-ups
And I wouldn't complain

Soon we'll be grown-ups but these things still won't
matter

In my mind's eye, I see my hand against your cheek
It will be alright

Amen.

Wildlife Paintings

Acrylic Paint on Wood

(Top to bottom)

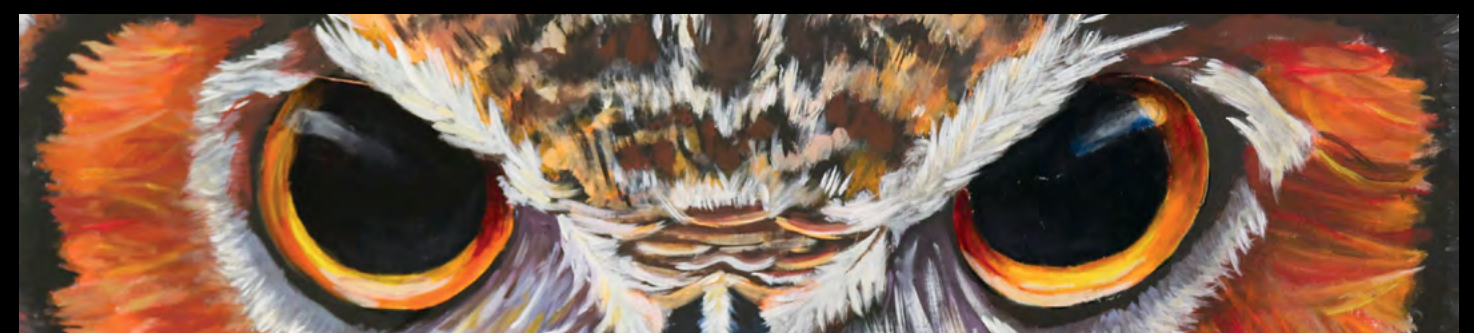
Eye on the Prize
Keely Brewer, First Place

King Lovie
Stormy Gale, Second Place

John
Michelle Luo, Third Place

Headlights
Mary Ellen Owings, Honorable Mention

Owl
Barrie Wright

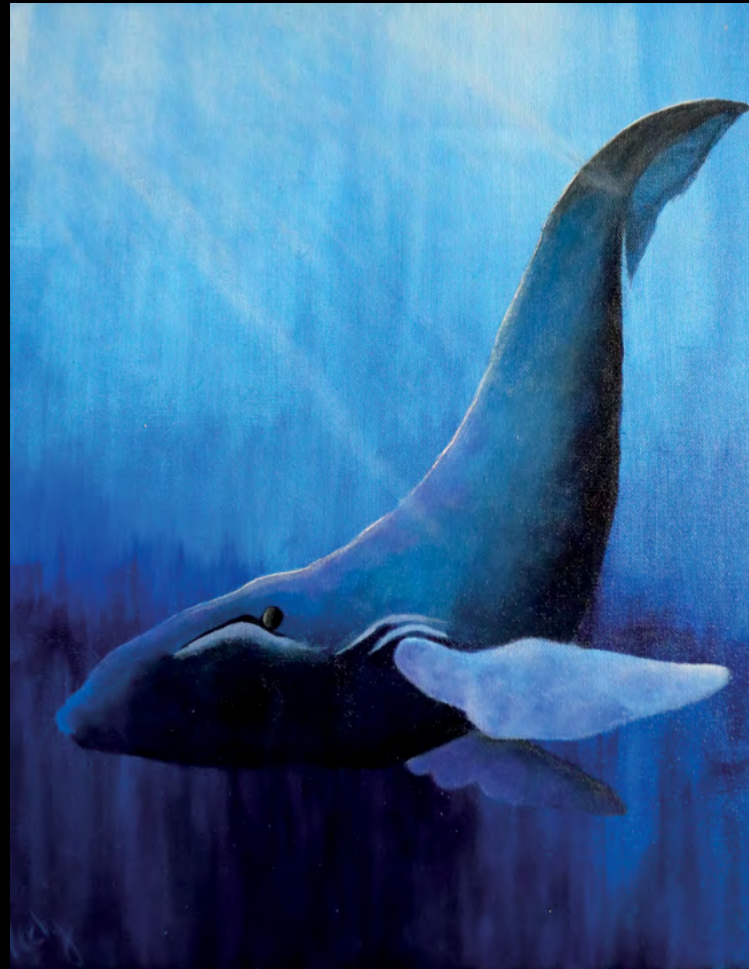




Summer Sailboat Sway
Lilian Le
First Place – Drawing
Pen & Ink



An Hour with My Friend
Millie Perdue
Acrylic Paint



Big Blue
Keely Brewer
Acrylic Paint



Lion Valley
Michelle Luo
Acrylic Paint



Magnolia
Justic Cucuzza
Photography

Kerala Snakeboat Race Mariat Thankachan

I saw the snakeboat race my sixth year of life,
a wicked sport meant for the finest at heart,
one where the cries of a hundred men harmonize
as wooden oars, etched with charms of luck and
prosperity, pound the waters at once.

Harpo, chundan, vallam. Together, boat, water.
Frenzied beats of perfect strokes,
the backwaters of Kerala calm no more
as 2,200 bodies fling themselves into the boat dance.

Regatta meant for chilling showers of the monsoon
season,
represents the bond of community and the waves.
The villagers look on, with whistles of celebration and
support
for the Olympics on water.



Strawberry DNA
Kamal Bhalla
First Place – Photography



In Your DNA
Millie Perdue
Acrylic Paint



Swiss Alps
Kayla Patel
Honorable Mention – Photography



Mountain Views
Stormy Gale
Acrylic Paint



Snowfall
Barrie Wright
First Place – Painting
Acrylic Paint



Blooms
Maggie Ellis
Honorable Mention – Photography

Evening Gathering
Kayla Patel
Acrylic Paint



Mardi Mask
Chanclinique Hairston
Honorable Mention – Sculpture
Clay



Sunset on the Riverbed
Morgan Emokpae
Third Place – Painting
Acrylic Paint



Mask
Mary Hayden Patterson
Second Place – Sculpture
Clay



Sunset Blossoms
Aaron Montgomery
Honorable Mention – Painting
Acrylic Paint

mother's hands
Victoria Gong
Second Place—Poetry
Competition

my mother's hands
puckered like napa leaves
simmering in broth
twist a yellowed tea towel
under the faucet
and wring it until the
cloth is as pale as her hands
is as pale as the rice
steaming on the stove
beside her
and the kitchen
reeks of bleach

my mother's hands dry
like crumpled silk
butterfly wings trampled
under an army boot
they smell of earth
milk
green tea leaves
and the tomato plants
that grow in our back yard
they touch my face
and I turn away
out of their reach

Heat

Michelle Luo

Honorable Mention—
Poetry Competition

skin to skin
to sticky vinyl seats
sun pounds through
the hazy, moist windows
i squeeze my eyes and
colors mix and wind
like black oil rainbows while
every thought thumps
imagining cool air
feet on pavement
ice cream
lemonade
i want to reach for the handle
but the alarm might sound and
everyone will see me curled,
fused to the car so i'll
wait
until mother
returns



Golden India

Kamal Bhalla

Second Place – Photography



Sun & Moon

Rachel Brady

Clay

Shaving Cream

Victoria Gong

Third Place—Short Story Competition

In the morning I watch Baba's slow limp to the bathroom. Both he and the door creak as he heaves it open, and he stumbles as his foot catches on the lip of the threshold. For a moment, I consider the bruise that will spread across his shin like an amoeba, before it yellows, shrivels, and fades, but he does not fall. Baba pulls his other leg over the ledge, and the door clicks shut by itself.

I go to the window and yank at the blinds. They catch on their rusty hinges and hang stubbornly, half-drawn. Stark sunlight crawls into the room, but it seems too weary to reach into the far corners. Shadows roil in the deep creases of the sheets rumpled on the hospital bed. I notice, not for the first time, that there are whorls of fingerprints and strands of hair trapped in the plastered walls.

The stench of ammonia lances up my forehead, and I pinch at the bridge of my nose until the headache reduces to a dull thrum between my eyes; smells in the hospital room come in waves

like the patients, crumbling away without notice, then returning with different names and faces and unchanging symptoms—old age, failing organs, persistent melanoma.

Turning, I remember that the nurse said to me yesterday to check on Baba more often, so I tap on the bathroom door with two knuckles. Then, I remind myself he's hard of hearing, so I call out, "Baba?"

There's no reply.

I push the door open anyway and find Baba standing at the sink, his eyes purple and baggy, his cheeks covered in shaving cream. He turns the faucet on and lets the water run until it's warm. His nose dangles like a lump of melting candle wax when he hunkers over.

"Have you used the toilet, Baba?" I ask him.

"Yes," he says, squinting at the mirror as he brings a razor up to his face.

The toilet has not been flushed. I push down the handle, and it wheezes, swallows, and spits back up.

"Do you want me to help?" I hold my hand out for the razor.

Baba doesn't move. "No," he says. The razor makes its shaky journey down the snow-covered slope.

I watch him tremble as he shaves stroke by stroke, the razor rasping from his cheekbone to his gulping Adam's apple. Baba nicks himself a few times, but he doesn't bother to rinse the cuts. His blood turns the shaving cream pink, like the frosting on a birthday cake.

Baba's gaze wanders once he's halfway done, drops from the mirror to the counter of the sink, where

there's a paper cup with two toothbrushes, a tube of travel-size toothpaste, a bar of soap, and the old picture frame. The frame is three by four, the size of Baba's heart, and it holds a grainy photo of him and my mother on their third wedding anniversary. I'm

not yet born, and they clink champagne glasses, laughing. My mother, dressed in royal blue, has her pinky finger sticking out.

Baba picks up the photograph, and I watch in the mirror as the blue films around his irises seem to expand, as if he's aging before my eyes. I'm not sure how long he stands over the sink gripping the picture in his left hand and his razor in the right, looking like a retiring Father Christmas with his half-beard of shaving cream, but when I step forward and tug the razor from his hand, it falls away without protest.

"The nurse will come by soon, Baba," I say, shaving his other cheek clean. "You'll want to be ready."

The photograph lies flat in both of his palms. He does not cry, and he carries it back to his bed. △

*"I watch him tremble
as he shaves stroke
by stroke..."*

Squirrel Brains

Hayden Stokely

“D’ya wanna see something real neat?” she asks.

Captured in the tight grasp of a trillion pine trees, drowned in humidity and July sunshine, I nod. Granny coaxes me into the shadow of the forest. She hoists a gun on her willowy frame, perching the barrel on the crook of her left shoulder where her frail collar bone juts out. I eye the weapon warily, carefully maneuvering around Granny’s aim with feeble trust in the woman’s skill of shot or sanity.

Her confidence is notable, though, as she raises the rifle to the air, poking her silver eyeball to the viewfinder. She raises it in one swift motion unhindered by the weight of gravity or age, a movement overflowing with the ease of a woman raised to do just so. My memories submerge my thoughts, and I remember the stories of her youth. Raised in the midst of the Great Depression on the ghost of a farm, Granny grew up without an education, a mother, or a house to call her own. She knew how to survive in between the winding maze of an uncharted forest. That is where she felt most at home.

My young eyes widen as the sound of a gunshot pierces the air. I blink, just to catch sight of Granny nipping a squirrel in the tail end. My heart aches for the poor creature’s life, but I say nothing in protest—too shocked to make a sound.

Granny trudges over to the wild animal. Its matted body, drenched in soil and blood, is still writhing in its grave of clover and pine needles. Its bullet-riddled hide is a grotesque sight. It makes my gut wrench.

“He lives for the wind,” Granny says with a sigh. “Poor fellow. I was doing him a favor,”

“What for, Granny?” I ask.

She chuckles, swiping away flecks of dust and grit on her rifle. “Good eatin’,” she tells me. “That’s the only real purpose in this world.”

My eyes widen at the thought of eating something so vile.

“Surely not...” I murmur.

Granny persists. She guides me on our winding path through the grove of trees, exits from the forest, and leads me back to the house. The sun, slinking below the horizon, is no longer there to warm the bellies of the leaves. I touch the squirrel Granny cradles in her arms. It is beginning to turn cold and rock-solid.

Inside, Granny’s kitchen reeks of pickling vinegar, cooked collard greens, and mildew. The oven, the house’s only source of warmth, radiates heat as I sit on the floor beside it. I gaze up and watch as the woman dons her family heirloom, a century-old apron caked in the bleached remnants of flour and syrup, and frantically pulls out bowls and mixing utensils.

“Watch this, child,” she orders me.

I stand up just as Granny cracks the squirrel’s head open with one fell knock of a copper spoon. My knees turn to jelly as she dissects its cranium, letting the blood free-fall onto her splintering countertops and drip steadily to the floor below.

Specks splatter my brand new pink sneakers, but I am silent.

She turns, pulls out a carton of freshly gathered eggs, and begins to prepare the rest of her meal. Granny cooks in a formulaic rhythm carried down from generations, handed from her mother from her mother and on and on and on. She neglects measuring tools and goes by her intuition and nose, sprinkling spices and doling out a heaping spoonful of butter generously.

Goopy entrails ooze and slosh, sizzling upon impact with the scorching cast iron skillet and thickening into a golden hue.

I am not allowed to touch—nor would I ever dream of wanting to. Repulsed and yet far too intrigued to waver my gaze, I stare, entranced at the gelatinous sight in front of me. One raw, fleshy squirrel brain cooks and simmers in a bed of scrambled eggs.

My cheeks turn green, which is probably why Granny insists on teaching me her family recipe in the first place. She beams down at me—her whimsical, vegetarian, seven-year old great-granddaughter—with her last two remaining teeth jutting out front-and-center, intent on imparting wisdom.

Delicately, she places her butcher knife onto the marbled countertop and crouches down.

“People think I’m crazy,” she murmurs. “They say I’ve got a scrambled-up brain, but baby, I ain’t got nothing on him.”

She pokes the poor squirrel carcass one last time before grabbing it by the tail to fling it outside for the dogs. I make a mental note in my mind: never stay with Granny for the summer again. △



Playtime

Mary Ellen Owings
Second Place – Drawing
Pen & Ink

Mississippi Miles

Madison Wypyski

The tires of your white Toyota bend and breathe with the crumbling asphalt soft due to sweltering summer sun that drips down through beaten branches of thick trees lining the winding curves of the maimed country road that is bound to jostle you if taken too quick.

You open windows, reveling in the hot, thick air cascading against your rosy cheeks, and with every deep breath, you imbibe the hearty scent of dirt curling up from the marshy earth, Interlacing the scents of musky cotton and hay-filled barns housing stale air and sporadic “moos” and “clucks.”

Jubilant church bells break silent morning rituals as you snail your way through narrow dirt-rimmed roads while smiling, weathered faces peer through bug-smear glass in ratty, rusty running-on-empty pick-up trucks. You smile back—a small gesture in a world of unknowns.

You reach the Delta, where removed from the city’s chaos and crazy flows a river of heartbreak and horror and of culture richer than Grandma’s crawfish étouffée.

Gentle guitar riffs pierce the quiet, and melodious voices belting deep gospels inviting you no matter your creed. The rumbling blues felt in soul and spirit filling a void with the sound of song.

But you pass it all by as the wheels continue to roll in and out staggered holes parading the street. Never looking back. Leaving the quiet for the clanking and crashing commotion-filled confusion and the people who do not return your smile.

Until one day, you find yourself missing those Mississippi miles.

The First Encounter of the Fourth Kind

Drew Lindsay

A rap song’s baseline slammed into Samuel’s ears as he watched mile markers on the side of the road fly past. His family was taking a road trip. Well, *another* road trip, the third one this year, to be precise. It was always the same, Dad driving, Mom manning the nap station in the passenger seat, and Samuel stretched out across all three of the back seats.

The trip was monotonous in the most brutal way, a thirteen-hour drive punctuated only by bathroom breaks and stops for food. The darkness around the car was almost soothing to Samuel; he could forget he was cooped up in a car. Samuel pushed the skip song button on his phone; he was tired of rap music. Looking back out into the flat night air, something caught his attention.

“Do you guys see that?” Samuel asked his parents, craning his neck to get a better look. He was met by silence; his mom must be asleep again.

Straight out across the horizon, two green and blue lights were chasing each other. Samuel tried his best to gauge the distance between himself and the lights, but it was impossible in the dark. All a sudden, the dancing ceased, and the lights got brighter and brighter. Samuel’s eyes grew wide with terror, “Oh, my God,” he thought, “it’s moving straight at our car!” The lights became blinding and rushed over the car, nearly flipping it over. “John, what was that thing?” Samuel’s mom was awake now. “I . . . I haven’t ever seen anything like that, one second it was about to plow into the car and the next it was gone,” replied Samuel’s father, his voice quivering. Samuel took his earbuds out because he thought they were putting out a ringing noise, but it didn’t stop when he removed them. The ringing seemed to be

coming from inside his very skull. It wasn’t until then he noticed all the electronics in the car going absolutely haywire: phones unlocking, flipping through apps by themselves; the radio flipping through modes and stations, playing languages no one in the car had heard before; toys wrapped up in the luggage compartment of the car for Christmas screaming for attention from children. All the while the ringing was growing louder in Samuel’s head; he couldn’t hear now. His mom and dad were covering their ears in pain as well, his father narrowly managing to pull over the car.

Tears welled in Samuel’s eyes at the sheer volume of the ringing reverberating through all of the contents of his mind. The lights were floating around outside again. Blue and green flood lights circled around the car, like a perversion of the stereotypical late-night

game show. The lights seemed to match the intensity of the ringing, the combo overloading the senses of everyone in the car. Samuel felt the car moving in a way he couldn’t describe, unable to process anything over the screaming in his head and the blinding light outside. Then, all of Samuel’s mind overloaded and his vision went black.

When he awoke he was still sitting in the car—alone. As he looked down as his feet he realized his shirt had a gash in it from his chest to the top of his belly button. As his senses came back to him, Samuel surveyed the situation. His parents were absent from the front seat; panic set in, and his vision moved to the luggage compartment: all of their bags were gone. The compartment was completely empty. Samuel reached for his phone for comfort, only to find that it was missing as well. His heartbeat was thumping so loud he couldn’t hear anything; he was in full

panic now. Looking out the window, he seemed to be in a massive building of some sort. There was a light shining down from above, centered around the car with about a twenty-foot diameter.

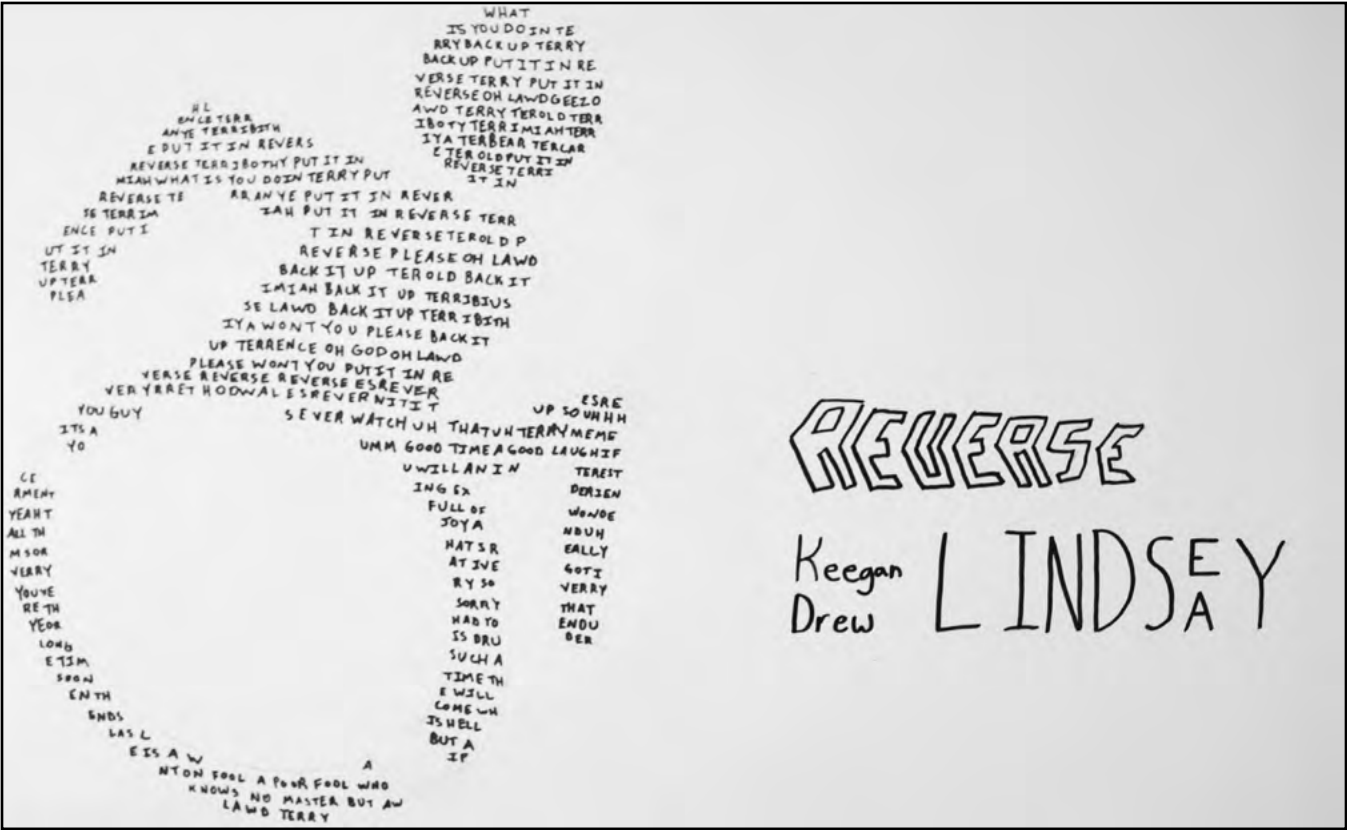
As Samuel looked out toward the farther reaches of the room, he could see shadows moving, dancing around just outside his vision. He reached for the door handle and pulled, only to find it wouldn’t budge. He yelled at the unopened window, hoping whoever was out there would help him, “Whoever you are, help me, please!” Tears streamed down his face out of fear. Samuel began trying to kick out the window; it was no use—he was stuck.

A clear figure began to move towards the car out of the darkness. It wasn’t far from the vehicle and it moved slowly. “Good God,” Samuel whispered, realizing that the figure must be around eight feet tall, judging it against the height of the car. It became visible as it walked into the light. It was slender and gray, just

like the aliens found in scary movies and on TV. It seemed to glide as it walked, floating step by step. Its black soulless eyes met his stare through the lightly tinted window. As it reached the car, Samuel moved to the opposite side of the car. The thing, whatever it was, bent over and looked through the window at him. It lacked a nose, and had gray, unblemished and slimy skin. It reached an arm up and with long, gray pencil-like fingers and tapped three times on the glass. Samuel began shaking in fear. Then, the alien seemed to grin, opening the slit it had for a mouth. It did so, extremely slowly, drinking in the horror Samuel held in his eyes. Row after row of razor sharp, dagger-like teeth were now exposed. The alien seemed to point behind him.

It wasn’t until this moment Samuel realized the hot breath on his neck. A scream cut through the air in the room as Samuel was ripped out the car window, and he was dragged off into the dark. Δ

“...all the electronics in the car going absolutely haywire: phones unlocking, flipping through apps by themselves...”



Sand Mountain Stories

Aidan Dunkelberg

In the old days, back when televisions were sparse and rare and therefore more valuable than gold or spun silk, all of my mother's cousins and uncles would gather in Odell and Ovell Robinson's living room, around a blurry screen more deep than it was wide. It was a thirty-two inch RCA Merrill, one of the best models in a twenty-mile radius of that small, squat farmhouse that packed thirty people into it every Saturday from August to December to watch Alabama football. That TV took them through most of the Bryant years; I think it died in 1968, just a couple days before the Gator Bowl. Missouri stomped the Tide, 35-10, and in the wake they held at that farmhouse the next day—a celebration of loss, a mishmash of happiness and sadness, like equal parts butter beans and mashed potatoes on a stainless steel fork—the silver lining was floated again and again, wafting through the air like steam off the fried chicken, that *At least we didn't have to set there and watch them get steamrolled.*

Then again, there's a little bit of superstition passed down through the veins of every Southern family—it's in the blood, I guess, born from generations of farming, hanging on the edge, never knowing if it's liable to rain the next day, never knowing if that calf is going to make it through another week or if the coyotes are going to get after it—and so there were a few of them who shook their heads, saying, *If only we'd have had the TV, maybe we'd have won.*

I guess it was the year after that when the gas station burned out on Highway 75. It's a sight to see

now—the pumps are still there, almost fifty years later, but everything behind it has been blown away. That is, what didn't get burned into ashes. That store was my great-grandfather's, and I've heard the story told that on the day it burned down, he was sitting out front, just the way he did every day, creaking back and forth in the worn-down wicker rocking chair that only he ever sat in. I guess his pipe was in his mouth, just like always; I've always wondered what pipe he was smoking that fateful day, if it was that one with the corn-cob bowl I've always admired. I've always wondered where that pipe came from; it's out of place in his pipe stand, next to its brothers all fashioned of ebony and some other dark wood, ash perhaps, or rowan, with a silver band

two-thirds of the way down the stem. Apparently, though, that corn-cob one was his favorite, and I think I understand why; it's just got a character to it, indefinable perhaps, but still undeniable.

Anyhow: all the tellers up around these parts will swear up and down that my great-grandfather stayed smoking his pipe, rocking back and forth in his wicker chair, until he felt the heat

of the fire on the back of his neck; they'll swear that even then it took a few seconds for the feeling to register, and then when it did he tucked his pipe in his shirt pocket and walked away, over to the gas pumps, where he watched the flames eat up the wicker chair that he'd been sitting in not thirty seconds before, watched it being tossed violently into the fire's gaping maw.

Only then did it occur to him to reach over for the pay phone by the gas pump and dial it. △

“...a celebration of loss, a mishmash of happiness and sadness, like equal parts butter beans and mashed potatoes

The Forgotten

Yousef Abu-Salah

We have no country.
Refugees of the non-existent,
We have stood in the crossfires,
Mere bystanders of a conflict concocted long ago.

Flinching at the slightest sound
Of endless ammunition,
Gunshots have become commonplace,
And we are left to rot.

A miserable existence
Epitomized by the corpses dotting the landscape
Of a place once filled with joy and life,
Now reduced to the char of grief,
A hopeless destiny that soils beneath death's footsteps.

However, things do not go as planned.
Our hearts begin to ignite,
Fueled by the resilience of our hope,
A hope that has far exceeded its limit.

We stand, hand in hand
And begin to fight the opposition.
Our pent-up emotions have finally penetrated the wall
that has restricted them,
Giving us the strength to delay our deaths just a little
bit longer.

Just as this hope begins to swell within our hearts,
A long-forgotten friend,
We are beaten once again.
No whispers in the catacombs this time.

As I lie next to my dead comrades,
Cursing this cruel world and the life that I was forced
to endure,
I realize that hope was all an illusion
That led us to our foolish actions
And gave us the belief that we could change the
outcome of our predetermined fate.

Humanity had been lost long ago
And I was the epitome of that.
I stand up for the final time
The lone survivor of an absolute massacre.
Facing the monsters who were all but shells of human
beings.
With theirs souls and sense of guilt eliminated long
ago.

And I begin to cry
For all the children and families ruined in this
bloodshed.
I feel a sharp pain in my chest
And I fall toward the unforgiving bottom,
Finally joining my comrades that have already departed
from our world,
Achieving that long-awaited peace
That eluded me for so long;
I think I finally understand why—
Everything has to die.

The Long and Winding Road

Indu Nandula

It's the last day of summer, both a sad and wonderful time. Sad, because I am leaving home; wonderful because I am finally spreading my wings in a place where I truly belong. Most people would rejoice over the chance to once again be a part of human society, but not me. After running from my demons for so long, I sometimes find myself wanting to slip away, into the darkness of my empty heart and hide eternally, never again having to reveal my face to this judgmental world.

My grandfather died in the spring of 2015; no one knew what was happening. And by the time anyone figured out something was wrong, it was too late; he was too far gone. Like me, he was a Scorpio, and a stubborn one at that, not wanting anyone to know the truth about what was happening to him. Years and years of medication took a toll on him, submerging him under the murky waters of old age. That winter, he was diagnosed with a fungal infection in his brain. Nobody had a clue. All of his children lived in the States; he lived in India. He had no wife to sit by his deathbed, no siblings to carry his ashes. He had been there for so many people, but when he needed them, they were nowhere to be found. When he needed me, I wasn't there, and like a rowboat in a monsoon, he went under, never to rise again.

My grandfather was a giving soul, bettering so many people's lives throughout the course of his lifetime. One day, a homeless woman with twin girls came to his door asking for some rice. He gave them a pound of rice, a gallon of water, and a room to sleep in for the night. He was a compassionate man, putting everyone before himself. My grandfather used to travel internationally because he worked for the census bureau. He

interacted with thousands of people throughout his lifetime, and impacted so many people's lives. Every night, there were always guests at his house, and every single one left with a smile on his face. When his daughter went into labor, who sat beside her and held her hand? He did. Who taught me to write in Telugu, and held my soft, young hand in his weathered, old one when I blundered clumsily across the page? He did.

As I drive on Highway 82 from Cleveland to Columbus, all the memories hit me like stones in a hailstorm. The mere reality of it engulfs me. Those last days, my grandfather had asked to talk to me, to hear my voice one last time, but I ignored him, thinking

he was fine. But the truth was, he wasn't fine. He knew his last moments were coming, but I did not. He had been walking a tightrope over the river of death, with me as his lighthouse. But I failed. I failed him, and he fell, whispering my name, plummeting into the void. In Greek mythology, a mathematician named Daedalus was imprisoned in the Labyrinth

with his son Icarus. In the story, Daedalus escapes the maze with his son by crafting a pair of wings for each of them. However, Icarus flies too close to the sun, the glue that holds the wings together melts, and Icarus falls. And I prayed, prayed that like Daedalus when he escaped the Labyrinth my grandfather would spread his wings and fly back to me, but he didn't. Instead, he fell.

I see my grandfather in every blur of scenery as I travel these winding roads between Greenwood and Winona, en route to my final destination. In the flowers growing on the median that separates home from my future, I see his beauty; in the shy fawn's eyes, I see his innocence. He is everywhere. Even in the sloping roads between Starkville and Columbus, I see him.

"He had been walking a tightrope over the river of death, with me as his lighthouse."

Everyone's life has some highs and some lows; no one's life is perfect. Despite the hardships he went through, from losing his older siblings, to losing his wife, my grandfather hid his pain behind a veil. He tried to bottle it up, and pack it away, so no one would see, so no one would know. And none of us were keen enough to see it. I didn't see it. The last time I called him, he told me he loved me, and that I truly understood him. But did any of us? Sometimes I want to yell out and scream, "I ignored you when you needed me the most. I'm sorry." But I know that no amount of confession or apology can undo the past.

French philosopher Albert Camus once said, "I used to advertise my loyalty and I don't believe there is a single person I loved that I didn't eventually betray." This is what I did—I betrayed my grandfather. He gave me the world, and in the end, I turned a cold shoulder towards him. He could have opened up to me, but I threw away any opportunity he had to do so. If only he were here now and could hear me saying this. But in a way, I like to think that he never left, that he is still here with me, offering me guidance, despite what I have done.

As I draw myself out of my reverie, I find myself in the middle of campus at the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. Here, I don't have to hide from my guilt—it empowers me to be the best I can be. Everything I do, I do it for my grandfather. His voice is my guide, and I hold his heart in mine. My mother once asked me, "What is it that motivates you? What are you fighting for?" I have to give her an answer, but as clichéd as it sounds, I am fighting for him, for the years that he lost, that I failed to give him. Every day, I look at his picture, and tell him that I live, and breathe, because of him. He gave me my mother, and through her, he gave me life. And now, he lives through me. △

So This is Mississippi (after Ted Kooser)

Jagger Riggle

The broken roads meander
Into the fields; a cloud of dust
Explodes into the air from metal monster,
circling, preparing rows of corn.

The occasional double-wide
Littered with rusted pickups
Break the otherwise flat plots full of
Mud, beans, and sweet potatoes.

So this is Mississippi, a Thursday
Afternoon, August. Crawling along
With windows up so you don't drown,
White, puffy clouds floating around.

A pine forest towers above the road
Concealing shy does, stealthy foxes,
Silent crows, when it ends abruptly
To a waist-high field of future hay.

You feel like that; you feel like
Running out of gas, like leaving the road
To go explore, to take the overgrown path
Small cars have never trekked before.

Creaking heard from a barn or
Sniffing the sweet smell of honeysuckles or
Petting pine needles off the old hunting dog
Slobbering all over your face.

You feel like drifting. You feel like pulling over and
floating above the rural landscape. You dance
instead in a field, and transcend time, and
take a step, and trample a bean stalk.



Bessie

Mary Ellen Owings
Scratchboard

Dirt Dad Stephanie Dauber

One, two, three folds on your forehead,
The Mississippi July sun won't stop you
From clearing the kudzu leeching the life out of your
granddaddy's farm.

*It's an oak, look see, she's beautiful
and older than you and me combined,
You said. One day she'll be as tall as those hundred-
year-old pines,
And I wanna watch her grow.*

So you dug your thick heels straight into the mud and
Pulled. You panned for gold with
A rhythmic cut and pull of the dirt, desperate
To get every creeping root until the pile grew
Beside you, growing as you monkeyed
From limb to limb, detangling
Parasitical vines from the healthy host, risking your
life for hers.
And you sat and watched the kudzu burn,
Sitting with your knees pulled in and loosely crossed
Around your legs, a beer dangling between your
fingers;
You watched it burn, and dried yourself
In the heat of your labor.

The Countryside

Natalie Long

Gravel scatters, hitting the sides of the truck,
Creating inconspicuous chips in the paint.
Smoke curls out the driver's cracked window
From the burnt orange end of the cigarette.
The passenger breathes in only when
She can catch a breath of clean air.

The sweltering summer sun rises high in the sky,
the clear, blue sky looming up above,
as the children play in the cornfield mazes
that stretch for miles on the open road,
chasing each other in and out of the rows.

Older siblings keeping a watchful eye,
Smalls grins gracing their faces,
Reminiscing of their childhood days,
And they soon join in.

In between fields,
Brick houses and paneled trailers
shelter mothers and fathers
Fatigued from working in fields
In the blistering sun.

Weeks fly by and fall is upon them,
The colorful hues of reds, yellows, and oranges
Hang from the trees.
The route doesn't change,
But the scenery does.

No longer are there mazes to be played in,
Chopped down by the big, green tractor.
Children no longer roam outside,
Held up by schoolwork, and
Mothers' fears they'll catch colds.

Spring brings a sense of normalcy.
Flowers of yellows, blues, and pinks start blooming;
Trees fill with budding leaves.
Children return to the outside,
Spending their days by keeping a watchful eye on the fields
Waiting for the rows of corn
To pop up,
So they can run through the mazes once again.

Sneaky Beans

Rosie Andrews

"Time for school!" my father chirped. It was ten
o'clock in the morning and nine-year-old me felt cozy
in the nest of my quilted comforter. It was not until
my older brother, Parker, coaxed me with a cup of hot
chocolate that I trickled onto the gelid hardwood floor,
my feet waking a little more with each shuffling step.
We sat in the living room, my dad on the burgundy
loveseat and Parker and I on the brown leather couch,
sipping from our piping mugs. The yellow sunlight
seeped through the broken window blinds. The sound
of my younger brother in his baby walker squeaked
throughout the antebellum home.

My dad began to read the story of the First Punic
War. Aside from mathematics, vocabulary, and reading,
my father taught my brother and
me the ins-and-outs of Roman
history and European geography.
We also learned the fundamen-
tals of the Latin language. My
father would make us repeat,
"*Amo, amas, amat, amamus,
amatis, amant,*" until the conju-
gation of the Latin word for
"love" imprinted into our fourth-
and seventh-grade minds. At the
time, this was not peculiar; to our knowledge, every
fourth and seventh grader studied the Latin language.
Not until later, I realized, that these years of home-
schooling were where my *amor* for learning, people,
and cultures was born.

After our morning routine, my brother and I would
often ride our bikes to the brand new coffee house
down the street, Sneaky Beans, to study. I loved that
coffee house—from its odd periwinkle exterior to
its creaking wooden floors to the chalkboard in the
restroom that always read encouraging (or obscene)
messages from the locals. The baristas who worked
there were hospitable, particularly Leslee. Leslee never
charged us for our drinks. She always crafted me a
luscious, frozen, chocolatey creation that would kindle

my taste buds and soothe them all at once.

The Sneaky Beans regulars represented the best
people on Earth: Sam, the neighborly homeless man
who would come inside for a cup of water and read the
Clarion Ledger; Byron, the owner who gave me a free
"I Heart Sneaky Beans" t-shirt for dancing to the swing
music that played over the newly refurbished speak-
ers while I stood in line to place my order; Lauren,
the woman with untamed, voluminous red hair whose
entire closet consisted of vintage clothing purchased
from The Salvation Army Family Store; Geo, the fifty-
something-year-old cyclist who owned a matching road
bike for every neon, skin-tight cycling suit he wore;
and John Smith, the introverted electrical engineer who

jumped over the firework foun-
tain in my family's front yard on
New Year's Eve.

"The regular spot?" Parker
asked.

"Yes," I replied. We mean-
dered our way to the back of the
coffee house. It was empty except
for the three Belhaven College
students discussing plans for
their upcoming sculpture project.

Parker and I plopped down onto the black, faux leather
couch. I opened my Latin workbook and began scrib-
bling "*amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant*" over
and over again.

Ten years later, I am at the Mississippi School for
Mathematics and Science, or what I like to call, Sneaky
Beans, Part Two—a place of learning, personal growth,
and community. Since I began to learn the Latin
language, I have deepened my *amor* for people and
cultures. I am thankful for the lessons that homeschool-
ing and Sneaky Beans taught me. Not only did I learn
how to conjugate *amo*, I also learned the true mean-
ing of *amor* through the people of Fondren in Jackson,
Mississippi. I loved the regulars at Sneaky Beans, and
they loved me. Δ

*"...the Latin word
for 'love' imprinted
into our fourth-
and seventh-grade
minds."*

An Act Justified

Tija Johnson

This is my story.

“Mr. Refinni, please answer the question. I will not ask you again. Your honor, please instruct the defendant to answer the question.” Agitation rushed through every vein in his neck as he rocked side to side monitoring my every move. The prosecutor had been attempting to force me to confess to his millionth question of the day. He eyeballed me intensely, awaiting my response, and my smirk was only upsetting him even more. Clemmons was his great uncle, so he despised my mere existence. It seemed to me that he should have understood me more than anybody. The viscous tension between me and every organism in the mocha-colored courtroom swelled like cakes in the oven. I enjoyed the anticipation. The longing to know what I had done. The reasons behind my actions. The pity the jury was going to give me once I put on my Oscar award-winning performance. And my award, you may ask? A not-guilty verdict.

I had been in this particular setting far too often so I knew how the game was run. In fact, I think I had begun to play the system better than it was playing me. I knew all the right and wrong things to say and when to say them. But let’s jump back in time to see why I am like I am, shall we?

Nineteen fifty-five. Five years old. Carefree was my name and absorbing the sun’s beautiful rays was my game. My two-year-old sister, Cara, and I occasionally went out to play when those people weren’t around. Born in the deep south of Alabama, we experienced all types of things. *Stupid fools! I don’t care what those bleeding hearts tell you, you ain’t nothing, and you ain’t gone never be nothing.* At five years old, I didn’t need to be hearing no jibberjazz like that. My brain was like a Bounty paper towel gliding over a water spill. I internalized it. And my sister. Rage flowed over my bones as she began to repeat these things. I wanted to bash her head in when she sang out the words “*stupid fools.*” Just as I would go to smack her on her butt, those big brown eyes would pierce my soul. It was not her fault that she was born in a time where America was

everything but united, and the people of the country were spun directly from the devil. I couldn’t do it. My sister was my kryptonite.

Eighteen years old. My life was a living hell. Do you know what’s like to see your baby sister being beaten by a crackhead? This crackhead was the woman who gave birth to us. She used to beat Cara so much that her skin peeled and hung from her back like a stringy orange. Then the bi.... Put a hot iron on her back. I was helpless. Her pimp boyfriend shoved a gun in my mouth. The taste of steel is one I’ll never forget. I had guns on my flesh so much that just the feel of one on my skin, and I could tell you what type of gun it was. So what did I do ? I got revenge. Hard.

Now save your pity. I was not one of those children who had a hard life, did good in school, and overcame my issues. I was only two thirds of that. The statement “I had a hard life” would be an understatement and absolute insult. I was highly intelligent. My IQ test was off the charts. Ever heard of William James Sidis? Google ’im. I can run an Olympic marathon around him. I know how to manipulate your brain in ways God himself cannot. I didn’t try to overcome my issues. I let the hurt fester into pain and hurt and revenge. I wanted to do more than hurt the crack woman and her pimp. And that I did. That and more. “I was angry with my foe: / I told it not, my wrath did grow. / . . . / Till it bore an apple bright. / . . . / In the morning glad I see / My foe outstretched beneath the tree.” William Blake . See, I felt this in my soul. I was destined to make those animals feel the pain I felt for so many years. I was a certified sociopath, and I knew it. So what did I do ? I *remembered*, that’s what I did.

May 6. Around 8 o’clock. Cara and I had just left out of the corner store stealing food. Cara’s ribs began to stick out her little side at night because we hadn’t eaten in days. Tiptoeing down the “white man’s” alley, I told Cara we had to be quiet because one wrong move and we were dead. We were doing good until the damned dog started barking. Imagine running quicker than the speed of light and your sister falls. I lost all

breath in my body. Shots began firing and I knew I had to get Cara out of there. I swooped up Cara and took off running. “Pow!” A bullet struck in my arm, but I didn’t stop running until I got home. When I burst through the door, I started checking Cara for gunshot wounds, disregarding the one I had received. She wailed in my arms and I couldn’t do anything about it. Feelings like that you can’t imagine. I would’ve rather been scorched by the sun. I’d rather have acid poured down my esophagus millimeter by millimeter. I would have rather have oxygen injected directly in my chest. Anything—instead of seeing my sister lie there helpless. Weak. Powerless. The crackhead and her pimp weren’t there at the time. Suddenly, the pain from my arm crippled me. Who was going to care for me? Who was making sure I was okay? I roared out my pain as Mrs. Lanston, our neighbor, burst in the door. Then it all went blank. I woke up in the hospital. When the police came, they said they had to take me away, but that meant I would be separated from Cara. I ran. When I made it back home, I walked in on that ingrate on top of my sister. I will save you the details. Before I knew it, I was on top of him giving him all I had. The crack lady pulled me off and said if I hit him again she would kill Cara and me both. I grabbed Cara and walked out the door, swearing to get revenge. But just as we got down the steps, Cara’s rigid hands released from my grip. Cara’s body gracefully plunged to the concrete ground. A hole the size of a quarter invaded her forehead as blood

oozed from her mouth. Her eyes were locked on mine. My mother’s pimp shot Cara, and what did my mother do? The sick ingrate laughed. You never know what death feels like until you watch your soul leave your body. I died when Cara did.

In that instance, I sold my soul to revenge, hate, and vengeance. I figured, “What kind of God would allow this to happen?” There was no God. Only man and his decisions. So I did just that. The crackhead died before I could get my revenge, and I cursed God for it. But the pimp. He was mine. I was my own God, and his death was closer than he thought.

May 6. Twenty years later. The anniversary of my sister’s death. I dressed like a cop and went and arrested the pimp on his block. The piece of spit was smacking around a woman for getting pregnant. When I pulled up, the prostitutes scattered like roaches, but I could care less. I was a bull and he was drenched in red. The bastard didn’t even recognize me at first, but I felt that it wouldn’t matter soon. When he was in the car, I told him, “This is for Cara.” The look in his eyes when he recognized me was almost enough for killing my sister. Almost. When I got him back to my house, I acted on any emotion that came to mind: tortured him, scooped out his eyeballs, cut his tongue, sawed off each limb one at a time. But I didn’t kill him. I let Mother Nature do that.

“Mr. Refinni, did you or did you not kill Edgar Clemmens?” I looked him dead in his eyes and said, “No.” Δ



Heidelberg
Maggie Ellis
Photography

Camels

Sarah Swiderski

Thwack.

Arnie's chin collides with cement, bits of skin sticking to the pebbled surface.

"Get up."

Arnie remains splayed on the ground. His glasses lie about three feet in front of him, a crack running clean through the right lens.

"I said *get up or I'll break a rib.*"

My stomach clenches as Arnie pushes himself up. His arms are no bigger around than toothpicks, and they shake under the weight of his torso. They give out once, his chest hitting the ground in a failed pushup, before Arnie finally reaches his knees. Blood flows from the break in his chin, and his arms are scraped, but he's up.

Jerry pushes a sandy curl out of his eyes before leaning towards Arnie's flushed face.

"If you ever look at my girlfriend again, I swear to God, I'll break more than your glasses."

Arnie recoils from Jerry's nicotine breath. I saw him smoking a pack of Camels earlier; he's been smoking a lot lately. As Arnie slowly nods, Jerry turns on his heel, coming to take my hand. I allow myself to be pulled through the sea of onlookers, all averting their eyes from mine. I glance back at Arnie. He's lying on the ground again.

I turn my attention to Jerry's boat shoes, which

keep stride with my sneakers. Each step echoes in my ears as we near campus:

Break up with him. Break up with him. Break up with him.

His grip on my hand gets tighter as we stop outside my Spanish class. Jerry leans in to kiss my forehead, his hot breath stinging my nose. He's definitely smoked more than one pack today.

"See you later, babe. I love you."

As he turns on the heel of his boat shoe, Jerry's hand brushes a lock from his neck, careful to avoid its base. I can't make them out from here, but I can picture the cigarette burns. They're darker in the middle, with

lighter skin pushing up around the edges. Fresh ones appear every month or so, when I see his dad's beat-up Honda parked in the middle of his mom's driveway after school.

He doesn't like talking about it.

As Jerry reaches his locker, he turns and catches my eye. Something like a smile stretches across his face, and I'm reminded of the boy from lifetimes ago, who helped Arnie up when he tripped over his shoelaces and volunteered as a Spanish tutor.

But that smile breaks with our eye contact. I watch as Jerry pulls a pack of Camels from his locker, glancing around before he stashes it in his hoodie pocket.

Then, he disappears into the crowd. Δ

"His grip on my hand gets tighter... 'See you later, babe. I love you.'"



Mufasa

Vivienne Tenev

Wildlife Paintings

Acrylic Paint on Wood

Camouflage

Hayden Stokley

You say amidst fuzzy memories of

Crocodile-green tee shirts and

Brown slacks to wear to Sunday school,

"My favorite color is camouflage."

I scoff.

A whole six years younger, but

I can spell words two syllables bigger

And I know, "Camouflage isn't a color, stupid."

On hazy afternoons with wide, youthful eyes watching you

Ride bikes down the trail kids weren't supposed to cross,

I would lose sight of you,

Then see the neon green wheels spinning, spinning.

Spinning, like the way time spins when you try and

Remember the days when camouflage was a color,

And you still lived in that rickety house

Behind Okatibbee Lake, still wearing camo.

The boy whose green eyes sparkled,

Whose leaves and trees and insects,

Whose muddy boots and loose twigs and stems,

Marked an earthy trail through the house.

When they called and told me,

I didn't see a young man who was unemployed,

Depressed, and lonely pulling a trigger,

I saw camouflage.

I saw you, eleven years old, darting through the forest,

Invisible.



Groot

Sophia Garcia

First Place – Sculpture

Clay

Mississippi Livin'

Mia Parker

The wind smacks your face as you ride

Head hanging out of the window

around the curvy backroads

in the dead of night.

Everything is silent, except for the sound

of your engine roaring in the night

and your screams of joy echoing through the darkness

and that 80s song or rap song or whatever song is

ripping out of your speaker.

The gravel road beneath you throws you

every which way through a sea of

yes ma'am's and *no sir's* and

this-a-way's and *over yonder's*.

The dirt of the road stirs up into

the air, burning your eyes, but you have never

felt more alive than you do in the

front seat of that silver Sonata.

Ballpark in the Sky

Alex Monterde

Grass slumps under the weight
of fallen water.

A haze fills the air,
coating my skin like another shirt.

The moisture does strange things to
the light of night, casting the world
in a purple shade.

A rumbling sounds, thunder from a distant cloud,
but this thunder grumbles about first basemen.

White stadium light is cast up,
and shadows swirl on its surface
as though the throwing and catching and spitting players
are themselves in the cloud, and their spit is the mist all around.

I sit in the moist, enveloping dark,
my shoes weighed down by a hapless puddle,
And watch the ballpark in the sky.



Waterfall Tower

Daniel Bicknell

Third Place – Sculpture

Plaster

Verisimilitude

Aidan Dunkelberg

Three miles out from the main intersection
in that dusky midwinter Iowa town with its
nondescript but magical brick storefronts
blurred by gray skies and dirty snow and cold
is a small tin garage where I first learned to ski—

not downhill but cross-country, across
level paths that rolled out over snow-covered fields,
through woods of bare trees, their branches
weeping thin icicles—paths brushing up against
frost-crusts banks of the Cedar River.

Once after a snowstorm I saw—or thought I saw—
an orange-billed pelican waddling across that river’s ice,
oblivious to me and my clumsy skis
on the ridge above.

Life is like that
after a new snowfall; you see everything
with the wonder of a child. Anything
could be possible—seeing pelicans in northern
Iowa, skiing to the ends of the earth,
learning to understand the language
of beech trees creaking in the cold.

White pelicans migrate through Iowa
but don’t winter there—
maybe this one was passing through
and stopped to admire the glory
of the river and trees blanketed in purest white.
Or perhaps it was I, fooled by
the verisimilitude of a fresh snowfall,
who dreamed a pelican on an ice-glazed river.

Staying on the Sidewalk

Hannah Craft

“They threw rocks at me.” Incredulous, I gawked at Grandma when she recalled her past; the words seemed to haunt me more than they haunted her. Grandma was describing her daily walk to high school back when she was a teenager, some fifty years ago. Attending the only school for blacks in Holly Springs, Mississippi—Sims High School—she had to trek through a white neighborhood before arriving to school. Along her journey to and from school, she would pass white students who threw stones at her yelling, “Get off the sidewalk!” followed by a racial slur. Imagining how afraid and inferior she must have felt at the mercy of her white counterparts, I sympathized with my grandmother. As a Mississippi native, I have never been naïve about the infamous history of the Deep South and its racism. But knowing that my own grandmother was affected by such animosity increased my pain. “So what did you do?” I asked her, on the verge of tears. Grandma glanced into my eyes as she recalled the memory; my ears will never forget her voice, light in sound but heavy with meaning as she replied, “I stayed on that sidewalk.”

Deeply moved by Grandma’s simple yet powerful words, I immediately began assessing my teenage life and comparing it to hers. I realized how fortunate I was, never experiencing public discrimination based on the color of my skin or never dreading to attend school because white bullies were going to torment me for being black. Nevertheless, my grandmother proudly endured every stone and insult. She was proud because she did not let her oppressors control her or define her. Grandma taught me one of the greatest lessons in life: perseverance. Although I found sorrow in Grandma’s story, I also found inspiration.

My grandmother’s walk to school was long and hard; my road to success will be longer and harder. While discrimination is not as apparent as it was fifty

years ago, unfortunately, it still exists. I am headed towards a profession in the STEM field, which, in the United States, is dominated by white males. According to a U.S. Census article published in 2013, only six percent of workers in STEM fields are African American. For some, this statistic can be intimidating, but for me, this statistic is empowering. Along my road to success, I will encounter people who will not want me where I am because of my race, gender, social class, and religion. However, I desire to be like Grandma, refusing to succumb to the standards of my antagonists. I deserve to walk on the sidewalk, too.

Every time I feel as if I have hit a stumbling block, I remember Grandma, and I turn my hurdles into motivation. At the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, a challenging residential high school, my academics can easily overwhelm me. Whenever I make a “B” on a calculus quiz or am faced with a plethora of polyatomic ions to memorize in chemistry, I do not get discouraged. Instead, I am driven to

excel and confront the challenges. I hope to face all barriers in that manner. Anytime I hear the words “not white enough,” “not man enough,” “not smart enough,” “not rich enough,” “not secular enough,” I will embrace my identity, increase my determination, and defy the odds.

My grandmother and I shared frequent, intimate conversations; the conversation about her walk to school, however, was life-changing. Reminded of the opportunities Grandma was not granted because of her race, gender, socioeconomic background, and cultural traditions, I desire to succeed in a way she was not able to do fifty years ago. She motivates me to persevere in the face of adversity; Grandma’s story of walking to school may have served as a simple memory to her, but her words will forever resonate throughout my life: I, too, will stay on the sidewalk. △

*“...only six percent of
workers in STEM
fields are African
American.”*

Anachronisms out the Window

Jackson Sparkman

I clamber my six-foot-six-inch self into a Toyota Prius. Two blocks out and five hours to travel; I start by tambouring down Main Street, Columbus. After I pass the mini-golden Statue of Liberty and through the claustrophobic expanse of complementary pastel storefronts facing one another, I face the downturn of a hill. I feel as if I am riding into the great blue expanse of sky. If only the euphoria could stay. Traveling from Columbus to Gautier I feel as if I am a satellite reaching for the edge of two galaxies, slinging between gravitational fields of memory until I eventually reach out of the grasp of them all.

Every month, I dance around the vertebrae of the great Magnolia State. My family has lived in its hilled bones for the past 200 years and made lives in the tendons between the harder spots. Every bone, and I scrape down every bone, memory coagulates on the rim of my car. There's the Star of the American Road, just down Highway 45 from Cheryl Eldridge Sparkman, where she knew the owners of the cheapest gas around. It is now ever-expanding rust skin under the crinkled thin film of white paint. More revolutions of tire over ever-expanding black asphalt, and on the left is Fontaine Peach Stand, where they started selling Alabama peaches in the early 2000's, and Cheryl's pocketbook has never forgiven.

On down, and on down, I reach my birthplace, and the death place of my people. Meridian's Threefoot Building seems to be a beacon in the wasteland of downtown, now that all the Wypyskis and Shelleys have moved on. I remember my first time on the top of the parking garage juxtaposed to that lonely pricking tower to the sky, my grandfather's hands around my waist I watched the traffic below. He's now gone, but I want to go reach into the sky on the top of that concrete monstrosity again. *But there's not time for reliving a memory when I must hit I-10 before sunset.*

I keep my wheels moving until there is nothing left but pine trees and chewing tobacco cans lining our highway. Buckatunna is my half-way point, a happy expanse in the green walls. I can swear to you

this day, there is no better fried-chicken restaurant than Buckatunna's little Podunk Chevron station. The grease-lined bar hosted my brother, sister, and me when our grandmother evacuated us from Hurricane Isaac in 2012. My sixth-grade, ever-expanding belly had rumbled enough for my grandmother to take its suggestion to pull over; I had my eyes set on the beautiful orange potato wedges, and my grandmother's examination of my eye led her to ask if they had any sweet potato. That was the best "No" I've ever heard in my entire life. I'll eat when I get home. Jack, get back onto the road.

My mother's Chris Ledou CD punctures my ears as I'm rolling and rolling. You might miss the turn of the road, only a small green rectangle under a much larger blue sign reads, "Gulf Coast Exit." Small towns are only small towns, only flashes on the open road when you are so close to your mama's house: Vernal, then Lucedale, then Agricola, then Hurley.

I finally reach Moss Point. I finally see the purple-gray wall advertising the River City. I finally exit onto I-10. It's the first time I've broken 80 miles an hour in a very long time, and I accelerate onto the bridge over the basin of the Escatawpa River. I am now speeding into the great auburn magenta-edged expanse in front of me. To my side lies the largest plain of floating banks of wind-slanted reeds cut with wide rivers and slim creeks in the world, and all I can do is pay attention to the driver in front of my car on the bridge, flying sixty feet up on the overpass of an Interstate. Within twenty minutes, I am in an arced driveway in a house that I've spent less time in than the dorms of the residential school I attend.

It seems to me now that the concrete I walk on feels fabricated; the handle on the door feels synthetic. There is no home that I can enter and truly feel as if I have found my center; there is no physical brick and mortar structure that holds what is truly home. All I have left of home are my dances along the vertebrae, only my anachronisms through the car windows. △



Gridlocked

Sarah Perry

Honorable Mention – Drawing
Acrylic Paint & Ink

Labor of Death

Allyson Espy

Death is your business so that I will live,
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
The same hands that crush roasted peanut shells,
Disturb and displace the earth to make room for a body.
I don't like to watch them go down into the ground, but
I sit vigil for you.
Otherwise, your only other company would be six feet under.
You are too old for the back-cracking, bone-shaking labor of death but
Too old to cease, for as long as you savor breath, you will toil.
And the grind is generational,
I know.

Sweat, tears and fears is all you ever saw;
All I will never dream because of you.
The craft of death makes your demeanor stiff and frigid,
Almost like the ones at rest.
Though the algor melts when I,
Swaddled in the warmth of innocence, enter.
Young girls are not supposed to have thoughts that linger
On the final fate of men, but
Now, death is my labor, too.

CONTRIBUTORS’ NOTES

Yousef Abu-Salah (Flowood) hopes that his poem “The Forgotten” conveys the feelings of hopelessness and isolation that citizens in war-torn countries face across the globe. He plans to become a researcher in the field of virtual reality. His favorite book is *The Lemon Tree*, and he would like to meet Ahed Tamimi.

Rosie Andrews (Jackson) identifies her eighth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Mallory Gnemi, as her icon. She plans to major in cultural anthropology at Rhodes College and identifies *Brave New World* as her favorite book.

Kamal Bhalla (Clinton) wants to meet BTS, a K-pop group, and travel the world. She takes photography because she wants to capture the beauty that surrounds her and be able to live in that moment forever.

Daniel Bicknell (Southaven) says his favorite book is *Eragon*, and if he could meet anyone, it would be Nikola Tesla or H. P. Lovecraft.

Rachel Brady (Columbus) writes stories inspired by those told by her family. Her motto is from one of her favorite movies, *The Outsiders*: “Stay gold, Ponyboy, stay gold.” Her favorite book series is Harry Potter, and she plans to study filmmaking and business at Tulane University.

Keely Brewer (Hattiesburg) says about art: “For one of my birthdays, I remember getting this massive pack of crayons. It was basically a Crayola carousel. It was the kind of thing that made other kids in elementary school think you were cool. All I wanted to do was draw. On everything.”

Hannah Craft (Holly Springs) recalls writing a children’s story about a butterfly and a bee when she was six years old; the story was typed, printed, and featured her own illustrations. She will attend Vanderbilt University and major in biochemistry, then go on to medical school. She hopes that her essay will “inspire readers so that they can do anything, regardless of the limitations or roadblocks that others might try to impose on them.”

Justin Cucuzza (Wiggins) says his favorite book is *SYLO* by D. J. MacHale.

Stephanie Dauber (Columbus) plans to major in biochemistry and become a veterinarian. She writes to “show others what I’ve seen and give them a new perspective.” Her first memory of writing is scribbling down into a used composition book couplets “about the beach. Only the beach.”

Danail Dimitrov (Ackerman) makes art because he has an idea of what things should be like and he wants to see it. His hero is his father because he always supports him.

Aidan Dunkelberg (Columbus) plans to study physics and is especially interested in cosmology and quantum theory. He writes to “filter the world through a different lens, to frame images and fill in the gaps between them, to connect and dissect the universe.”

Maggie Ellis (Forest) is influenced by Hilary Knight, USWNT Gold Medalist, and her favorite book series is Percy Jackson and the Olympians. She plans to major in biology, and her motto is “The hardest thing to know is which bridges to cross and which to burn.”

Morgan Emokpae (Byram) paints to have fun and relax. His icon is his mom, and his motto is “Life is a series of chosen steps.”

Allyson Espy (Clarksdale) writes because “sometimes, it’s just fun to make things up.” She says her hero is Charlie Brown and plans someday to own a farm with chickens.

Stormy Gale (Columbus) says her hero is Carl Sagan because “He spreads the love and knowledge.” Her favorite book is *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, and she plans to major in physics at the University of Alabama.

Sophia Garcia (Doddsville) was inspired by an episode of Bob Ross painting: “I tried it out, and I was pretty good (for an eight-year-old).” A defining quotation for her is from Stephanie Bennett-Henry: “Life is tough, my darling, but so are you.”

Victoria Gong (Vicksburg) says her favorite book is *A Separate Peace* and would like to meet her great-grandfather. She says she writes to “find the stories in people’s pasts and connect them to their presents, to help people recognize and understand the stories around them.”

Edith Marie Green (Oxford) has a favorite quotation: “All that glitters isn’t gold, it’s disco” (Dr. Easterling). She says, “Writing makes me happy, it’s that simple.” Her future plans are to become a history teacher and activist.

Chanclinique Hairston (Brooksville) says Michelle Obama is her icon and Jesus is her hero because “He makes the impossible possible.” Her favorite book is *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and she plans to major in zoology at the University of Southern Miss.

Jaylen Hopson (Meridian) would like to meet Midoriya from *My Hero Academia*. He hopes that what he writes “will inspire people to look more closely at the world around them.”

Tija Johnson (Itta Bena) wrote her first short story in second grade; the story was framed and hung in her school’s office. Asked to name a hero, she calls her grandmother “the definition of heroic” for overcoming all that she and her family went through.

Kayci Kimmons (Batesville) says about writing: “I used to journal all of my ‘hardships’ when I was younger. My entries usually consisted of complaints about my mom.” Her favorite book is *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell, and she plans to attend the University of Mississippi, then medical school.

Lilian Le (Bay Saint Louis) says her defining quote is from Cardi B: “I’m my own competition. I’m competin’ with myself.” Her hero is Dr. Morgan because “She never lets stuff or people bring her how, and she is awesome.”

Drew Lindsay (Grenada) says that his defining quotation is “Keep moving forward.” (Walt Disney) He writes because “putting your thoughts on paper gives them a sort of permanence” and hopes that readers are entertained by his contributions to *Southern Voices*.

Keegan Lindsey (Canton) hopes that his submissions to *Southern Voices* “lead to a newer, better form of spiritual enlightenment, allowing its viewers to ascend to a plane beyond our own, feeble minds.”

Natalie Long (Louisville) wants to attend Vanderbilt University as a pre-med student. She writes because “I enjoy it, and it’s a good outlet” and says her favorite book is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

Michelle Luo (New Albany) says her first memory of making art is “drawing on the walls.” She hopes her submissions will inspire “empathy and awareness of personal identity” in others; she would like to meet Atticus Finch.

Alex Monterde (Purvis) plans to “study chemical engineering, get a 9-to-5 job, publish something, and die.” He remembers writing a Victorian-era detective story in third grade (“It was one page long”) and says he writes to “try and create something I’d like to read.”

Aaron Montgomery (Wiggins) wants to meet Martin Luther King Jr. to get his perspective on today’s society and how to change it for the better. His motto is “Just get it done!”

Indu Nandula (Cleveland) would like to major in either criminal justice or medicine. Her defining quotation is “Happiness can be found in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.” (Albus Dumbledore)

Mary Ellen Owings (Columbus) says her first memory of creating art was drawing rainbow people with crayons in Kindergarten. She plans to major in environmental biology on a pre-med track and possibly minoring in art at Tulane University.

Mia Parker (Lucedale) says her future plans are “IDK, as long as I love it”; her defining quotation is “Don’t worry, be happy.”

Kayla Patel (Columbus) says about art: “It is a way to let others see the world how I see it.” She plans to major in biological sciences on a pre-med track at the University of Alabama.

Mary Hayden Patterson (Hernando) says her hero is her grandfather because “He was the strongest and most creative person I’ve ever known and he taught me to think outside the box.” She is influenced by Opha May Johnson, and her favorite book is *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare. Her motto is “A ship is safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.”

Helen Peng (Starkville) hopes that her submissions will “help my readers think more deeply about a seemingly insignificant subject or action.” Her favorite book is *The Kite Runner*.

Millie Perdue (Ocean Springs) says her first memory with art is getting into trouble for using a pen to doodle on new wallpaper. Her favorite book is *Howl’s Moving Castle*, and her hero is Alexis Litke because “She gives me strength when I have none.”

Sarah Perry (Columbus) says about art: “When I was around three years old, my mom gave me paints to play with, and I painted both sides of a piece of paper blue and stuck it to the wall. That was my first masterpiece of many.”

Jagger Riggle (Pontotoc) plans to go into the field of meteorology. His defining quotation is “Failure is not an option.” (Gene Kranz)

Jessica Smith (Columbus) says that “when I paint, each brush stroke allows me to forget my worries and just make something beautiful.” Her favorite book is Christopher Paolini’s *Eragon*.

Jackson Sparkman (Gautier) says that in fourth grade “I wrote about Katrina from the eyes of illegal Mexican immigrants crossing the Gulf of Mexico. I got a B.” His hero is Amber Jackson.

Hayden Stokley (Laurel) writes because “the art of storytelling has the power to transform my perspective. Writing adds magic to even my most boring days.” She plans to study law or public policy.

Sarah Swiderski (Starkville) hopes to research infectious diseases at Emory University and beyond. She says her writing “aims to highlight details—calluses lacing a fingertip, an exhausted face broken by a smile.”

Vivienne Tenev (Starkville) says, “I enjoy making art. Drawing and painting has taught me different ways to observe the world around me. Making art keeps my mind engaged but in a relaxing way, allowing me to take a break without getting bored.” She plans to major in chemistry and minor in art and Chinese.

Mariat Thankachan (Clarksdale) says about art and writing: “I remember living with my grandparents in the mountains of India; the scene was too beautiful. Pictures didn’t do nature justice, so I tried to save my memories in poetic works and acrylic paintings.” She hopes to become a physical therapist, and her favorite book is *Wuthering Heights*.

Barrie Wright (Cleveland) says her first memory of creating art is painting and drawing with her sister. Her motto is “I stay in shape by running from commitment.”

Madison Wypyski (Pass Christian) plans to study neuroscience or public health. Her favorite book is *Great Expectations*, and she would like to meet Paul Kalanithi.

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