SOUTHERN VOICES

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

Southern Voices is available to read on the Internet at www.themsms.org

SOUTHERN VOICES 2016

SOUTHERN VOICES

VOLUME XXXI • SPRING, 2019

Staff

Judges

Art and Photography Judge

Mr. Jonathan Cumberland is an Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Alabama. He has maintained a creative practice in illustration and graphic design since 2009. Notable clients include *Johns Hopkins Magazine, Scholastic Magazine*, Mississippi Tourism Association, The University of Alabama and more. In addition to his commercial work, Mr. Cumberland has appeared in juried international poster exhibitions throughout Europe and South America. He received his BFA in Graphic Design from Mississippi University for Women in 2009 and his MFA in Illustration from Savannah College of Art and Design in 2011.

Essay Judge

Dr. Stella Nickerson graduated from MSMS in the Class of 2008 and received both the Abernethy Award for Excellence in Creative Writing and the Chris Read Award for Fiction, as well as state, regional, and national awards for her writing. She received her Ph.D. from Arizona State University and is now a professor of chemical engineering at Brigham Young University. She teaches a scientific writing course to engineering graduate students and has many fond memories of Mississippi, MSMS, and *Southern Voices.*

Poetry Judge

Dr. Jay Parini is the D.E. Axinn Professor of English and Creative Writing at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, and is a poet, novelist, biographer, and critic. His six books of poetry include *New and Collected Poems, 1975-2015* and *The Art of Subtraction*. In addition to eight novels, he has written biographies of John Steinbeck, Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Jesus, and Gore Vidal. His nonfiction works include *The Art of Teaching, Why Poetry Matters* and *Promised Land: Thirteen Books that Changed America*. He writes for various publications, including *The New York Times, The Guardian,* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He often contributes op-ed pieces to *CNN, The Daily Beast,* and other websites.

Short Story Judge

Mrs. Jane Nickerson is the author of *Strands of Bronze and Gold* (Knopf, 2013), *The Mirk and Midnight Hour* (Knopf, 2014), and *A Place of Stone and Shadow* (North Loop Books, 2017). For many years Mrs.Nickerson was the children's librarian in Aberdeen, Mississippi. She has always loved "the South, the 'olden days,' gothic tales, houses, kids, writing, and interesting villains." After five years living in Ontario, Canada, Mrs. Nickerson and her husband have returned to Aberdeen where they live in "a lovely little old house that is a television star." Mrs. Nickerson knows MSMS well; four of her children are MSMS graduates: James (Class of 1998), Bethany (Class of 2003), Phillip (Class of 2005), and Stella (Class of 2008).

COVER ART

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Erin Davis

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

I was born in the height of China's monsoon season. In the delivery room, as Mama labored and the Californian sun beat at the windows, Baba paced the hallways with his cellphone clutched in his fist, trying to reach his father, who was trapped on his rickety fishing boat, caught in the middle of an incensed sea.

When they tell me the story of my birth, they don't describe how Grandfather died, how the gaping mouth of the ocean swallowed him whole. They don't tell me to imagine the way he held his last breath as he relinquished his nets, his boat, his livelihood, as I took my first breath after barely slipping into this world with my umbilical cord wrapped thrice around my neck, as our wrinkled hands reached in tandem for the light and I surfaced while he sank. They don't tell me he gave his life for me—whether it was a sacrifice or a coincidence doesn't matter. They don't tell me that he is what I'm meant to live up to, a scientist slandered by the Cultural Revolution, exiled to the countryside, a man who fought his way to the sea just so he could feel free again.

I just know.

When the white couple across the restaurant table asks if I have any family in China, my tongue curls up to say that I was born during a monsoon that washed away everything I could have known, to tell them about the conception of loss that has been handed down through my family: Baba's mother passed on long before Grandfather, and my mother's parents denounced her for marrying the son of a heretic.

In the end, I just say "no."

Conversation flows like a stream widening, emptying into a gulf that I can't bridge. I squint at the white couple on the far side. My boyfriend's hand is the shape and weight of a skipping stone, detached from his body. His mother talks of reunions, Thanksgivings, Christmases with relatives a hop and a jaunt in a car away.

When his parents ask me what I want to do, I tell them I want to major in English. "I like poetry," I say. I don't tell them I write about that unexplainable feeling that makes my heart swollen whenever I think of Grandfather lying on the bottom of the ocean while I lie on the floor of my bedroom, blinds drawn against sunny California, but it's the same feeling that surfaces whenever they look at me, and I know they are only seeing their reflections in my eyes. It's the same feeling that compelled me two summers ago to write poem after poem about drowning and solitude and, when Baba drove us down to the beach at Santa Monica, to stuff every one of them into a bottle and throw them into the water.

"...we with our poetry exist in different dimensions, that no matter how we clutch at the other's hand, skin-tight, jelled with sweat, we'll still be an ocean apart."

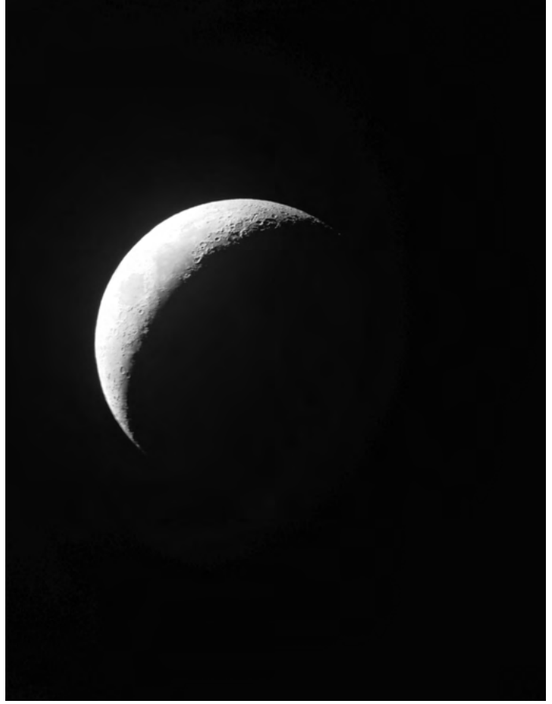
"It's hard to make a living off poetry," his parents tisk. They don't see the endless well Grandfather's ghost dug inside of me that grows hungrier for poems the more scraps I feed it.

"That's what they tell me," says my boyfriend. He wants to be a poet, too; he practices his trade on me every now and then.

When his parents leave, we sit on the curb in the parking lot, and he presents to me his newest work. I let the love poem, folded in crisp thirds, sit flat in my palms and try to explain my thoughts to him—that we with our poetry exist in different dimensions, that no matter how we clutch at the other's hand, skin-tight, jelled with sweat, we'll still be an ocean apart.

"Just read the poem," he says.

I read it, but it is and means nothing. ■



"Moon"

Deja Hughes

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

Four Men

Edith Marie Green

after "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot

I. In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

He has gone to Italy, he is left in
Our hearts, but he's not here. The
Newspaper he used to write for has closed its rooms
And so he left, he left, for the
Sea and for the women
(And the men), for the come
Of winter chill and life and
The wine, the words, the hearts that will go
Away from him one day. His nights are spent talking
To people who, in decades to come, will reflect on these days of
Merriment and sorrow, of love and Michelangelo.

II. I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker.

He is someone that I could paint a portrait of. I
Am a terrible artist but in my mind, I have
Drawn him a thousand, a hundred thousand times. I've seen
The purse of his lips, the lines of his forehead, memorized them, the
Gentle manner he has, how everyone laughs around him. For a moment
I'm transfixed as he shows them a card trick and grins. He is made of
Humanity. He is another part of my
Heart that I am always too happy to tell about
He is refined greatness
He burns bright, never to flicker.

III. Do I dare
Disturb the universe?

I never want to be the one to tell him what to do
We are friends, I am not his mother, but I
Think it will all be okay. The world hasn't permanently stopped spinning, he just has to dare
His way out of the straitjacket his emotions constrained him to. Shall we disturb
A man who needs a little disturbing? The
Scars still linger on him. I tell him that the universe is waiting, yes, the universe.

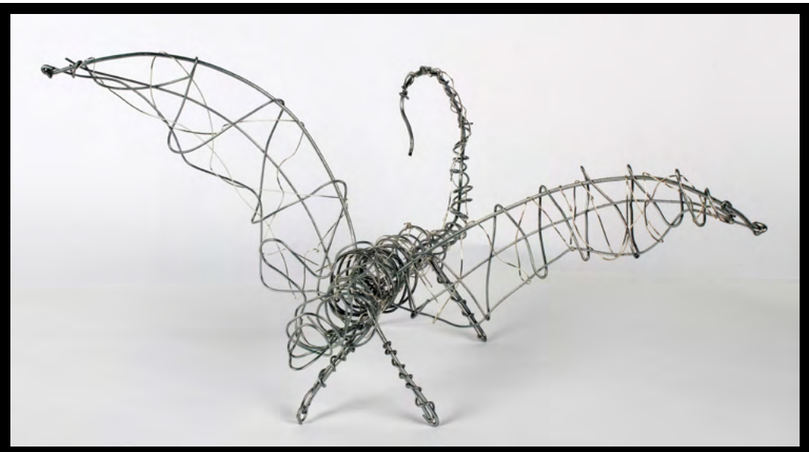
IV. I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

He has an emptiness in him, one that I
(Nor no one else) could ever fill. He should
Have died, I know—his lungs always on the verge of collapse, I have
My doubts on if he will live much longer. He had been
My best friend. Not a rock—no, he is too fragile for that, he was a
Gentle reminder that life goes on. A pair
Of hearts do not have to beat in tandem forever in fact—his breathing is ragged
now—they don't have to ever beat in time. His claws
Don't hurt me, they just make me sad. We were scuttling
Around each other, hoping this was it, across
The months we stopped hoping. The
Divide was too wide. He lay on the floors
Of his oblivion and slept while I was awake, nervous for what had become of
Him. He's not silent
Yet, but soon he will be swallowed up beneath the deepest seas.

Magic Numbers

Madison Wypyski

1, 2, 3, 4…
Colored blocks and cookies
We all knew how to count before formality set in
After all,
Too many gingersnaps made me sick
I could not have *all* the blocks
This was all the math I needed
Our brains always understood quantity
All that changed was the expression
An evolution
From trial and error
From "those ones"
And "that"'
To "fives and tens"
5, 6, 7, 8…
Multiplication and Mad Minute math
We knew that big numbers combined with other big numbers
Made bigger numbers
Taylor's and my cookies combined meant more
If you took *some* of the blocks, I could not have *all* of the blocks
Our brains understood
Our tongues simply changed
"some"
to
"sum"
9, 10, 11, 12…
Shapes and circumferences
Geometry was second language
Cookies were round
The tiny box block wouldn't stay on the slant-sided block
Our brains saw shapes every day
Slants and corners
Became angles and sides
And the two-bite brownie
Became a radius of two
13, 14, 15, 16…
Like terms and limits
Advanced mathematics was not so advanced
I had to limit the number of cookies consumed before I felt sick
Combine all of the blocks by shape and color because that's what made sense
Our brains knew
Cookies and colored blocks were only
Stepping stones
To dense calculus books
Connected by
Magic Numbers
1, 2, 3, 4…



"Vesmusex"

Michael Begley

Wire

Mirror

Edith Marie Green

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

I am my father's mirror.

We have the same brown eyes, the same thick hair, the same laugh, the same facial expressions, the same boniness in our bodies. We are allergic to the same things (tomatoes, citrus fruits, penicillin, codeine, NyQuil). We have the same digestive disorder. We both struggle with the contents of our own craniums from time to time.

And yet, looking back, we are never quite the same.

My father made a point of not mentioning his father until he got sick. I was in tenth grade, and I remember my parents being late to pick me up from school, my father in the passenger's seat, all the way leaned back, sticky probes from the hospital still attached to him. I remember his explanation of how his nerve disorder he had developed. I remember the first time I was there for a lapse in his body working, or his brain forgetting things that he had known a moment before.

I always felt that it shouldn't have bothered me as much as it did, and still does, because plenty of people have parents who are sicker, or closer to the end of their lives, but my biggest fear was always losing the people I loved. I couldn't lose my mom or my dad, but the hospital visit had thrown Dad's mortality into stark perspective, and pushed me out of childhood faster.

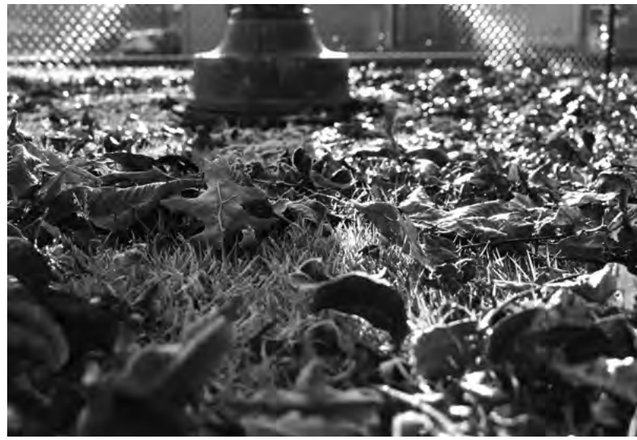
As I began to get closer to adulthood, Dad began to tell my brother and me more of his youth. Although my father had always been a storyteller, his stories began to turn towards his father. I learned how to play the Marine hymn on the piano, and Dad began to march around the house, singing me the words, and told me my grandfather had been in the Marines.

He told us of how terrible his eyesight was—at forty-one, my father got bifocals. His family was poor, though, so he never got glasses the first time until he was nineteen. Before that point, he had hit a bus while driving because he couldn't see it. He told us of other driving accidents, too—his breaking his nose (twice), getting his moped stolen, and getting his license taken away for speeding.

I speak about my father as if he has passed. He hasn't, although it can sometimes feel like the man he once was has. At the core of his being, he is still the same person he's always been: dedicated, hardworking, loving. A professor, a researcher, a scholar, a father, a husband, a brother. But I can see at the edges, how he is beginning to curl away from us.

I suppose he sees himself in me, as I was the child who ended up more like him. Tony got the meeker sides of his nature, but I am the flip side of the same coin. I wonder if, one day, my stress will consume me and they will take me to the emergency room, thinking that I'm having a stroke. I wonder if, one day, I will no longer be able to hold in my sorrow and will tell my children of it with abandon. I wonder if, one day, I will have to go to physical therapy so that I stop feeling pins and needles in my arms.

I want my mind to work forever, but my father's has not, and I am him, and he is me. We have the same blood type, we have the same smile, we have the same love for the sky outside us. ■



"Frost Line"

Erin Davis

Photography

Virginia Slims and Irish Spring

Madison Wypyski

Third Place—Short Story Competition

The first time I met Tommy Little, he was beating up one of the sixth graders behind the back corner of the gym after school. I winced at the cracks of knuckle hitting ribs, bone colliding with bone, and I watched as countless repetitions of driving fists pounded the boy. I stood quiet, one foot on the ground to stabilize my red Cruiser bike, while the other coasted along the left pedal ready to propel me forward if Tommy headed in my direction. After his beating, the young boy limped away from Tommy like a wounded mutt, dragging his denim-covered right leg and glancing back every couple of steps to make sure he was not being followed. Tommy wiped his bloody knuckles, darkening his navy t-shirt, glanced upward to meet my eyes, and acknowledged me with a slight jerk of his blonde head before heading back towards the front of school.

I spent the next day inching around corners armored with my gray overcoat and red JanSport pack. As I stood at my locker shuffling through month-old papers in search of a Spanish verb tense worksheet, I sensed someone on the other side of my locker door. Taking an extra thirty seconds to find my worksheet, now shaped like a wilted airplane, I closed my locker door to come face to face with Tommy.

"You didn't see nothing, alright?" he said, as he picked dirt and dried blood out from beneath his fingernails. "He had it coming, alright?" This time he looked straight at me with dagger-like eyes.

I could not help but wonder why Tommy Little needed affirmation from me that I would keep what I saw only to myself. Maybe it was because he knew if I said anything, he'd just beat me to a bloody mess too, but he could have waited until after school to find me outside and jostle me a little, throw a couple of threats, send me home with wet pants and a bloody nose. Tommy's civil tone and almost beggar-like nature intrigued me, and so I quickly answered, "Yes, sir," like the military brat I was, and then stared below, taking in the sharp contrast of Tommy's battered Nikes with the new Sperrys Mom had gotten for me at the Belk in Charlotte.

"Thanks, man. I 'preciate it," and with that, Tommy turned on his heel and started walking in the opposite direction down the hall.

I went for weeks without speaking to Tommy, though I could not get him and his kind behavior towards me out of my head. I tried to bring it up to my best friend, Charlie, on the way home from the AV Club meeting, but he cut off my bike, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Nick, you really need to leave this mess alone. Instead of digging around, maybe you should be counting your blessings and rejoining the church because you have all your teeth and organs in the right places." I knew that Charlie was right, Tommy had a reputation for violence, and Mom would have my neck if I came home with a black eye, yet my curiosity persisted, and I found myself taking extra time to leave school every afternoon, hoping to catch Tommy and talk.

> **"Ceramic dust filled the air and my lungs on contact, yet the bowl's destruction had done little to stop the villain in front of me and more to anger to him."**

I could always smell Tommy before I saw him. As I biked around the cinderblock corner of the science building and out of the teachers' parking lot, I breathed in the familiar combination of Virginia Slims and Irish Spring. I made a donut in the lot and began heading back to the building like a bloodhound, seeking the owner of that distinctive scent.

Tommy was sitting in the grass behind the science building smoking a cigarette, breathing out the smoke through his nose like some fancy chick from a movie. I ditched my bike, so that I could observe in quiet, but Tommy had already seen me and gestured to me with one crooked finger.

"You wanna smoke, kid?" he asked, extending the Slim as easily as some kids shared candy. I denied his offer, knowing that I was already going to have to bike the long way home just to get the second-hand smoke out of my clothes *and* keep Mom at bay. He shrugged and continued to puff. "Why have you been following me," he asked, in between cloudy breaths. "You shouldn't be keeping friends with people like me."

"I haven't…I don't follow you, and I don't want to be friends." Both of which were lies, but beyond the point. "I just wanna know, why were you nice to me? Why didn't you beat the crap out of me after I saw what you did?"

Tommy's face was distant and contemplative as he took one…two…three…puffs and blew each out in concentric rings. "And why the hell would I do that?" he asked in a serious tone. "What have you ever done to anybody that warrants a beating, kid?"

"But, I…"

"I told you. I beat up that kid because he deserved it, okay? He was messing with my friend's kid sister, and I can't have that going on here, okay? I don't just go around beating people like that for kicks and giggles. I ain't like that. I ain't like him," he said, quietening, like someone had dialed down his volume with a remote.

Tommy's eyes looked inquisitive and sad, as if waiting for me to give him my blessing, so that he could carry on, and again, I wondered why Tommy Little was waiting for my approval. With each puff of smoke and questioning glance, Tommy became a more and more intriguing specimen that I wanted to dissect and discover, but that I was also too hesitant to touch. A boy I once saw as strong and alien was no more indestructible than fine china teetering on a shelf.

"Hey, you wanna go to my house? My cig is almost finished, and I am fixin' to gnaw my arm off I'm so hungry."

My head snapped up, Tommy's voice drawing me out of my own thoughts and his question stretching my curiosity like taffy. I managed to grunt out a "sure," before hopping onto my bicycle and following Tommy down the road.

After about fifteen quiet minutes, we arrived at a home that looked like it had been clipped with care from the *Southern Homes & Gardens* magazines Grandma was always sending Mom subscriptions for. I noticed the bushes in the front flower beds trimmed in neat geometric shapes and that the house was painted a clean slate color. We left our bicycles in the driveway, and headed in through the red front door.

Tommy led me upstairs where we entered a small, square bedroom decorated in a spectrum of blue. I stood to the side picking a scab from my elbow and glancing around the barren room, looking for signs of the boy who lived there. No posters cluttered the wall, no books sat on the dark wooden desk, and no ripe-smelling sports equipment crowded the corner; the room was a shell of its enigmatic inhabitant. While I studied his room, Tommy grabbed his desk chair, dragged it to the mouth of the closet, and stood, reaching towards the top shelf for a box.

The box was floral and round like the hat boxes Mom and Grandma pulled out every Sunday before church. The mass of tissue inside the box smelled faintly of orange blossoms and clove, and Tommy pulled each delicate piece out with care until he reached the bottom. Sitting against the soft pink cardboard were three boxes of Virginia Slims and a worn picture featuring an elegant women holding a small grinning child. Tommy pulled a cigarette out of one of the boxes, and said to me without looking up, "These were my Mom's. I don't really care for them much, but they are *her*. You know what I mean, Nicky-boy?" With that, he repacked the box with the same precision he had unpacked it, and hid it in the shadows of the closet.

"Let's go downstairs. I am starving, and I hate smoking up here."

I followed Tommy down the staircase and into a large kitchen. He pulled his lighter out of his jeans pocket, and lit the Slim, studying it and sighing before taking a puff. It was quiet for a spell before I asked Tommy, "What happened to her? Your mom, I mean."

As if in an instant, I regretted my question, wishing I could pull my words from the air and swallow them whole before they even whispered past Tommy's ear.

He was silent. "I'm real sorry. I didn't mean to pry…"

"I killed her." I swear anyone in a half-mile radius could have heard a pin drop, but before I could say a word, Tommy continued, "My pops. He's a real piece of work, and over the years, he's become good friends with the bottle." Tommy took a puff, his eyes beginning to glaze. "I had been struggling in school, Biology and Algebra II, never been great at that math stuff. Anyway, Dad had been drinking that night, and when he heard this, he was angry. Said that just wasn't acceptable because 'no son of his was going to be an idiot' and he slapped me across the face. Mom jumped in front of me before my old man could take a second blow, so he grabbed her instead, and I ran. I just ran, Nick." By now, tears were streaming in rivulets down Tommy's freckled cheeks, and I sat there dazed, as he continued, "The next morning, I snuck in through the back door to see Dad talking to two policemen. When the trio saw me, Dad started to cry, saying all of this garbage about how 'she'll never hurt me again' and 'he was so sorry, son.' My mom was dead, he had killed her, and covered it up, saying he defended me from *her* drunken rage when I knew it was the other way around. We moved away within a week, and the bruises have taught me to stop bringing it up."

Tommy wiped his snotty nose against the inside of his wrist and then got up. "All this pansy crying has got me starved. I'm making sandwiches. You want one?"

Tommy made peanut butter and jelly while I was sat staring when the front door slammed open. In walked a middle-aged man, lofty in height like Tommy, but solidly built and dressed in a crisp, clean business suit. Settling his briefcase on the ground, he turned, took one look at my smiling face and roared at Tommy, "What did I tell you about bringing home guests?"

Slap.

Tommy fell to the ground clutching his cheek and scooting backwards towards the fridge behind him, trapped. As his father walked past me, I caught a whiff of a familiar yet different scent. Smoke, soap, with a touch of Jack Daniels radiated off this man in waves, and my eyes shifted in fear to Tommy who looked unfazed. Tommy's father had rolled up the sleeves of his business suit and was nearing Tommy now.

With the second blow, I was on my feet. Searching my surroundings, my eyes narrowed on the ceramic bowl of fruit located on the icy, granite island. Using both hands for leverage, I brought my weapon down against the back of the man's head. Ceramic dust filled the air and my lungs on contact, yet the bowl's destruction had done little to stop the villain in front of me and more to anger him. Now bleeding from a gash behind his left ear, Tommy's father turned towards me. Pure rage glistened in his eyes the way pools of water reflected starlight. I was toast.

Looking around for my next method of attack, or maybe my back-up crew, I noticed Tommy beginning to stand. "Run, Nick! Get out of here," he screamed as his father began to turn his attention back towards the kitchen. Desperate for a final defense, I rammed the blunt end of the television remote into the nose of my attacker, and with an audible crack, a flow of blood cascaded, streaming onto the starched collar of his once pristine button-down. Dropping the bloodied remote, I ran out of the house, grabbed my bicycle, and left suburbia as fast as the red Cruiser could pedal.

…

Tommy was not at school the next day…or the next…or the day after that. His friends moved on, didn't talk about it, and I got my front tooth chipped for questioning one of them after school. I found a spot in the bushes across the street from Tommy's house and from my hidden perch, I watched his father exit his black Lexus and enter the house as if nothing had changed. The only difference from *that* day was Tommy's bike now missing from its strewn position in the driveway.

I biked by that slate-colored house a week later to find a "For Sale" sign staked in the front yard. Peering inside, I saw all of the furniture was missing. The only thing remaining was the scent of Irish Spring and Virginia Slims clinging to the house like a reminder—and a warning. ■

Tan Lines

Catherine Li

Third Place—Essay Competition

June in Mississippi is hell on Earth. The relentless sun beats down on a restless child, bored after poking at ant beds and making mud pies. Something shiny a couple of feet away catches her eye as she forces her feet to carry her to it, small hands reaching outward. Suddenly, the sun's reflection on the object creates a sharp, blinding glare that causes the child to tumble forward. The child begins to cry, and an alarmed father drops his gardening tools and runs towards her. Crouching down beside her, he kisses both of her bloody palms. Despite this, the child whines and squirms in her father's grasp. He realizes she's growing impatient, and it's time to go home.

The journey home feels longer under the scorching sun, but the father continues to angle his body to shield the child, his own skin bearing the brunt of the sun's anger. To pass the time, the child begs for one of her father's stories just like every other day they make this journey.

"June in Mississippi is hell on Earth."

"Baba, tell me about the land of the fireflies." The child whines, squirming around in her father's grasp.

"Again?" He asks, smiling down at the her. "But you've heard that story a million times!"

"Yes, again! Tell me about the time you caught a thousand of them!" She tugs impatiently at his sleeve.

So the man begins the tale of his childhood. He describes the vast open fields he grew up farming, watering each tomato stalk by hand. He speaks fondly of the tiny, mudbrick school building where he first fell in love with mathematics, spending hours hunched over a spineless physics book until the last rays of sunlight disappeared below the horizon. It was in this inky twilight that he made the long trek home, catching fireflies in his tattered bookbag and fantasizing about the places they had flown. His eyes mist over at the memories, the friends, and the family he may never see again.

The child's eyes widen in alarm and she reaches for her father's face, "If you miss the fireflies so much, why did you leave?"

"Because I want my daughter to grow up in a land of freedom and opportunity. Because you are more important than a million fireflies." The man smiles through wet eyes. "Because you can't be afraid to take risks for what you love."

My father came to America with one suitcase and the will to succeed, leaving behind my mother and everything he had ever known to pursue a higher education and pave a better future for my sister and me. To this day, the faded tan lines that mar his arms, arms that shielded me from the scorching Mississippi sun, remind me to be unafraid in pursuing the things I love—because nothing worth having comes without sacrifice. ■

Writing Lessons

Victoria Gong

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

From early on, I believed that my options were eventually either to leave Vicksburg, Mississippi, forever, or to suffocate in the town I grew up in among its crumbling streets littered by boarded record shops and restaurants serving Southern-style home cooking, concentrated in lard and saline.

For eleven years, I went to a small Catholic school in the center of downtown Vicksburg. In the classroom, teachers would seem exasperated if I answered their questions too quickly; girls would whisper, "She thinks she's so smart," behind my back. In school, I learned how to stay silent until teachers realized their own mistakes, to pass off malicious intents with oblivious smiles, to daydream through theology class (because the certainty with which Coach Pikul lectured on scripture convinced me that there had to be something larger than Bible study and football).

I knew I was different, but I didn't condemn not fitting in. I only looked forward to the moment I would escape the monotony of Mississippi, the daily repetition of gossiping girls and sports-obsessed boys. To occupy myself, I turned to writing—fantasies, outlandish stories, that took place as far away from Mississippi as possible.

But one summer, when I attended a writing camp in the state's capital city, I was shocked at how many teachers admired Mississippi writers who wrote about Mississippi, admired how mud and cotton fields and racism were present or implied in every scene. Somehow, I couldn't reconcile something I loved with something I was so dispassionate about, couldn't believe that Mississippi was anything worth writing about—even more so that that writing could be praised.

Strange things happened, though, as I travelled from state to state over summers to attend more writing camps. In Gambier, Ohio, my workshop instructor asked us to write about the place we were from, and I discovered with aching emptiness that there was nothing I was willing to write about, nothing poetic about the Southern town I'd grown up in that I had not pushed out of my mind. There's something wrong here, I thought, reflecting on how I often felt more stuck or more lost when I wrote, how I avoided the "personal essay/memoir" category like the plague because I believed there was no interesting story I could tell that took place in Mississippi. Then, I thought: Maybe I had been wrong.

Ironically, it took distance—transferring to a residential high school for the academically gifted three hours away—to form the stories I wanted to tell about Vicksburg (about home), stories that took place on the playground of my old school or in the Vicksburg National Military Park that was built on a Civil War battlefield, stories that made my writing richer and myself more mature. By isolating myself from my home, I had also inhibited my personal growth, becoming just as narrow-minded and monotone as the Mississippian stereotype I looked down upon. Instead of fleeing from my realization, I wrote about it, adamant that I would no longer use writing as a tool to escape my identity and circumstance.

At another writing camp in Iowa City, I met a boy from Shanghai who was a Faulkner fanatic, and I roomed with a girl from California who bombarded me with questions about Mississippi, talking about my state almost romantically. By the end of that summer, I realized that being from Mississippi even contributed heavily to my different-ness, and I started telling people, "I'm from Mississippi," with something akin to pride.

Now, I want to write to continue to build and discover myself, to write stories about coming home. And while I still want to leave Vicksburg, Mississippi, to gain exposure to the world, I won't be ashamed to call it home, to return to it, or to bring the lessons I learned growing up in it along with me. ■

Yellow Keys

Neziah Igwebuike

My grandmother has an old piano in her living room that sits in the corner closest to the fireplace, making for a hazard during the cold months; it looks battered and worn, even though few members of my family know how to play it. It's declined in both appearance and sound over the years, but I still look forward to playing it whenever I go to Ohio.

I wasn't allowed to touch my grandma's piano until I was five years old and deemed trustworthy enough to not break it. I had started lessons by then, so I was eager to demonstrate my newfound skills to my extended family. My parents held up new camcorders as I sat in front of the piano, tentative fingers examining the yellowing keys before plucking out a simplified, mistake-ridden rendition of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Applause filled the room after I finished, and I couldn't stop smiling when my grandmother, laughing, asked for an encore.

"I realized what Parkinson's was on my own, seeing it in the endless bottles of pills, the slight trembles of my grandmother's hands, and the way she never went upstairs anymore."

I realized that some of the piano's keys had stopped working several years later, at the age of ten. It didn't bother me much, and I continued to play music for my relatives when they asked. My grandmother asked for an encore, like she always did, but something felt off. At some point during that trip, my dad pulled me aside. The wrinkles on his forehead told me that he was concerned.

"Am I in trouble?" I asked, naive as a ten-year-old could be.

"No, sweetie. Don't worry." He sighed, the weak smile on his face fading the tiniest bit. "Your grandma has Parkinson's."

"What's that?" I felt myself starting to cry. I couldn't bear the thought of my grandmother being sick.

"Something I pray you never have to worry about."

"But what—"

"I'll tell you when you're older."

My dad didn't have to tell me once I got older. I realized what Parkinson's was on my own, seeing it in the endless bottles of pills, the slight trembles of my grandmother's hands, and the way she never went upstairs anymore. As I played the piano for my grandmother one morning after Christmas, she was my only listener. I was fifteen.

Grandma pulled me into a hug after I finished my sonatina, and for a moment I felt just as happy as I did the first time I played.

My grandmother still noticed something was wrong. She looked me in the eyes after she hugged me, her own tired eyes clouded with worry. "Sweetheart, what's the matter?"

"It's nothing, Grandma. I'm fine." I put on a fake smile to prove my point.

"Listen, sweetheart." She smiled at me, too, but this time it was genuine—weak, but genuine. "I don't want you to worry about me. I love you. I'm going to be okay."

I managed to get out a feeble, shaky, "I love you, too." It was getting difficult to maintain a positive expression.

Grandma took my hand and led me into the kitchen. I braced myself for whatever bad news was going to come next, but all she said was "Start heating up some water for me. We're going to make lunch." I obeyed, and together we prepared a large, steaming meal of pancakes, bacon, eggs, and toast. As the rest of my relatives woke up or returned from their errands, we all began to gather in the kitchen to eat. My grandma hugged me again as I was about to go wake up my sisters.

"Sweetheart," she said, "I want you to play the piano for us after this. I didn't get my encore." ■

The Asian Market

Helen Peng

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

Thrusting the glass door open, I scan the cardboard boxes lining the wall, searching for a familiar violet hue. As they do with every weekly quest at the Asian Market in Starkville, Mississippi, my eyes return empty, without mangosteens. Mangosteens are sturdy fruits that, once pried open, expose delicate cushions of sugar. Imagine an orange with an inch-thick purple peel and snowy white slices—that is a mangosteen. In Guangzhou, my grandparents' home, mangosteens are wheeled to the store by bicyclers every morning. Growing up, I learned how to pick the ones worth eating. It's a careful task; a mangosteen just a day beyond its prime can result in food poisoning. However, the succulent sweetness of each perfect slice is worth the risk.

A white woman walks into the Asian Market.

When the market opened, the prospect of tasting mangosteens after years of separation consumed me. Although searching for mangosteens remained a highlight of my week, it seemed to emphasize the color of my skin that had encapsulated my identity. While my grandparents adjusted to America by coaxing Chinese gourds out of Mississippi red clay and greedy kudzu, I laughed off my heritage with a sharp tongue. I had convinced myself that to be unique, I had to defy Chinese stereotypes. After stowing away lunches of stinky chives in favor of cafeteria hamburgers, I realized my attempts at becoming more than my ethnicity rendered me inauthentic.

For a moment, the shop inhales. Her business suit points towards glamour, stiffness—contrasts with the re-hemmed jeans of staring Asian working-class families.

Mama taught me Newton's Third Law of Motion between spankings. "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, so my hand hurts as much as your skin does," she said. I accepted this as an apology. Sometimes, I stared at the sticky notes she pasted on her mirror that asked her to keep her temper and not to blame herself when I failed to be the perfect Chinese daughter. Some days I doubted that she ever read them; other days I wondered why I wasn't good enough.

But I was determined to understand Mama. I sought connections with her between aisles of foreign packaging, and she gifted me parts of herself through every recognizable object at the Market. Stories of age-old mangosteens inspired a recognition of beauty in being Chinese. I found wonder in the tales Mama told me and compassion to understand other perspectives.

The woman tips her head down, perhaps in embarrassment.

Growing up as an Asian Mississippian helped me appreciate the power behind perspective. Listening to Mama's stories of twenty-mile hikes to boarding school instilled resilience in me; the garden of kudzu and gourds in my grandparents' backyard taught me flexibility. Although I excel academically, play violin, and study on the weekends, I also spend late nights drawing horse-apples and writing about silt-rimmed crawfish holes. I have learned that everyone is a storyteller, and that the world is so much bigger than a single story.

For a moment, our roles are switched. I see myself in her. I offer her packets of dried seaweed.

A week from today I will thrust the door open to the Asian Market in a frenzy of footsteps. But instead of seeing the absence of mangosteens, I will see mushrooms that brewed in Mama's cold remedies. I'll see cardboard boxes bulging with ingredients that sizzled at our dinner table, and I'll see families like mine connecting with generations through the details of daily life. Like my weekly hunts for mangosteens, I will forever hold hope for the stories that bring people together.

After I explain its savory crunch, the woman buys the seaweed along with chicken feet samples. She tells me of her third failed job application in a week, how she hopes to get the one she just interviewed for. I'll have to wait until I can offer recommendations of mangosteens, but for now I hope that the Asian Market is becoming home for new perspectives. ■

Red Bindis and Potato Curry

Indu Nandula

"Are you bleeding?!"

My hand instinctively reached for my forehead, the pads of my tentative fingers grazing over the immaculate, red bindi.

Though Trey and I were the only ones present on the four-square court, his screech didn't fail to attract onlookers. Before I knew it, I was enveloped within a circle of curious nine-year-old eyes, mouths agape. I faced Trey, chest puffed out, shoulders drawn. "It's a bindi," I declared. His face pulled into a mocking sneer. "Indu has a booboo, Indu has a booboo," he chanted, the words soon echoing around me like a hunting call. The words slapped my already red cheeks. For the rest of class, I felt my classmates' whispers echoing off my slouched back:

"Is that a tattoo?"

"Do you ever think she can take it off?"

"What is that?"

From that day onwards, I never again wore a bindi to school. My unadorned forehead never again drew the attention of my classmates. Trey's comment went forgotten in the minds of my peers, but it remained seared in my own.

"As I look back on those days in elementary school, I realize that though I have changed, the world has not. I will wear my bindi and eat my potato curry just like the next Indian."

Every day, I toted my lunchbox to school, filled with the curry from the previous night's dinner and an Indian delicacy of my mother's own making.

I had friends before I opened the box. As the spiced goodness of my meal entered my mouth, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up only to see Trey, his face once again scrunched with disgust. "What is that? Pig food?" he asked, holding up my lunch as if it were a snotty tissue.

"It's a potato curry," I replied. With a scoff, Trey slammed my beloved lunch onto the table and sauntered off, snickering all the way to the end of the table.

I wish I could tell my nine-year-old-self that, in time, none of those comments would matter, that Trey would go on to play baseball in Memphis and get his teeth knocked out by a third baseman twice his size, while I would remain in Cleveland. That no matter how hard I tried, I could never, and will never, be able to completely belong *anywhere*—not even with my own kind.

Even with my bronze skin, red bindi, potato curry, and Telugu brain, I will forever be stuck outside the gates of my Indian heritage. While my mother recollects stories of braids woven with white ribbons and Mysore silk saris, I remember fretting over skinny jeans and chemistry homework. When holidays like Vinayaka Chavithi roll around, unfamiliar words are exchanged between my parents and relatives. Telugu lingo leaps and bounds back and forth between my mother and father like the crickets outside our house, while I stand outside the circle of communication, completely in the dark. I speak on the phone with my uncles and aunts in India, asking for multiple translations of a language that should flow naturally from my lips.

As I look back on those days in elementary school, I realize that though I have changed, the world has not. I will wear my bindi and eat my potato curry just like the next Indian. People will ask me if I'm bleeding and if I'm actually eating pig food. Instead of hanging my head in shame, I will smile and tell them about the symbol of purity that adorns my forehead and the spicy deliciousness that fills my stomach. Despite this, Indian people will still remain a mystery to those to whom we are unknown. We will always be told to go back to our country. We will always be asked what that word means in Hindu—I mean Hindi. People will always assume that I am a genius with computers, and that I know every piano composition under the sun. They will ask about my bindi and my potato curry, but as long as I have both, I may be able to eventually fit into my unruly Indian-American world. ■

Abby

Michelle Luo

Abby wasn't from around here. She let everyone know by the way she toted around her "bookbayg" and not her "bookbahg," called Sprite "pop," and maintained a drawling Minnesota accent muffled by braces spanning across her teeth. I didn't know how her family had found their way to Mississippi. They had moved into the house across the street where they kept a yellowing RV parked in the grass.

It was the way she stood four-feet tall in her red Chuck Taylors and had a passionate love for Ben 10, golden retrievers, and basketball that I found myself in silent admiration for her unabashed boyishness. I maintained a cautious curiosity toward so-called masculine activities. Dribbling a basketball was not something for girls to do, or so society had informed me, although my dresses did have pockets. Abby wore a mustard yellow hoodie and baggy blue jeans ripped at the knee.

Most children become friends through play. I was accustomed to play in the form of domestic simulation, mimicking household chores or cooking with plastic foods. A pick-up game of football was not my idea of fun. But it didn't matter. If Abby was my friend, I was to play with her and to play with her meant tossing around a football in my front yard or climbing around a dank, humid RV and pressing all the buttons. She had several older siblings—Jenny, the sister who wore make up, and Johnny, the older brother who played intramural football. And then there were Bobby and Tony who were grown and already moved out. Their mother had a mop of blond hair and always looked tired. I never met their father. Abby slept on a bed located in what was meant to be a dining room, Ben 10 action figures strewn among dog toys on the plush carpet. I thought it was a bit strange, but what is normal to a kid?

By the end of summer, I learned that Abby was going to be in Ms. Jones's third grade class just like me. I was shocked at the coincidence, questioned the probability. There couldn't have been another Ms. Jones at the local elementary school to speak of, could there? Being in the same classroom meant continuing a summer friendship. I looked forward to school that year.

At school, I learned that my eyesight was bad enough for glasses. Sure, seeing grammar exercises on the board while sitting at the very back of the classroom was difficult, but that couldn't mean I needed glasses. Glasses were for old people and librarians. After an uncomfortable visit to the eye doctor, I chose a pair of pink acrylic glasses and shoved them on my face. They oppressed me like a cage. I couldn't deny that the tree leaves looked like they were in HD, and I could see every blade of grass. But they made me look stupid. Abby got glasses, too, and by then I had acquiesced to looking like an old, stupid librarian. But despite the threat of fracture, glasses never stopped Abby from playing basketball. At recess, I would tag along to whatever Abby did, but it wasn't really the same. It was never really the same.

Sometime in winter, Ms. Jones had passed along the Harry Potter books to me to read. A poor "Accelerated Reading" score on the Sorcerer's Stone traumatized me, but I kept reading, finishing the series in two weeks. The rest of third grade I spent reading until I had nothing more to read. The next year, we'd move on up to another school building for the Big Kids and become fourth graders. Ms. Jones warned us they'd "chew us up and spit us out" over there, so we had better behave.

School ended in spring. As a child, school ending is like the completion of a chapter with an endless interlude until the next. Summer dragged like sullen feet, and it became as though Abby and I had never met. She lived in the house across the street that now seemed like an impenetrable fortress. Maintaining friendships was never my forte, and so I came to understand they were ephemeral.

I saw Abby in fourth grade at recess one day. The air was hot, and I kept a book under my arm. Abby was in a different teacher's class then which meant I hardly ever saw her. She was dashing around playing basketball with a bunch of boys, hair tied high in a long blond ponytail, red Chuck Taylors dancing on the concrete. I watched her for a moment, considering calling out to her. But I reconsidered, choosing instead a shady corner to sit. It wasn't the same. It never really was. ■

Chinaman

Helen Peng

First Place—Poetry Competition

Rainbow
is the color of the streets
that we speed through,
my hands clutching the metal rack
behind my grandfather's bicycle seat
that I hold onto for dear life.
Slate gray
is the color of the toned paper of the
magician,
who whips out a portrait with a flick of a
wrist.
Don't worry you'll be able to draw the
world in a
single breath,
Grandfather tells me.
And through the streets
we fly
like birds,
to escape my grandmother's
sharp assaults for late a morning's ritual
to the flea market.

My grandfather's laugh reminds me of the sun,
reverberating across the room,
filling even the darkest corners with
rays of golden hope.
His eyes crinkle at the edges,
not "crow eyes,"
as I used to tease him, Instead,
the footprints of a dragon—a gift of wisdom.
His skin is still folded with time,
his hands are still firm with age.
I think
the dragon gifted him some of its energy too.

Back then
were smiles of golden mango sweetness,
tastes of pork-fillings,
sounds of scratched charcoal onto the pores
of paper.

The eldest of seven,
illegitimate son of the Cultural Revolution,
stole the only key out of this desolation
forced math equations into his mind
ignoring his shelf full of story books and sketchpads.

Now
in the lobby of his humble apartment,
golden dragons crawl through the intricate
red weaving of his oriental carpet,
crayon-scribbles decorate the white walls
that Picasso would marvel at.
Potted bamboo in porcelain pots line the
window
providing company for a family of jade
Buddhas.
the bamboo
he said
should be in mountains,
reaching towards the blue, blue sky
instead of growing towards
a plaster ceiling.

Lucille Hammond's Magic

Ryley Fallon

As Aqua Net replaced the supply of oxygen in her lungs, Lucille's white heels paced a white-and black-checkered floor. The steady rhythm of her frantic waltz blended with the muffled jazz playing from a single-dial radio. A string of bright yellow-tinted bulbs reflected light off three plastic domes. The domes connected to three narrow, pastel green chairs, each of which held a middle-aged woman sitting crossed-legged and holding a crisp September 1963 edition of *Vanity Fair*. The women wore modest dresses with varying colors of polka dots that crept up their necklines and with thin, coarse tulle linings that scratched their legs. Tuesday morning was the time when the "miracle-working" hands of Lucille Hammond brought every woman of St. James Parish back to life.

Lucille's own daily manicure consisted of cream-colored shampoo and a wide array of shades including platinum blond and brunette. Her fingers danced between delicate strands of keratin, but never tugged at a customer's scalp. Her movements were swift and graceful, even under the pressure of the peeling posters depicting a collage of "The Perfect Looks for Wives and Mothers" covering the peach-colored walls. Lucille held a cigarette in one hand, and with the other she gave every woman in the parish the confidence to be more than life had told them they had to be.

On a typical Tuesday morning, a small girl with a cranberry-red dress and white-laced tights walked into the shop unsupervised, with all the grace of an adult woman. Gravity seemed to be having less of an effect on her. Her tiny feet seemed never to touch the ground, just merely float above it.

"Take a seat wherever you like," Lucille called out. She didn't look at her unusual customer, invested as she was in a mound of tight golden curls. The smiling child took a seat on top of a wooden stool with a maroon plush cover, crossed legs barely passing the middle rung.

The thin white tights she wore had an intricate stitching of flowers whose stems spiraled into the next until a stripe formed. Her black flats had a clear gloss finish and not a single scuff. She swung her feet gently to the notes of the saxophone and static of the radio. She kept her small hands locked in her lap, nestled in a bed of cranberry chiffon. The only time her hands came undone was when the young girl adjusted her dress to ensure wrinkles would never appear.

Her face, as smooth as her dress, glowed with youth. Not a single impurity speckled her face except the occasional freckle, which she referred to as "God's special marks." Her skin tone was a sign that the Louisiana summer was fading, mostly pale with a slight golden hue. The same radiance shone out of her hazel eyes, speckled with golden flakes. Her lips held a natural shade of pink and curled at the ends, conveying the happiness embedded in childhood.

"Gravity seemed to be having less of an effect on her. Her tiny feet seemed never to touch the ground, just merely float above it."

Framing her plump cheeks, her blunt brunette hair appeared the work of an at-home salon. The jagged strands contrasted the cohesion of her appearance which seemed to be that of a daughter of a respected St. James family. Although there seemed to be an attempt of styling, her fine hair struggled to hold curl. The strands refused to stay coiled behind her ear, pierced with a single diamond. The girl's spirit would soon show to be just as defiant as the curl.

She carried herself in such a way that radiated confidence. Her spirit was like wet clay, yet to be sculpted by the world. The young girl sat up straight in her chair, never letting her posture fail. She continued to wait patiently for someone to notice her.

The young girl began to catch the attention of the women in the salon. A woman in a solid baby blue dress pulled her white pointed glasses down the bridge of her nose and glared at the added responsibility sitting in the stool across the room. Tuesday mornings were supposed to be responsibility-free mornings. Other women were amused by the young child, covering their mouths in an effort to conceal their grins. After all the women under the plastic domes had put down their *Vanity Fairs* to whisper about the child, the lady sitting in the middle chair stood up, strawberry blonde curls still damp. As wife of the "only Baptist minister in St. James," Mrs. Liddell was used to being in the middle of everything, assuming authority whenever she got the chance.

She walked over to Lucille, who was still working on the golden curls. With her pale hand and clear-coated nails she covered her mouth and leaned in close to Lucille, the other hand on her hip. She enlightened Lucille about the presence of the child and asked Lucille to pay attention to her salon, smiling with true Southern charm, lips curled with joy but eyes as empty as the hairspray cans in the back of the salon. Lucille glanced over at the child as she sealed in her golden masterpiece with two final sprays of Aqua Net and a bobby pin.

Lucille then walked over to the child and knelt down until she could see the blue flakes in the child's brown eyes. Lucille's only child was the salon. No tiny feet had ever waddled on the black and white checkered floor. She prayed for a head of curls to untangle every morning, but the day had never come. She stared at the child with intent eyes. The outline of the child filled a hole that forever had been in her heart. She hoped that storks were now delivering older children.

"What can I help you with, darlin'," Lucille said in her soft Louisiana accent, tucking the child's soft brunette strands behind the girl's ear with her dyed hands, "Does this beautiful girl have a name?"

"My name is Grace Anne, and I want to get my hair done like my momma's," the child said, her face glowing with radiant youth.

"I think I can manage that," Lucille responded, winking at the child. She took Grace Anne's tiny palm into her own and lifted her into a metal chair that had been painted white in an effort to hide rust. The day was nearing noon and women had started to trickle out, heading to the Tuesday League meeting at Hill Pine Baptist Church. Lucille knew that Grace Anne's mother would come in at any moment looking for her. She needed to work her magic quickly.

"What were you thinking of, sweetie?" Lucille asked the girl while staring into the large mirror.

"I want bangs," Grace Anne replied, confident in her answer. Lucille thought to herself for a moment. Bangs were not what a respectable young lady would wear in St. James Parish. The minister's wife wouldn't be caught dead showing up to Bible study with that hairstyle. Lucille, of course, knew all this, but as Grace Anne's reflection glowed with hope, Lucille decided that girls deserve a little fun.

In an effort not to cut the child's hair, Lucille twisted and pinned Grace Anne's fine hair as if she were sewing. She tucked stands under themselves until bangs appeared. Grace Anne giggled in excitement and touched her new hairstyle with gentle hands, making sure that it was actually herself in the mirror.

"I look so pretty," the child said, admiring her new look. Lucille smiled; she had worked her magic. She hoped that Grace Anne would always pick bangs over "The Beehive," no matter how many bees buzzed in her ear and told her not to.

Just as Lucille sprayed a last "safety" spray of Aqua Net, Grace Anne's mother walked in. Her plain navy dress hung off her figure. The gravity that had escaped Grace Anne had found its home in her mother's dress. Her features seemed to blend into her pale face. Her eyelashes held no curl, and her lips were pale and did not move except to yell at her daughter. With long, swift strides, her lanky legs moved across the tile until she was in arms reach of Grace Anne. She dragged her daughter out of the shop asking Grace Anne why she couldn't be a "nice girl." When they reached the sidewalk lining the shop, she yanked every last bobby pin out of the child's hair.

Months later, Lucille stood in her shop, smoking a cigarette on an early Tuesday morning. The Louisiana dew settled on the recently blooming tulips lining the outside of the shop. Lucille painted thin layers of glue on the back of a manila-colored poster. Waltzing in her white heels, she made her way to the peach-colored wall. Jazz music played softly as the sun began to shine in through window panes speckled with dust. Lucille pressed the damp poster into the wall, making sure the glue would hold the paper until well after her lifetime. After she finished, Lucille prepared for the Tuesday rush.

When the women of St. James Parish came in that day, they saw a poster of a smiling, bright-eyed woman with bangs placed directly adjacent to the posters depicting "The Perfect Looks for Wives and Mothers." Lucille hoped that the day would come when every woman in St. James Parish wore bangs. ■

Fading Scars

Catherine Li

Second Place—Essay Competition

When my sister was born, my father wasn't home. He was caught in a whirlwind of paperwork for his new job in Singapore, and when the phone call finally reached him, he could already hear the cries of his daughter loud and clear. As soon as he could, he booked the first flight to Hefei to meet his first newborn baby, only to be swept back into work the very next day. The there-and-back travel every few days continued until his income was stable enough to move my mother and sister permanently to Singapore.

Even though my older sister was born unexpectedly, two weeks early, and the situation was completely out of my parents' control, I could tell from the guilt in Baba's eyes when the topic was brought up in conversation that he blamed himself.

> **"I could tell from the guilt in his eyes when the topic was brought up in conversation that he blamed himself."**

My sister told me the first time Mama left her with Baba alone; she had cried until Mama came home, sobbing, "I want Mama," at the top of her lungs. I can sense a twinge of guilt, but because she was so young, she doesn't remember most of it. Mama tells me this story now with a laugh, like it was just a funny childhood memory, and she tells me this is why Baba spoiled me because he didn't want to make the same mistake twice. I ask Baba if that's true, and Baba always chuckles and denies it, giving the same reply each time: "Of course not." But the way Baba looks at his hands while his brows furrow and the lines on his forehead multiply shows the truth to Mama's claim and gives my stomach a wave of uneasiness.

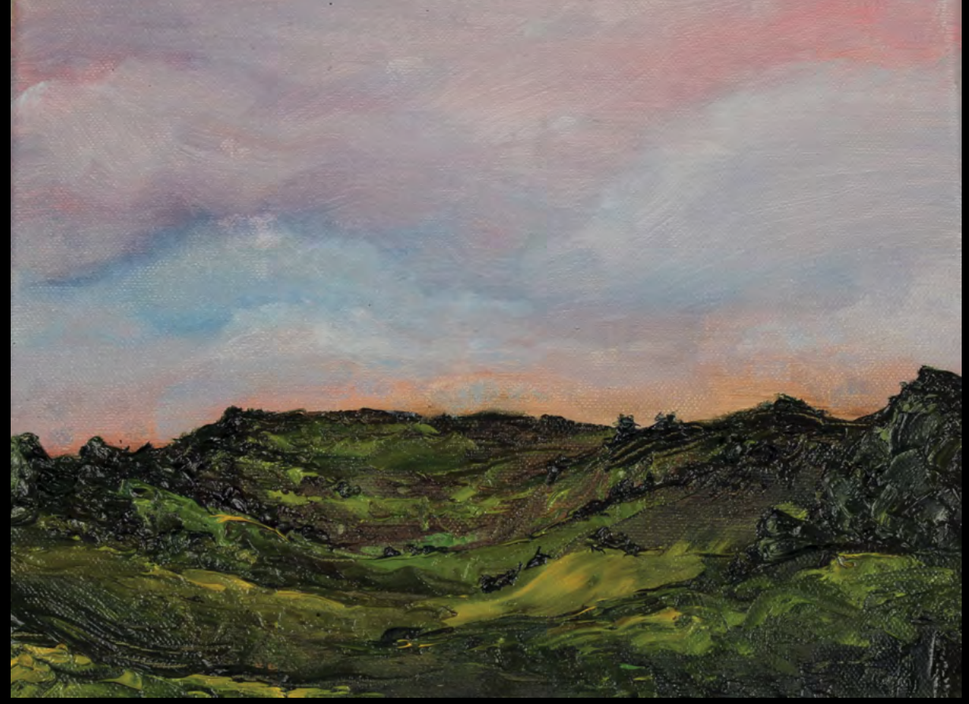
The entire month of January and until I was born in February, Baba spent preparing for my arrival. After I came home, Baba took as much time off as he could, making up for the time he lost with my sister. As I grew up, my fondest memories included my father teaching me how to do something, from learning the multiplication tables to eating chestnuts without a nutcracker.

One Sunday afternoon, while Baba was in the kitchen making beef stew and pork dumplings, my sister and I muffled our giggles as we sneaked behind him, poking small holes into his back yelling, "Tag, you're it!"

Baba made a 180-degree turn with his arms stretched out, lunging for us as we shrieked and ran away. He always made sure he was one step behind us because we were "too fast" until he got tired and extended his arm a couple of inches to tag us, ending the game. After running back and forth from the kitchen to the play room around seven million times, Baba finally got tired and prepared to lunge for my sister who was behind me, causing her to accidentally trip. She easily took me down with her, but as she fell on me, I fell onto the coffee table, grazing my cheek on the corner. The adrenaline pumping through me numbed my cheek, and I didn't realize I was bleeding until Baba swept me up and rushed me to the bathroom, and I caught a glimpse of the bright red liquid smeared across my right cheek. Seeing the blood shocked me, and my first response was to cry.

I remember Baba's panicking and trying to calm me down while taking me to the hospital. In the waiting room, Baba looked at his hands with his brow furrowed, and I counted the new worry lines on his forehead that seemed the multiply again. Today, Baba still brings home new scar medicine in hopes of getting completely rid of the scar that zig-zagged across my right cheek, even though over the years it faded on its own. When he does, I always tell him that it's not his fault, and that he shouldn't blame himself.

"Of course not," he says. ■



"English Farm"

August Andre

First Place—Painting Competition

Oil paint

It's Not Just Me

Jessikah Morton

Our hardship cannot exist in vain
We've gone through too much to tame
The memory of our name
I blame the system for what we've lacked to gain
My kids' faces turned away from the shame
Behind my shoulders I keep them sane
I hope I've ingrained strength and a frame
Of mind that will help them survive in their lives
And I despise those who look into my eyes
And think it's a disguise
and I want them to realize
That my cries advise them to see me
The lies tantalize the belief that I will soon be free
Of this jail that keeps the
Suffering around so that we cannot leave.

"Green Frost"

Erin Davis

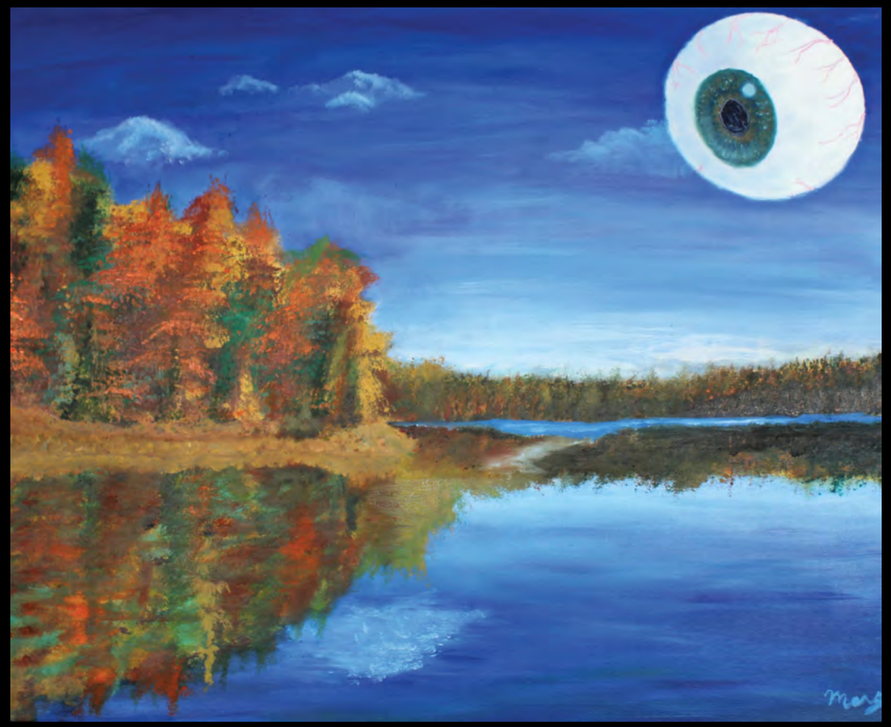
First Place—Photography Competition

Cursive

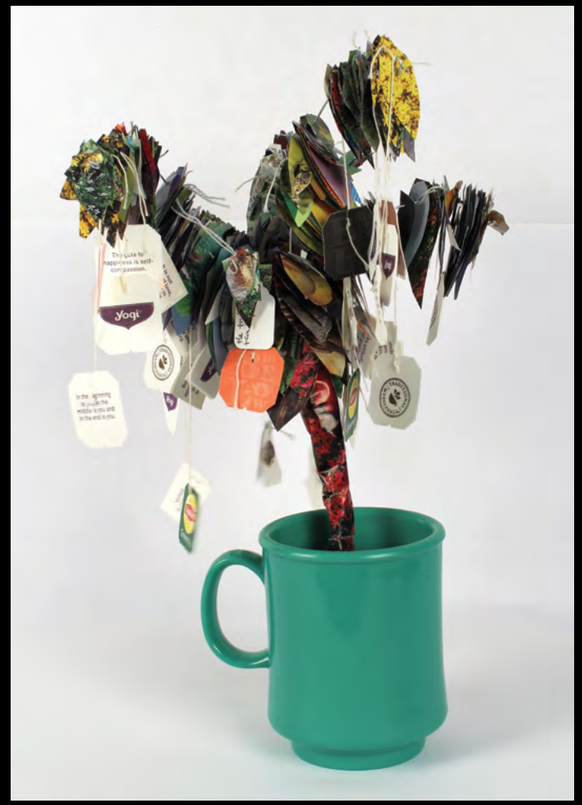
Michelle Luo

In grade school I was told
that as grown-ups we would
write in nothing but long
looping D'nealian script.
That was hard to believe,
as we struggled to grasp onto
chunky, awkward No. 2 pencils
(pens were for big kids)
our hand bones too feeble for
oppressive motor hazing
every loop and twirl an exercise
for soft heads yet to comprehend
multiplication and compound words.
So why did they teach us cursive

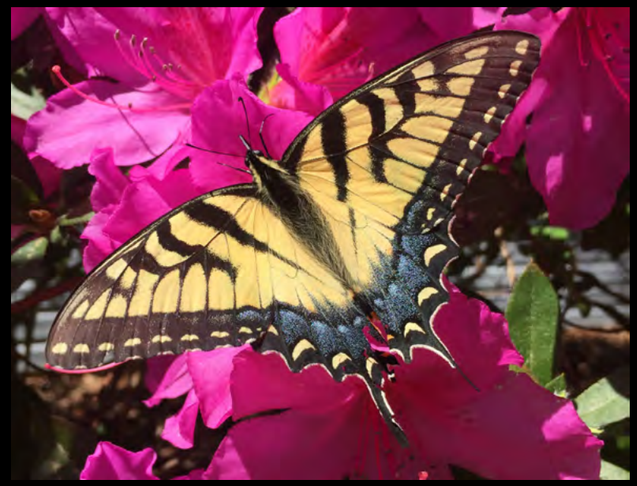
When doctors scrawl like
malfunctioning spirographs
and architects get taught how to
write all block-like later on?
I was looking through a box
of photographs I found at a
thrift store last week.
The ink on their backs had faded into
watercolor pink and yellow
but I could still make out looping
grooves where a pen nib dragged
into cardstock flesh like faded scars.
The ridges glinted at an angle under lamp light,
words obscured over time.



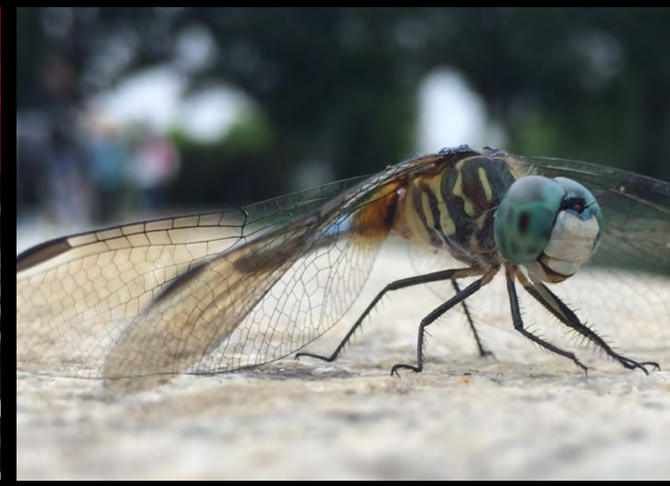
"Of Emerson's Nature"
Morgan Emokpae
Second Place—Painting Competition
Oil paint



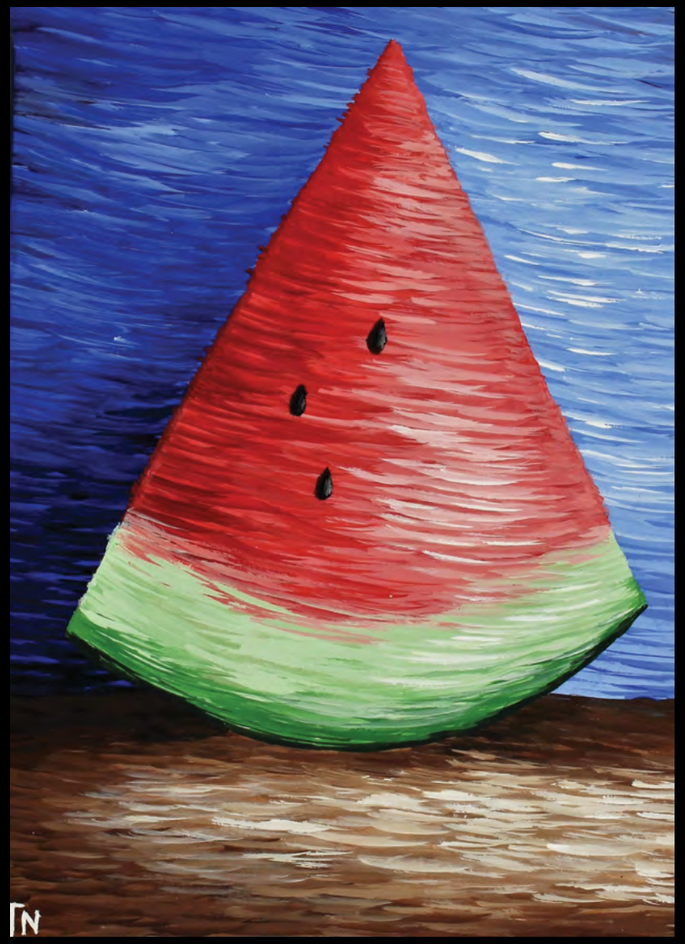
"Tea Tree"
Linda Arnoldus
First Place—Sculpture Competition
Wire, magazine, used tea bags



"Butterfly"
Helen Peng
Photography



"Dragonfly"
Helen Peng
Photography



"Citrus Lunatus"

Gina Nguyen

Third Place—Painting Competition

Acrylic paint

fourth of july

Sarah Perry

i once lit those fireworks
in the middle of the cul-de-sac,
still too young to play with fire
while it bit & stung
my shaky hands.
the flames flew to the sky
and the sparkles scattered
among the stars;
the heavens remade
in blue-red-white.

summertime

Sarah Perry

spanish moss hangs from overarching
branches, swaying wantonly in
the moonlight.
even the night is hot,
a blanket of molasses-thick
air covering the land
far beyond the horizon.
these mississippi nights we spend
together on a blanket,
gazes drawn upwards
to the moon and the stars
in all their glory.
our hands intertwined,
we talk of nothingness,
the vast expanses
that we're lost in.
we're afraid of what
will happen to the heavens
after we're no longer there to see them.

"Field"

Elijah Dosda

Third Place—Photography Competition

The King

Victoria Waller

Everyone in Tupelo knows about Elvis.
We have festivals, parades, attractions in his honor;
There is a plaque at my middle school
With an image of Elvis Presley, twelve years old,
With a guitar and a caption reminding us
That the King of Rock and Roll
Went to our school.

You can imagine my surprise
When I find Elvis sitting on the steps of
City Hall, a guitar in hand, and crooning the most
Beautiful tune, one that makes me think of home.

He sings for what feels like minutes,
But as his voice grows hoarse, I realize that it's been hours.
He takes a break to sip at his water,
And I snag him into conversation, dying to ask him
About music, about life, about how Tupelo looks different
Than it did all those years ago.

We talk and talk and talk, until the sunlight
Begins to bleed into the horizon, and the chill of a
Mississippi October evening sets in.

I invite him back to my place for dinner,
And we eat cheap microwave meals
On the couch I've had since college.
I apologize for the state of my home,
But Elvis is so kind,
And he insists he doesn't mind.

I ask him, once the conversation has come
To a natural halt, both of us just basking
In comfortable silence, if he will sing for me
Just one more time
Before he takes his leave.
And Elvis, a kind and charming man, indulges me.

As he serenades me,
Singing of fools and rivers and love,
I bask in the last moments of this wonderful dream,
Where I am happy and contented,
Before I wake up alone
With the love song replaying in my mind.

Little Dollar Adventures

Victoria Waller

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

My sweaty fingers grip the yellow plastic bag
weighed down with the delightful heaviness of our treasures:
Cow Tales and Dr. Peppers and Doritos and Sour Patch Kids
(never chocolate, it melts),
The evidence of our little dollar adventures

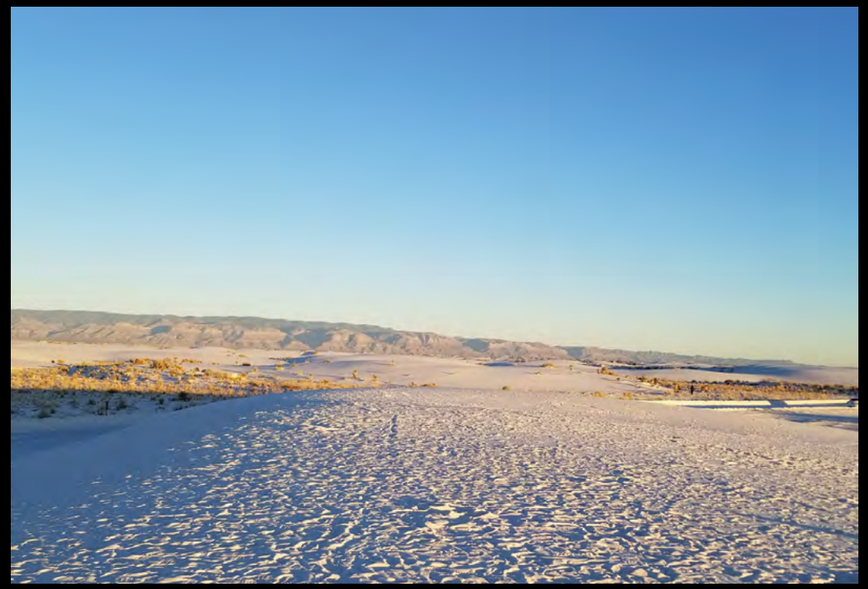
My feet carry me alongside
The pale boy with raven hair:
We skip and laugh and shout and sing,
Our smiles unrestricted and voices loud.

We duck into the tiny stretch of woods
dividing the cul-de-sac from our neighborhood.
Tip-toeing along the worn path, eyes snagging on each
Empty beer can and discarded wrapper.

Faded colors standing out against the earth,
Blues and reds against the browns and greens.

As we reemerge into the blinding sunlight
Water droplets, itty bitty beads of sweat, slide down our cheeks.
Our resolve breaks, hands thrusting into our yellow bags
Drawing forth our little dollar treasures,
The delicious *hiss, crack* of an open bottled soda,
Sugary sweetness sliding down our parched throats.

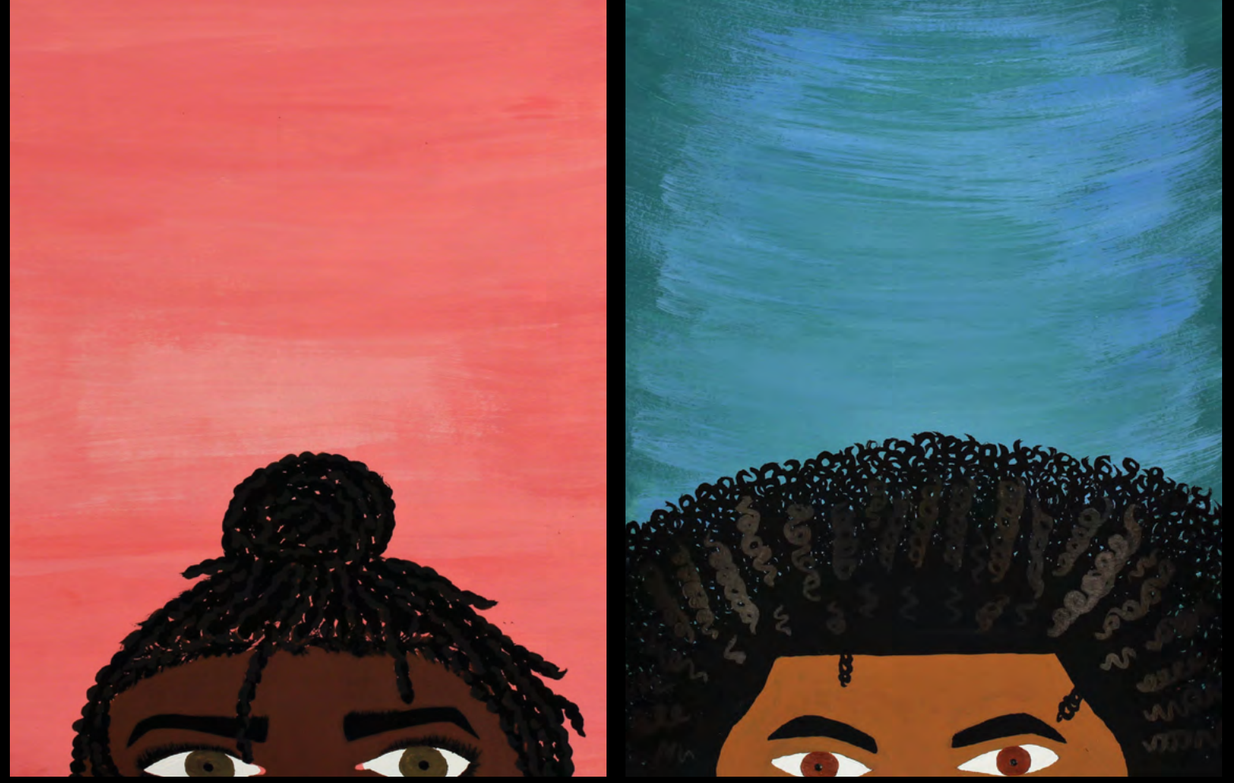
We make it back home before sundown,
Like we always do.
(We are scared of our mothers, and rightfully so).
We bask in the cool cool *cool* air,
A break from the unrelenting Mississippi sun,
And we reap the rewards of our little dollar adventures.



"White Sands"

Deja Hughes

Second Place—Photography Competition



"issa secret"

Kailah Ware

Acrylic paint

Tomato Soup

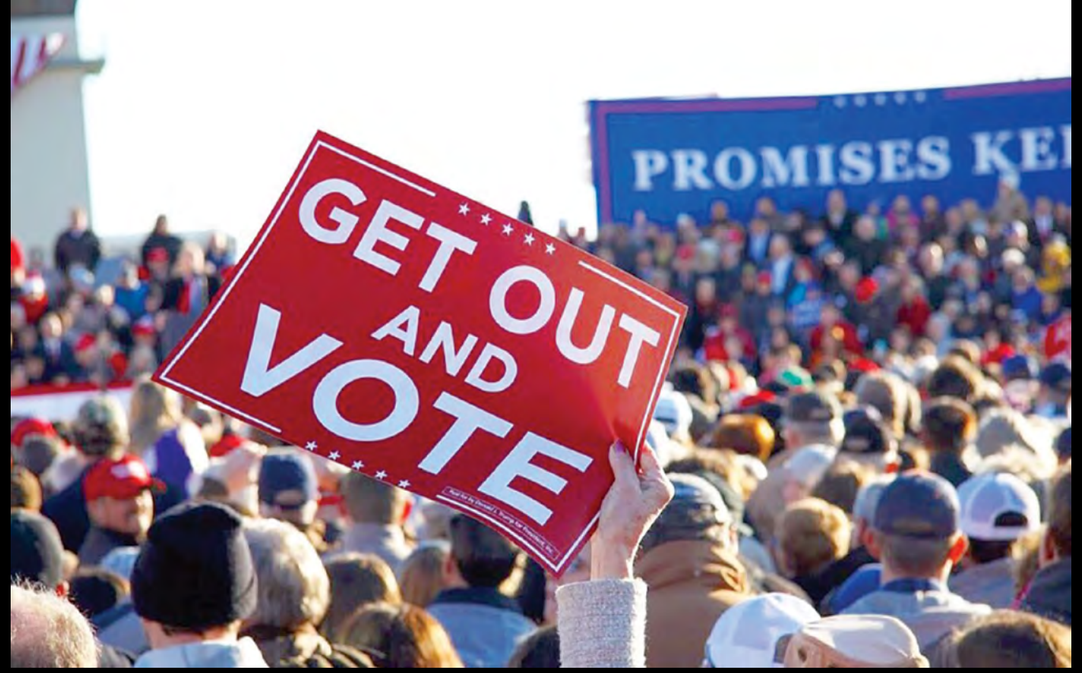
Madison Wypyski

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

You are rigid and clean,
An array of red and white and made of lines,
with curling block lettering,
a name,
decorating the curving paper cover that
wraps itself around your shining, smooth aluminum,
hanging on for life.

Campbell's Soup.
An icon of modern art.
Simple enough,
that the laity understands,
yet intriguing enough for
the upturned nose of a critic
to ponder,
what does it mean?

I am convinced that
Andy Warhol was a pessimist.
Armed with cans and cans and cans,
of soup,
he was ready for the apocalypse,
or the lonely grilled cheese.



"Citizenship"
Gina Nguyen
Photography

Dear Mr. President

Millie Rocco
Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

It's hard to imagine what effect
A thin sheet of melted sand can do.

Windows are so much in today's world.
They separate the healthy and the sick,
The rich and the poor,
The lovers and murderers.

How many windows does your tower have, sir?
How many panes decorate your house of white?
Do you even see the other side
Through your tinted eyes?

These clear barriers are clearly barriers
To equality
To love
And to happiness.

But you, Mr. President,
As you sit upon your leather chair,
I can't help but wonder if you really care.

All these windows built
For you to look
But you can't be bothered to see.

You see through your Twitter screen,
Through your money stream,
And through keeping America "free"
By making people leave.

I see past the shiny glass
I see past the issues you won't spare a glance.

Mr. President, if you could bother,
Open your eyes and try to look a bit harder.

Kick Kick Kaboom Boom

Christian Couvillion

I am a kicker, because I kick things. I have always had a natural talent for kicking; it has gotten me out of many tough situations throughout my life. For instance, in kindergarten, a large, mean child named Preston snatched my new Superman action figure and threw it into the sandbox. Superman was covered in dirt, and his limbs moved rigidly with a cracking sound in his joints. I yelled at Preston's stupid, grinning face, but he continued laughing, unfazed by my seemingly harmless threats. Infuriated, I unleashed my spinning thunder kick straight towards his right thigh. Alarmed, Preston tried to dodge out of the way, but my wrath was unavoidable. He ended up tripping on the pavement and scraping his elbow. He cried. I ran. This was the moment I learned of my extraordinary talent that would follow me through the rest of my life.

Often, I found kicking to be an effective move during combat with my sibling; however, I did not always use my kicking powers to disrupt the wellbeing of others. I eventually learned I could go further with kicking while playing sports. I have always struggled with most athletic games, mainly because I cannot catch, throw, or run. Thankfully, there exists a game where all a player must do is stand in one spot and kick a ball as hard as he possibly can: kickball. I was incredible at kickball, perhaps the best there ever was. Whereas I was always picked last to be on teams for other sports, in kickball I was the first to go.

Not only was I particularly small for my age, I was also the only freshman in my PE class that was composed mostly of juniors and seniors. I had never been able to compete with them in sports like basketball or punchball, as I was outclassed in nearly every physical way. My peers always made fun of how incompetent I was at moving my body. As I approached the kickball plate to take my kick, all the kids laughed at my unorthodox stance.

"Outfield, back up! Couv is up to kick!"

With a smirk, the pitcher rolled the ball towards me at an insultingly slow speed and with a slight bounce. I kicked with all my might, and that little rubber ball soared to the heavens. It crossed the home-run mark with miles to spare. Jaws dropped with disbelief throughout the field as I skipped merrily all the way back to home plate.

"How did he do that? What are they feeding that kid?"

Laughter and cheers echoed across the field. From that day forward, students called me "The Bionic Leg." People would roar when it was my turn to kick, and every time my foot made contact with the ball, someone would scream "Kaboom!" My kicking powers brought me from "no-name scrub," to "living legend." I am a kicker; I now kick things I never dreamed possible. ■

"The Countryside"
Erin Davis
Photography

Windex Mornings

Violet Jira

First Place—Essay Competition

On Windex mornings, I woke up to the sound of "Car Talk." Click and Clack had a way of making everything seem like a joke, their voices always on the cusp of laughter, their Boston accents ringing through my quiet Delta home.

I would wake up to the smell of pancakes and groan internally; after years of pleading I had not been successful in convincing my parents to invest in a waffle iron, not to mention I absolutely hated blueberry anything.

On Windex mornings, I would wake up, roll over, and read. The pages of skinny novellas rustled between my fingertips, the words snaking around me and gently placing me in another world. I didn't dare leave the room because I knew my mother was waiting on the other side of the door, having temporarily traded her Bible for a broom; for her, cleanliness really was next to godliness.

I would wake up on my well-worn sheets, their softness familiar. I would wake up to a cool room, my father having opened my window before the sun had even greeted the world. Even though the three-mile walk to school didn't demand that he wake up so early anymore, he couldn't seem to shake the habit.

On Windex mornings I would drink chai, mine milked down compared to my dad's cup of deep brown *chai nyeusi*.

Windex mornings were marked by my brothers in ill-fitting pajamas fighting for the D.S. on the couch. By my dad's chuckling softly at the sometimes-crude jokes the Magliozzi brothers made as he graded papers in green ink. By an open window with a cool flowing breeze carefully nudging aside the curtains. Windex mornings were marked by cleaning the house to an Ajax-commercial perfection. By pulling weeds in the garden with my mother. By cooking shows and infomercials for products I was half convinced no one ever really bought. By the smell of Windex wafting through my house, from the sparkling old Corollas outside.

There are no more Windex mornings. Tom Magliozzi passed away two years after "Car Talk" came to a close. Pancakes were replaced by compression can biscuits, and the size of our new home left no room between paychecks for open windows. I developed a hatred for chai, and a preference for coffee. My brothers grew out of the clothes they had grown out of, and there was no need to fight over the D.S. when they both had phones. The old Corollas were sold.

"Windex may disappear seconds after its mist makes the air shimmer, taking Windex mornings with it, but my family, our home, our love, hasn't dissolved a bit."

Now, I clean without being told. My mother's garden died off leaving only dried-up petals and sickly yellow leaves, subtle reminders of what used to be. When I plucked them off, my dad would jokingly chide me, telling me to leave my mother's "home improvements" alone. Car washes replaced the work of Windex; its lingering scent in the wake of sparkling glass perfumed my mornings no more. Windex may disappear seconds after its mist makes the air shimmer, taking Windex mornings with it, but my family, our home, our love, hasn't dissolved a bit. ■

A Blend of Two Cultures

Catherine Li

Four pairs of hands, three stacks of dough,
Two pots of ground pork, and one bowl of water later:
Thousands of dumplings lined like soldiers on Grandma's china
Fill every open space in the kitchen

The walls are decorated with lantern lights and calligraphy scribbled on red paper.
Mama has invited many guests who congratulate me
And hand me red envelopes filled with money.
I tug at Mama's qi pao, astonished, and ask what the occasion is.
Mama tells me this Chinese New Year is my lucky year: The Year of the Horse.
It only comes once every twelve years, she says,
So we must celebrate properly in order to invite all the luck to our home.

Mama tells me that horses symbolize speed and freedom,
that horses are dream chasers.
She tells me she knew I was a dream chaser even before I was born,
And I ask her, *How?*
Mama's laugh carries across the room, and she takes my hand to follow it.

Picking up an ink brush, Mama guides my hand as she stretches it
Across delicate paper, trailing black ink from the brush.
She begins her story.
Mama tells me the first symbol is my surname,
Passed on through generations and generations
From the Yangtze River to the foothills of Yellow Mountain.
I watch her smooth strokes glide as if they were a part of the river
Never ceasing to flow.

Mama tells me the name she and Baba chose for me
Means "fulfilling hopes and dreams" because I fulfilled theirs.

Mama's voice cracks as she explains that there was a time
When having two children in China was forbidden.

Mama tells me about lying on the surgical table crying for her unborn child,
As doctors prepared to take it.
But I didn't let them, she smiled,
And it was the best decision I ever made.

As Mama connects the last symbol,
She tells me about the journey to America, to the land of the free
And for a future for her two girls.
She tells me how Mississippi was foreign ground
Where they had no family and no friends,
How they started a new life founded on hospitality and hope.

Mama explains to me that even though it's hard
To communicate with her broken English and understand deep Southern accents,
and even though most nights she feels more like an immigrant than a citizen,
she is grateful for the South because it provided a haven for her to raise me.

For you, she says, *my dream chaser, it was worth it.*
As someone from the kitchen announces that dinner is ready,
I see Mama wipe away a tear, and beckon me to follow her.

At the dinner table
I reach for sesame chicken and for fried chicken
And notice the condensation dripping down the sweet tea pitcher
And the steam seeping up out of the clay Oolong teapot,
And I feel at home.

Do You Hear Me?

Liz Huynh

My sneaker screeches against the polished airport floor where ill industrial lights flicker a pale shine. I sit on the squeaky bench of blue chairs outside of the custody room, swinging my leg as I observe the travelers passing through security checks. Businessmen, with cotton suits and khaki pants, skip the security line and walk through the V.I.P. gate. Mothers with flowing maxi dresses stroke their daughters' hair. Teenagers, with sneakers and sweatpants, swipe phone screens to combat the long hours of international flights. Although we are in the same building, an invisible wall mutes me from the rest of the world.

I squeeze the top right button on my phone and watch the screen flicker on and off; minutes pass. I whisper to the empty row of chairs, "12:08. 12:15. Our flight leaves in fifteen minutes; we won't make it—what if they force him to jail?" With two hands, I fling the iPhone 5 into the air like a Frisbee and clap my hands to catch it. My mind runs through the possible scenarios and potential actions to take for each scenario. After I exhaust my imagination, I tug the phone into my pocket and rub my palms through my thighs, chaffing the thick jeans that are supposed to protect me against the Western chill. But no matter how much I fidget or rub, the uncertain air chills me to the core.

I want to cast away the metal doors and find Dad. I want to emancipate him from the unconstitutional custody, so we can climb onto the golf cart and catch our flight—just in time as the flight attendants close the door. We will fly to the land of democracy and lead an unfettered life. But I won't. Instead, I sit still with my legs glued together, attempting to hide the bulky Swissgear laptop bag behind slender calves that Dad trusted me with before being shoved into the box.

I pull the bag from under the seat onto my lap; my hand squeezes the sides as I trace the zipper line. Dad's laptop contains words, plain and rustic, that paint the image of Vietnam. Dad narrates the Vietnamese story, beginning from the starving years of 1945, to the tangy smell of cigarette and gunpowder on Grandpa's hair, to the squeaks of Grandma's rusty bikes that carry bulks of recycled flip-flops made out of motorbike tires to sell to Western soldiers. Dad tells the story of his blind devotion to communism, for, at the time, it was the form of government that promised Vietnam unity and complete independence. Then, Dad shares his regret for trusting the one-party regime because he witnessed the corruption unchecked power created: government officials chipped away the Official Development Assistance fund that developed countries had bestowed to Vietnam and sold Vietnamese natural resources and lands like commodities. Dad points his sharpened words against the suppression of the freedom of speech in Vietnam and pierces through the invisible curtain to expose the injustices. His words are like a waterfall cascading through the citizens' hearts, awakening our hidden anger and dusted patriotism. For the powerholders, his words are like needles, painful yet vital.

Ever since his website reached 100,000 followers, the government has used different tactics to mute Dad. They condemn him of "betraying the country" and put him on occasional house arrest. Whenever someone expresses their sorrow, Dad laughs, "It's really nothing. Other brave hearts suffer more." He explains how the government officials hire gangs to torment and threaten more outspoken bloggers and their families. The police hold captive bloggers and activists in jail for over three years without a rightful trial, hoping to trample their fortitude. So often, fearful for Dad, I implore him to stop writing and let the younger generation fight his battle. However, with a sad smile, Dad explains how young people are more susceptible to the government's abuses. The authorities bribe employers and landlords to force young activists into silence. "My writing is my atonement for your generation."

Being an activist fighting for the freedom of speech in Vietnam is like being a mole in a whack-a-mole game. One could use all platforms to expose the injustices, but being silenced is only a matter of time. The government destroys criticism instead of making changes. I see oppression in the short-lived Facebook posts with bloody images of citizens who were rude to a police officer. I see oppression in the lack of mention about the various form of government throughout the world. I see oppression sitting alone in the airport.

Suddenly, the metal door swings open and Dad steps out. I rush to Dad's side while gasping for air as if I haven't breathed since he was taken away. I hold Dad's hand and although I want to flood him with questions, the built-up anxiety strangles my throat, and my eyes brim with tears. Seeing my worried look, Dad pats my head, "I'm sorry, darling. You were really brave! But we will not visit America. They banned me from exiting the country." Dad then asks for my phone and dials a relative to ask for a ride home. As we pass the security line, I notice the crinkles on Dad's polo shirt and the red mark on his right wrist. His peppered hair seems to turn white after the three-hour detainment.

Stepping away from the air-conditioned glass building, I inhale the moist air and soak up the broiling sunlight of the Vietnamese summer. People enter and exit the international hub, rushing to their destinations with little concern for our predicament. Standing next to Dad on the sidewalk, I spot the ivory plane among the milky clouds. I wonder if our countrymen's affliction will travel on the plane to that land of justice our elders talked about, or is it hidden in the air or censored by oblivious minds? ■

Educated

Millie Rocco

Second Place—Poetry Competition

If you didn't want an army,
You shouldn't have given us uniforms.
We are armed with pencils and scantrons
To be the perfect students,
To raise the State's scores,
And to adorn résumés with awards.
Illegitimi non carborundum, sweetheart.

Ego te provoco,
Do your best, or else.
Take your notes,
Study your sets,
You can do better than that.

Carpe noctem, boys and girls!
Use your knowledge to fight.
Apply to college and beat the competition,
Take the admissions office by storm.

Ex nihilo nihil fit,
Your hard work will pay off;
The soldier will be promoted.
Now finish your job, and remember,
Alumni is another word for *veterans*.

Lanterns

Liz Huynh

Red and gold shine
of lanterns stacked on vendors
Tint dull boulevards.
The caged-flare, draped in gamboge and gold,
Ignite the dark with sparks
From white and red candles or sizzling electric.
Assorted shapes of lotus buds or water lilies,
Plastic dolls or malleable Mickey.
All flickers in celebration
Of the union of the Fairy
And the peasant.

Once in mid Fall,
I stood with mouth ajar,
Drooling over various shapes;
Fingers scraped smooth Washi papers,
coarse Mulberry papers,
and pleaded to Dad.
How could I,
among the various possibilities,
choose one and be content?
Should I take the flickering firefly
or the dancing dragon or the slithering snake?
Options upon options
foreshadowing the many life lanterns,
or life choices to come.

Photographs

Sarah Perry

Cardboard shoeboxes and dusty photo albums cover the expandable oak dining table just outside the tiny kitchen. Abuelita's venerable hands sift through heaps of photographs. Her voice carries a smile behind it, and her eyes shine as she explains each one to me. After each picture, she passes it over to me to put away neatly.

I'm glad I wasn't so young then. I listen carefully; her voice is gentle, yet I stay ensnared in the web of tales she weaves. Anecdotes about my uncles' mischief make us both laugh, and I love to hear her chuckle. Like her voice, her laugh is gentle; mine is loud and I laugh longer than she does. Pictures surface of my cousins (too many to count on both hands), my parents, my brother, myself; pictures from the 70s, pictures from three years ago. Most have stories behind them that I'll only ever hear about.

I spot a creased black-and-white photograph, edges torn, with a note on the back. Half of the note is scratched out with black ink.

"What's this, Abuelita?"

I hand her the photo and she pauses, inspecting it with a close eye. I can tell that the woman in the picture is sitting next to me now. She has the same mischievous smile, the same shining eyes, the same gentle spirit.

"Oh…" She puts on her thick amber bifocals to take a better look at the photo, then glances at me and smiles. "This is from when Grampo and I first met."

I shuffle my chair closer to her, scraping it against the unfinished wood floors as I move.

"He had just bought this car," she says as she taps the photo with her index finger a few times. "He was so proud. But I thought it was silly; he already had a truck that worked perfectly well."

She smiles and hands the photo back to me. I flip it over and read the cursive on the back, trying to read what's crossed out.

Salvador and I—

He is a very wonderful guy. Fred took this picture, here at home.

I'm not quite *sure whether or not I like that smile on my face!*

The last half of the note is indecipherable.

I can recognize Abuelita right away in the photo, but I don't recognize Grampo. They're standing together, she in a neat white dress with her hands clasped in front of her, and he in a button-up with his hands in his pockets.

"I wish he could tell me the stories about him and Abuelita when they first met. I wish I could know that the stories he tells are true. But there's no way."

Grampo is eighty-two. In all the years of my life, I've never known him to be any younger. He has more wrinkles than I can count, tanned skin, and white hair. His lips curl around his teeth when he laughs or smiles. The Grampo I know is nothing like the one in the picture; he rarely has that youthful spark in his eye now.

I look back at the picture. I'll never be able to know what Grampo was like when he was younger, when he showed his teeth in a great grin when he smiled. Now, he'll crack some jokes, or say something witty and laugh, but I don't really know him.

I don't know if he really knows me.

I visit Abuelita and Grampo with Mama maybe once a year, if we're lucky; plane tickets are too expensive, and the twenty-hour drive is too long. Each time, Abuelita reintroduces me to Grampo. He recognizes Mama, but I never know if he recognizes me.

"Here is Naomi," Abuelita says to him, gesturing at Mama. "*Na-o-mi*," loud and clear, so his hearing aids pick it up. He nods and smiles, and Mama hugs him.

"She brought Sarah," Abuelita says. "*Sa-rah*, your granddaughter!" Grampo looks at me for a moment, then nods, looking between Abuelita and me. I smile at him and he smiles back.

Sometimes he knows that his memory isn't good. Abuelita tells me that he learns about Alzheimer's when the nurses come to their house to take care of him, but doesn't remember for the next day.

Sometimes he doesn't remember certain words in English. Abuelita has to say them in Spanish to him until he understands. It's a language he didn't pass on to his children. I've been told why, but I wish I knew from him. I wish he could tell me the stories about him and Abuelita when they first met. I wish I could know that the stories he tells are true. But there's no way.

Perhaps it's selfish.

"Uncle Johnny told me a story about you and Grampo," my auntie pipes in, later, as we go through more pictures. She speaks with a barely-noticeable accent. Abuelita just looks at her and smiles. "He says he would take you to the movies as a chaperone, then sit in the front row while you and Grampo sat in the back!" Auntie puts a hand over her heart, looking scandalized.

Abuelita smiles, not refuting the claims yet.

"… And I says, 'Oh my gosh!' But you wouldn't do *that*, right?" auntie asks. It seems like she's inherited that smile from Abuelita.

Abuelita smiles innocently, as if she hasn't heard what auntie said. "What? No, no…" She trails off and chuckles, looking from auntie to me. There's no way she can deny it.

These tiny snippets of Abuelita's life leave me wondering what else I don't know about her, what else I don't know about Grampo, what other wonderful stories I could uncover in the piles of cardboard shoeboxes and dusty photo albums. ■

"The Future"

Morgan Emokpae

Photography

closed eyes

Michelle Luo

tulips bloom in black tar
shrinking in endless twirls
like a sundress spinning out
loose fabric skirt twisting,
falling

violet petals blow away
like magic smoke
peeling away like
skin from
a grape

infinite fields span
a sky of stars bursting
nebulae writhing
expanding
in reddish glow

Runaway

Sarah Perry

"You're not my daughter," Emelia's aunt slurred, breath tinted with cheap vodka. "The only reason you're not whoring yourself on the street is because of my charity. Do you know how much you cost? Then you go and wreck your truck—that nice, expensive truck—"

"It wasn't my fault! The old lady pulled out in front of me and…" Emelia said, biting her lip. Hey eyes welled with tears, but she stared straight at her aunt.

"I don't care one damn bit. Now I've got to pay hundreds of dollars to get your hood fixed and the insurance will go up. You don't stop to consider anyone but yourself, Emelia Lynn! You're paying for this, you know. No more paychecks going to getting more skirts for your closet. You're old enough to be responsible for *your* actions."

Emelia's cheeks burned. She looked up at the popcorn ceiling to keep any tears from leaking. Dark water stains had pooled on the ceiling, making musty rings.

"Can't even look at me, now can you? You know I'm telling the truth. You've always been irresponsible. You're just another burden! You're completely worthless to me. I'd be so much better off without you causing trouble! I wouldn't have a damned disrespectful child on my hands," Emelia's aunt hissed, running her hands through her knotted hair. Her dull, sunken eyes glanced over the peeling wallpaper and stained couches to find any unfinished beer bottles in stacks of green and brown glass. Finally, she grabbed a bottle and took the last gulp of it down. As she tilted her head back, a strap of her old tank top fell over her shoulder.

"I'm not a child anymore," Emelia said after a long moment.

"Then stop acting like one!"

"Maybe you should take your own advice for once!" Emelia sputtered, staring straight at her aunt again.

Emelia's aunt tilted her head. "What did you just say to me?"

"You heard *perfectly* well what I said," Emelia mumbled. She picked up a few dishes and set them in stacks in the sink, then grabbed sweaters strewn across the dirty couches.

"This conversation isn't over. You're not allowed to go out with your friends and do—whatever it is that you do until you get enough money to get that red truck fixed. My word is final, Emelia Lynn!"

Emelia stomped the whole way to her room, each step echoing down the hall. She pulled out a backpack and shoved everything she could into it. A necklace in its case, an expensive perfume, some skirts, an old stuffed animal, a thin blanket.

She paused, hunched over her work, and clenched her eyes shut, still trying to keep tears from spouting. Before long, her already-bare room was nearly empty, and clothes and important knickknacks spilled out from her backpack. When she was satisfied with her work, she fumbled for her phone.

"Tom, could you do me a favor?" she said, five rings later.

Fifteen minutes passed too slowly. She kept her head in her hands, her elbows propped on her knees, until her phone lit up. She pulled the backpack's straps over her shoulders before stepping out.

Like smoke. Never in one place. Disappears before you can catch it. Run away, go wherever.

"Where do you think you're going?" her aunt accused, a new bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She puffed on the cigarette, the smoke filling up the dingy trailer home.

"I'm leaving." Emelia said decidedly, despite her throat clenching and her voice shaking. "You'll never see me again—I'll never be a burden to you again. I'll fix my car and move to the other side of the country. I'll go to college. Anything to get away from this trailer and from you."

"You're not smart enough to go to college."

"I'm still smarter than you!" Emelia shouted, bolting out of the door. She spotted Tom's truck and hoisted herself into the passenger seat, tossing her backpack up before her. She slammed the truck's door shut when she got in, crossing her arms and folding into herself.

"Just… just drive."

Tom nodded and hit the gas. His eyes flitted to the rear-view window, where Emelia's aunt was standing on the steps of the trailer. She threw her bottle as far as she could at the truck, but missed just enough that the bottle shattered against the ground where the truck had been parked. Beer seeped through the dirt.

Long silence marked the ride. Emelia stared ahead while Tom minded the road; he occasionally stole a glance at her, his brows furrowed deeply. Aimless miles passed by on the highway for minutes, the sun just low enough that lights lit up the city on the exits.

"Finally running away?" he said, sneaking in a smile.

"I guess so. I just… I can't go back. You know how it is. She drinks, then she gets angry, then eventually she hurts me. There's only a few months left of school… I don't know who I'm going to stay with."

"Maybe you could rent your own place."

"Too expensive."

"Maybe you could crash with Alison."

"Her parents hate me. They'd give me straight back to my aunt," Emelia mumbled.

Tom glanced over at Emelia again. She was curled up in the seat, her knees tucked under her chin. She watched the other cars on the highway pass them by. "Momma would probably let you stay on the couch, at least for a few nights. You could just ride with me after school, I could take you to work."

Emelia turned her head a bit and smiled. "I'm glad you'd do that for me. I'm going to try to save up for my truck's bills, then I'll be out of your hair…"

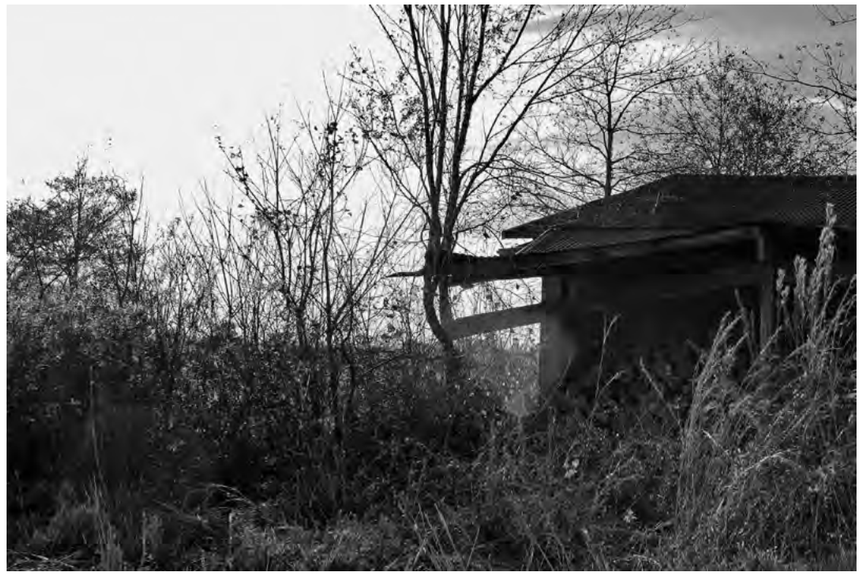
"You don't need to worry about that. You know my family adores you. No need to rush, or anything."

Emelia nodded and watched the streetlights flicker by as Tom exited the highway. He focused on taking the right turns instead of talking. The roads were smooth in Tom's neighborhood, no bumps jostling the car. Streets glistened with Christmas lights strung up on houses, reindeer and sleighs on roofs.

Tom pulled into his driveway and parked, then picked up Emelia's backpack for her. His sandy hair shone under the twinkling string lights. Emelia slunk out of the truck and crossed her arms.

"Hey," said Tom, watching her. "You're going to be okay."

"That's how it's supposed to work, isn't it?" Emelia grinned and stood straight again. "Of course I'll be okay." ■



"Abandoned Farm"

Elijah Dosda

Photography

I'll Be There

Samaria Swims

I see you frown
Everywhere you go
Things aren't going right for you
I know the feeling
But keep your head held high
Things will be all right
I'll be over there
Waiting for you to come talk to me

I see you tear up
Water coming from your eyes
I want you to be happy
I want you to feel all right
Everything happens for a reason
I need you to believe you will be fine
I'll be over there
Waiting for you to come talk to me

Don't push me away
I just want to help you
I want to see you thrive
I want to see you smile
I'll be over there
Waiting for you to come talk to me
No, I'll be over here
Comforting you

Windows

Samantha Broussard

The doors were wooden,
Windows tall and clear.
Six panes, divided by dark board panels.
They saw everything and
Never changed,
Not even when a golf ball fell from the sky
Launching itself
Straight into the middle pane.
From the first ice day
To the hottest moments of summer.
The windows always watched.
They watched me bring home
My first crush,
First best friend,
First homecoming date,
First boyfriend,
First heartbreak.
They welcomed friends
Needing a place to stay
When they couldn't go home.
The windows were always there, and
Even when I think
I'll never see them again,
They're always on my front door
Reminding me
That I'll find my way back home.

Thud

Christian Couvillion

I hold a blank stare across the room
Distracted from the task in front of me
My opponent moves his piece across the board
Plops his queen next to my king
With a thick, heavy thump.
I tip my king
And it falls with a quick, yet piercing, thunk
And my heart sinks
With a silent, mournful thud

Real Death Experiences

Audrey Wohlscheid

The first thing I learned about my Gramps was that he was a mortician. He and Nana lived in an apartment connected to the back of the funeral home. They parked their car underneath the carport right beside the hearse and fancy Buick that every funeral home seems to have. As well as the cars, there was a carpeted ramp that I liked to sit and play on underneath the carport. I once saw a man pushing a gurney up the ramp through the back door of the funeral home; I only now realize what was underneath the sheet covering the gurney.

I made friends with everyone who worked at the funeral home. My favorite person was Perceval; we called him Percy for short. He was the florist, and every single time Percy saw me, he put a flower in my hair. I cracked the code of receiving flowers from Percy after a few months. If he was working, that meant someone had died recently. If I saw several cars parked outside in the parking lot, that meant Percy would be in his office. Usually dressed in casual play clothes, I would stroll through the crowds of mourning people and find him. I went to many people's funerals that I didn't even know all for a pretty flower to be placed in my hair.

"That feeling intrigued me back then, but in my recent experiences with death, I have gotten more and more put off by the sight and feeling of the dead people."

Sometimes, Gramps would take me back to the morgue. If I woke up early enough, I could hear him brewing his morning coffee and Nana making homemade buttermilk biscuits. I could mosey into the kitchen, and if I was lucky, after breakfast Gramps would ask if I wanted to come with him to see the "recently deceased" as he called them. Of course, the answer was always yes! I have since figured out, with the help of context clues, that he never once asked me if I wanted to join him if a child had died.

There were usually two or three bodies in the back, as there were only two funeral homes in the town. They always looked like wax figurines to me; they looked like sleeping wax figurines. Gramps showed me how to wire a person's jaw shut and how the blood was drained. The coolest thing, though, was that Gramps allowed me to touch only the dead people's hands, probably for safety reasons. When I touched them, they were always cold and waxy feeling. That feeling intrigued me back then, but in my recent experiences with death, I have gotten more and more put off by the sight and feeling of the dead people.

My first major experience with death was when I was nine years old. I spent all of Friday and Saturday with my "boyfriend" at the time; we grew up together, as our families were and still are very close. My father took me back to my mom's home (as they are divorced) Sunday after church. I remember walking in through the kitchen. I saw several photo albums strewn about the dining room table, but I didn't think anything of it. When I walked into the living room, my mom sat me down to talk.

"You know Carson?" she asked me.

"Yeah, is he coming over?" I still remember those words leaving my mouth.

"No, he died this morning."

Looking back on it now, I am thankful that my Gramps was a mortician. I am thankful because I understood what was going on with everyone when Carson died. Unlike most young kids, I knew that even though he looked like he was sleeping, Carson was most definitely not asleep. But I knew that he was not hurting and not in pain; I had a very clear understanding of that. As much as I wanted him to do so, he would never be coming back. Of everything that has made me a more knowledgeable person over my almost seventeen years of life, I think having almost daily exposure to death has taught me the most. ■

Mud Dauber

Michelle Luo

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

Ury-poxy-lon po-li-tum.

She spoke the words under her breath, tracing a finger along each line of the encyclopedia entry as if in sermon. She drew out the sounds, rolling the l's and p's around with her tongue like a cough drop. *Commonly known as organ-pipe mud daubers, these large predatory wasps are harmless to humans.* The words she took closer to heart than Bible verses. She thought that the thick books looked similar and equally tattered.

"They make long, tube-like nests resembling organ-pipes…" Her whisper trailed out. *Inside trees and underneath man-made structures.* She lifted her head from the book to gaze out the glass. A mud dauber, like the one in the book, limped along the wooden porch. Its black-blue wings were low. It dragged and hopped across the ground agitated but defeated. It cornered around the rounded metal beam of a folding chair, which seemed to destroy its motivation. Throwing one leg forward and then another, its energy depleted over a few inches of travel. Then it lurched and stopped. It did not move, and still did not move when she heaved open the rusted sliding door against primal instinct.

Her hands tremored as they advanced toward the wasp. A finger grazed the wing and withdrew. The wasp made a microscopic movement, as if uttering a cry for help. She couldn't tell if the motion was her poke or the wasp's last breath of life, but she remained optimistic. She nudged her little finger under the wasp's abdomen, and its legs clamped on. Gulping down an exhale, she ran inside, kicking at the bottom of the door with her foot to shut it.

In the kitchen, she grabbed a bowl while balancing the wasp on her other hand. She laid her hand next to the bowl as if to encourage the wasp to leave, but the wasp remained latched fast to her finger. She waved the finger side to side and quickly stopped, imagining the wasp's brain jostling and compound eyes spinning.

Mud daubers often drink nectar, although prefer to feed their young nutritious spiders.

Sugar lived in the tallest shelf of the most remote cabinet. Above the refrigerator, white sugar was reserved for church potluck pies. *Apis mellifera.* The honey bee. Honey was reserved for tea and lived in a lower cabinet. Did wasps like honey? Wasps and bees seemed like natural enemies, but honey seemed an acceptable substitute for nectar.

Lifting the hand with the wasp out of harm, she climbed onto the countertop, and flipped open the cabinet doors. Heart pounding, her eyes scanned the shelves. Tomato sauce. Tomato sauce. Tomato sauce. Canned potatoes. Beans. No honey in sight.

On a whim, she abandoned the honey. It could not be found. The white sugar was in the cabinet above the refrigerator—her mother had used it recently. Mother was out at a church gathering and had left her daughter to reading and highlighting verses. She took a pie with her—strawberry rhubarb that was sure to impress. *Rheum rhabarbarum*, a fun one.

She brought herself to stand on the countertop. If her mother saw her now, there would be no more reading, no more sight, just darkness and hymnal tunes. The surface of the refrigerator was in view: dusty, mealy, and the final resting place of a few house flies—*Musca domestica*.

The wasp's six legs tickled her finger and itched it, but she ignored the tingles pulling open the small cabinet and dragging out the paper bag of sugar. In a swift motion, she dropped down, dangled her legs off the counters, and pushed herself onto solid ground, bag and wasp in hand. A spoon went into the bag, then the spoon went into the bowl. Water splashed into the bowl and swirled the sugar into a thin, clear syrup. With ginger care, she brushed the wasp against the bowl. A foreleg stuck out, twitching, then understanding, dragging onto the ceramic. Other legs followed, and soon the wasp began lapping at the syrup.

The wasp's safety restored, she returned the sugar, movements calm. She cupped her hands around the bowl, as if to barricade the wasp, and peered in. Its wings were relaxed and with a new blue sheen.

Something ruffled in another room. She froze. It might have been the wind passing through curtains on an open window or the collapse of a hanging towel. It might have been a bear exiting hibernation, or even worse, her mother returning from her lady's circle.

Her cheeks burning, she pressed a clammy hand against her face to dispel the heat. She covered the bowl with the palm of her hand and dashed back to the living room. The tips of her toes slammed against wood planks. No matter what, she could *not* be heard.

The sliding door resisted any shove, but ground open with a pained disharmony. Slinking out the door, she set down the bowl and fell back inside. On the couch, she pressed down her dress, shifted over the Bible she was meant to be reading, and tucked away her encyclopedia under the floral skirt of the couch. ■

"High Above"

Kelsey Hollingsworth

Photography

Organic Organism

Morgan Emokpae

Carbon-Carbon bonds,
God's clay of choice,
Its tetrahedral nature
Pushes the bounds of creation towards
igniting inward illumination.
That links me to you.

Whitman said, "Every atom belonging to me as good
belongs to you."
If this is true,
We combust the same saccharides,
Drink the same monoxide,
Refract the same photons.
Your pain is our pain.

Yet, what I see is not equality,
Rather, a society at odds,
Me vs. You.
Both begat by Adam,
A tale of Cain and Abel.
Darwin deemed survival of the fittest.
But why?

If it's the color of my skin,
I can explain:
Evolution—
Through descent with modification,
Perpetuated by variation,
Come full circle in nature's selection;
God sculpted me this way.
So, these melanin hues
Paint for aesthetic utility,
Not crude segregation.

But beyond the surface,
I am me, but I am also you,
A collection of carbons,
Sculpted by the sculptor,
But still,
A molecule by any other name,
A collection of carbons bonded in the human chain.

Indian Highway

Michelle Luo

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

Mama said we were heading to the theme park across the border in California. I had seen the sign once before when I was little. The sky was bluish black, deeper than a canyon, and I was lying down in the back of the car covered in blankets. I could feel every bump in the road keeping me from going to sleep. But I didn't want to go to sleep then—the stars were zipping by like pixies, and I got to see the sign in the shape of a saguaro cactus with light bulbs around the edges and "Bandit's Cove" right in the center. It shined so bright. It zipped by like every other star.

Now, it was daytime, hot, dry, and I could feel sweat bubbling and peeling down my skin, then vanishing. The air was warbling like mixing invisible paint. Red sand extended in every direction, shrubbery dotting the land spiked with Joshua trees. Onward, our car trundled down the road. Mama lit a cigarette. She held it with the tips of her long red fingernails because she liked to smoke it all the way down. She was a beautiful woman. She was taking me to Bandit's Cove, and I loved her.

The road met a fork, and we went left to the ghost town. I had been there before to pan gold and hear the stories the locals would tell about the battle that happened hundreds of years ago, and the ghosts that still haunt their homes. There was not much more for me to find interesting here, but Mama was stopping to catch up with a friend, she said, and so she did. We stayed in the hostel for a day. I got to pan more gold, although I only found rocks, and tried old-fashioned sarsaparilla from the tap, on the house, at the saloon. We left as if we were never there. I felt one of those ghosts, and I wondered if one day they would tell stories about me.

"Are we there yet?" I asked.

"We are certainly not," Mama replied. "There's a long way to go. Looo-ng way. Look at the map." She tossed over a travel guide we had picked up from the saloon, and I busied myself looking at it. So many lines cascaded and crossed over themselves, looping round and round, gray, yellow, blue. Then I realized I was looking at Las Vegas. Wherever we were, it could have been any lonely line in a plane of brownish map. There was one thing I was sure of, and it was the cactus sign that said Bandit's Cove.

"Is Bandit's Cove near?" I asked.

"Just around the corner." The road was straight. I didn't quite believe her, but I was patient when patience was all I had.

"I remember writhing around, fighting against the seatbelt, hot breath on my face, shaking, and dreams disappearing as soon as I figured they existed."

The road blurred in hot fuzzy memory, parts of my vision filled in with black, and I slumped into my seat, the belt slipping off my shoulder. I remember writhing around, fighting against the seatbelt, hot breath on my face, shaking, and dreams disappearing as soon as I figured they existed. I woke up, and with an inhale of smoke, realized I had woken up to reality, yet the haze behind my skull persisted. The beeping of the turn signal indicated another stop.

Rubbing my eyes, I asked, "Where are we?"

"Almost there," Mama replied. To Bandit's Cove, I thought, and my heart raced. I sat up straighter. The sky was dark now. The park would likely be closed, but I held disappointment on reserve, as you do when someone has said bad news and you choose not to believe it. Almost where, I wanted to ask, for confirmation, but maybe it was silly.

Mama pulled over onto the shoulder of the highway when it was nearing midnight. The stars and green and white lights in the car had illuminated the dark. With a click they went out, snuffed like candle flames. Mama fell asleep, her arms crossed and seat leaned back as far as it would go. Her face was peaceful, and she looked young, though the roots of her hair looked pale and translucent. The stars were ever-present but started looking like television static. My eyes grew itchy.

I woke up again. I couldn't tell if it was real, but it was brighter outside, dawn approaching. It was almost like I could tell where night remained and dawn began with the harsh black shadows lying crisp against plateaus and soft blue and white invading the sky. On the road I saw bodies. They were black at first, then time accelerated.

In a moment's time, light revealed the crooked bodies of five Indians, naked and bleeding out. It was a family: a father, mother, and three children, one a teenage girl and two young sons. They seemed to have enough life to be human, not like cadavers or ghosts. I wanted to leave the car, run, and call for help. Red streamed down their bodies. I wanted to save them. My body felt impulses to move but did not, frozen against the seat.

I saw the ethereal image of a cowboy. He raised his pistol, one handed, and in slow motion, the bullet left the gun and the younger son rose up and fell. Then it was the older son, daughter, mother, and lastly, the father. They plummeted onto the asphalt, blood splattering and then pooling, over and over, as if controlled by voodoo. In my periphery, I thought I saw the sign for Bandit's Cove.

A blank in my memory. Black. My consciousness surfaced, and by the time Mama woke up and the light returned, the Indians and cowboy were gone. There was nothing on either side of the road. Mama leaned up in her seat and stared off before putting the key in the ignition, as if looking for something that wasn't there. ■

"Rainy Days"

Kelsey Hollingsworth

Photography

hubris

Victoria Gong

after The Flaying of Marsyas

it is almost beautiful. the skin above his sternum
is soft, begging for the knife. if the sky were not
hellish I would suck his set jaw & blister his
sunken lids with kisses. a piece of him already bloody in
my palm, I think that I shall save his lips
for last. he does not cry out. he played so beautifully.
when he plays he
is so beautiful.

it is almost a pity. I could have given him
the sun, for a while. I am everything if not
in love, the closest I have been
to a poet, for a while. I thought of
dancing forever, lying down, lyre
to flute, for a while. to think that he could
best me, he must have wanted
to make love to me.

but I am the god. the skin above his sternum
flays so cleanly. he does not cry out.
I should give him the sun. he stares at the
hell-sky with fear in his eyes. there is no reason
for this except my pride. someday there will be
another like him who is too meek for me. beside me,
his boy makes music
on my lyre.

Still Okoyo

Morgan Emokpae

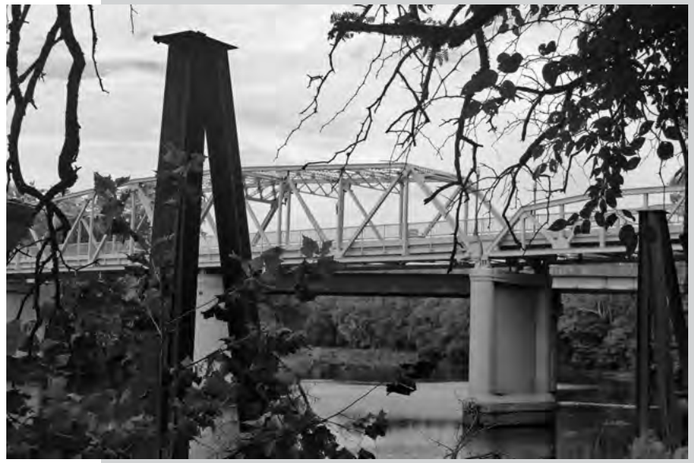
Third Place—Poetry Competition

I grew up with part of my tongue stuck in Edo land
And the other sippin' sweet tea in a crooked "S."
Mom's sweet songs held a silver twang,
While Dad kept time in a constant thump beat.
Rhythmic words drummed on dry ears,
Trickled through wisps of magnolias,
Reflecting the sun to
Settle in coarse dirt next to fufu yams and ground Cassava.

In Sallis,
Molasses-like climate precipitated
Humid summers spent under shade trees,
And rivers of sweat that ran down my spine
Pooled at the mouth of the Mississippi.

For Dad, Lagos City
Vibrated under the weight of millions of feet
Tracing the strides of ancient Abas and chiefs.
Leading to Osa, a divine connection to God,
A shivering chill from the touch of tribal sprites.

In fleeting childhood experiments,
My own blend of cultures emerged,
Harnessing the timbre of Nigeria
And the raspy haze of Mississippi.



"Riverwalk Gray as Chalk"

Elijah Dosda

Photography

December 3, 1992

Edith Marie Green

Second Place—Short Story Competition

Haircut day. Every third of the month Stephen went to get a haircut. He went to the barber in the strip mall on Kingdom City Road. He hated that it was in a strip mall (too capitalist) but it was a place to get a haircut and a hot shave, and the folks were nice enough.

It was a cold day in Illinois, but the barber shop was warm. The air smelled of what media had advertised as "men's scent"—thick, full of testosterone and "woods" and "pine" and "flannel." Every chair was cracked purple pleather, every barber had a black apron that was more "Sweeney Todd" than "I'm going to give you a haircut." Maybe Stephen's theatre school education hadn't gone to waste, like his parents said it had. But then again, he was getting his haircut in a strip mall, and the only thing waiting for him when he got home would be a microwave dinner.

"When Lily had died, in high school, God had died with her."

"The usual?" Morris, a barber, asked him. He nodded and sat down in Morris' chair. Morris whirled the cape around him. He stared at his own sallow face in the mirror. The fluorescent lights accentuated his pitted cheeks. The dream hadn't died yet, but it would soon.

They were always playing the radio here, and Stephen listened to the music—he was getting sick of the syncopated beats of the dying eighties. He noticed an index card in the corner of Morris' mirror, cluttered with newspaper clippings and pictures of hairstyles. It read, "Kill your gods." It was from some punk song by a local band that had gotten some radio air time recently.

Stephen had never really believed in God. To him, God was more of an archaic concept. There was no way that praying to anyone or anything could solve his problems. God couldn't get him a job that wasn't Blockbuster. God couldn't make him stop smoking. God couldn't move him out of his tiny apartment. God couldn't bring his sister, Lily, back.

When Lily had died, in high school, God had died with her. The drunk driver that had hit his sister had killed God. It had been all over the news and Stephen had spent the rest of senior year with a cap pulled over his face, avoiding condolences. Then he went into theatre, hoping that assuming one identity after another would turn him into someone else.

He was twenty-nine and nothing had changed yet.

"You like it?" Morris set down his razor, "I can clean it up a little more."

"It's fine," Stephen said, "Thanks a lot, man."

He stood up and paid, the usual fifteen bucks for a simple cut, and headed back out into the chill. It was fifteen degrees today, and his breath spiraled out in front of him. He jammed his stocking hat on his head and got into his car.

Time for that microwave dinner.

Stephen drove down the road, humming along to the grunge station on the radio. A haircut couldn't change a man, but it could cheer him up a little. He looked down towards the volume dial and fiddled with the radio. He looked up just in time to see another car barreling towards him, and frantically spun the wheel.

He spun too slow, and the road was too slick.

Kill your gods. ■

A Fighting Chance

Sophia Pepper

Sandhill, Mississippi, is a quintessential Southern town, a tiny place full of gravel roads, weathered churches, stunning sunsets, muggy nights, roaring cicadas, crippling poverty, and Confederate flags. I called Sandhill home until the summer before I turned fourteen. Growing up there meant growing up fighting.

Sandhill and my mother taught me how to fight, both for myself and for what I believe. My mother raised me on a steady diet of vegetables, feminism, science fiction, kindness, and library visits—all essential to who I am now. In a place like Sandhill, there's no tolerance for any deviation from the norm; unfortunately, I never quite fit. As a child, I adored reading and learning—activities far from the hunting and television my peers enjoyed. For every difference my classmates saw within me, they found something to attack. Out of necessity, I learned how to defend myself and my friends from both physical and verbal assaults.

The summer before I turned fourteen, I moved from Sandhill to Ridgeland, a city bordering the state's capital, Jackson. Starting my eighth-grade year at Ridgeland Middle School, I was able to take advanced classes and to test the boundaries of my knowledge for the very first time. I learned exactly how much I loved math and was able to compete on a VEX robotics team for the first time. This is where I discovered just how amazing robotics could be, how it would shape my goals for the future, and just how much of a fight I'd have to put up to be able to continue it.

As a girl in the South, there are certain fields of interest deemed appropriate and encouraged—but STEM classes are certainly not within that subsection. My first STEM teacher sent all girls out of the classroom when it came time to teach programming because, according to him, only boys would be able to understand, and he didn't want to waste his time. Despite receiving credit from my teammates for being the lead engineer, at competitions our competitors brushed me off in favor of my male teammates, even when they were informed of my position and told I was the person they should ask mechanical questions. I've had to learn a different kind of fighting, where I relied on my robot to outperform my competition's, where my skills had to speak louder than the words nobody seemed to listen to. I found a mentor in Mr. James Walker, the engineering teacher and robotics coach at my VoTech. He ignored gender, race, and experience, only focusing on two things: ability and determination. From him I learned never to stop pushing for improvements and how to find the beauty in losing.

At Ridgeland, I learned how far teachers were willing to go for their students; I was challenged by my classes for the first time ever, and I learned that robotics was something I wanted to be involved in for the rest of my life. Unfortunately, it wasn't all improvements. My best friend, Zia Richardson, passed away in October of my sophomore year, followed by my mentor, Mr. Walker, that December. Losing them was my hardest fight of all; for the first time I was fighting myself instead of others—and I didn't think I wanted to win.

Instead, I decided to make them proud and continue fighting to improve, both personally and academically. I applied to The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, a residential school for academically gifted juniors and seniors across Mississippi, and got in. I moved into MSMS for my junior year thinking of Zia and what she would have thought about my dorm room and my teachers. I helped start a robotics team at MSMS remembering Mr. Walker's words of encouragement. When I found out about a position at Mississippi State University as a research assistant, I knew it was the kind of opportunity they wouldn't have let me give up. When I started working there and got assigned to NASA, I knew how proud they would have been.

Now I'm a senior at MSMS. For the first time ever, I feel as though I belong somewhere. As wonderful as Ridgeland was when compared to Sandhill, I was still ostracized and abnormal compared to everyone else—something my peers never hesitated to point out. At MSMS, things are different. Everyone excels and fails together, and everyone has a dream they're reaching for. Here, counselors genuinely want to help, classes are worth more than just the grades earned in them, and every single person has something they can teach and something they can learn, no matter their station in life. The classes here are harder than any I've taken before, but they've shown me how I love being challenged. My past may have shaped my future, but it won't define it. ■

"A Columbus Devoid"

Elijah Dosda

Photography

Paper Cranes

Helen Peng

My great aunt was a doctor.
Her hands
though frail and wrinkled
are long, elegant.
They hinge from the crest of joints along her fist
and dance with every movement.
My great aunt still cleans the house like there are people in it.
Her fingers squeeze and stretch between the crook and crevices
to sweep the already-cleaned kitchen table,
as if my mother and her cousins till huddle around it waiting for dinner.
She bends at the waist and
scrubs, scrubs, scrubs
until the memories are clear to her
until the floors reflect her skin as smooth as the marble she cleans
like it once was.
My great aunt's fingers
she credits with sewing stitches.
They make miracles and conjure spirit where there is none.
They fold paper cranes and breathe life into them.
A flock still flutter in the caged basket beneath my desk.
I bet she would clean them too.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

August Andre (Oxford) lives by the motto, "Not all those who wander are lost." (J.R.R. Tolkien).

Linda Arnoldus (Starkville) hopes that her tea tree sculpture will teach people that nature and humanity are not enemies, and that nature and humanity working together is beautiful.

Michael Begley (Meridian) says that if he could meet anyone, living or dead, real or fictional, he would love to meet Tom Rowsell.

Samantha Broussard (Pass Christian) says that if she could meet anyone, living or dead, real or fictional, she would want to meet Chandler Bing from *Friends.* Samantha's motto is "To appreciate the sun you gotta know what rain is." In the future, she hopes to major in English and minor in Spanish.

Christian Couvillion (Poplarville) admits that "My first short story was about a bunch of angry rats that fought people." He says if could meet anyone, he would meet Paul Murphy. In the future, Christian plans to study education and become a principal. He acknowledges, "I don't speak much. It's easier to express myself in writing."

Erin Davis (Gulfport) really likes macro photography. She says that it "allows people to appreciate the smallest details in life."

Elijah Dosda (Diamondhead) tells readers to "Just slow down and view every day with brand new eyes. Every day is a new chance to succeed, and what happened yesterday doesn't matter." Elijah's major influence is 2018 Sochi Olympian Gus Kensworth, and his favorite book is *The Story of Your Life* by Ted Chiang. Elijah says, "I like photography because it's a way for me to slow down from the fast pace I live my life."

Morgan Emokpae (Byram) writes because it helps him process his thoughts and express his ideas in a different way. Morgan remembers his first memory of writing: "Bedtime stories with my mom." If he could meet anyone, Morgan would want to meet Anthony Bourdain. In the future, Morgan plans to work in international health and bring healthcare to rural populations.

Ryley Fallon (Lucedale) says, "I hope that my story will encourage others to make their own art, whatever that is." She remembers the first time she wrote: "An 'All About Me' book in the fourth grade." Her motto is "Nothing matters in the end, so do what you want."

Victoria Gong (Vicksburg) says that given the opportunity, she would want to meet herself from an alternate universe. When asked who has been influential in her life, she acknowledges, "My parents, yo." She hopes that her work will tell her readers to live and embrace themselves. Victoria hopes in the future to "find something worth dying for."

Edith Marie Green (Oxford) remembers her first writing experience when she "made a book about fish out of copy paper in second grade." Edith Marie writes because "it makes me feel good to get words out, but it's also nice to write things that others may relate to." If she had the opportunity to meet anyone living or dead, she would want to meet author Michael Chabon.

Kelsey Hollingworth (Ocean Springs) acknowledges, "I am a huge fan of photography because it's a way for me to express myself in a way that words cannot." She plans to attend Ole Miss and double major in mathematics and French, attend Columbia University Law School, and become a criminal prosecutor. Her motto is one from her favorite artist, Brendon Urie: "I think I'm ready to leap, I'm ready to live, I'm ready to go."

Deja Hughes (Southaven) says her favorite read is *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl.* She says art makes her happy: "It's a distraction from things that are difficult for me to handle." An influential icon in her life is Janelle Monae, and if she could meet anyone it would be Iron Heart from Marvel comics.

Liz Huynh (Pascagoula) plans to become a practicing physician and a writer. Her favorite book is *Doctor Finlay of Tannochbrae* by A.J. Cronin. She remembers her first memory of art: "In kindergarten, one of our assignments was to color within the lines of a circle. I tried so hard, but I always colored twenty yards beyond the border."

Neziah Igwebuike (Clinton) says that in the future she would like to study nursing. Her favorite book is *Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell, and her hero is her mom. Neziah confirms, "I write because I have always found it enjoyable; I find it rewarding to see my ideas physically on paper."

Violet Jira (Cleveland) says her motto is "Work smarter, not harder." Her hero is Atticus Finch from her favorite book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because he is the lawyer she wants to be. Violet writes, "Writing is fun, and since I can't pay someone to write the story I want to read, I might as well write it myself."

Catherine Li (Starkville) says her first memory of writing is "loving it." She admits, "I just write to share my story and life experiences." An influential icon in her life is Mulan, and her favorite books are those of the Percy Jackson series. Catherine lives by the motto, "Don't worry, be happy."

Michelle Luo (New Albany) says that an icon in her life is the Internet. She writes to record the status quo and hopes that readers will find her work(s) entertaining and inspiring. Michelle remembers "writing and drawing pictures in a first-grade journal" and "writing and drawing the alphabet in pre-k."

Jessikah Morton (Ruleville) says that she writes because she loves it: "Writing frees the thoughts from my mind, and sharing my writing with other people makes it one thousand times better." Jessikah looks up to her mother because she is a super hero, and she lives by the motto, "You have to do what you have to do to get where you want to be."

Indu Nandula (Cleveland) plans to become a CPA. Her defining quotation is one by Gloria Steinem: "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." Indu wants her writing to have a positive impact on readers: "I hope that my work encourages my readers to be unashamedly themselves, and not to succumb to the stereotypes perpetuated by others."

Gina Nguyen (D'Iberville) has been drawing from a young age: "Throughout early elementary school, I would draw random things I saw and hang them on the fridge at home. I've always been really proud of my work." To Gina, art is a way for her to express her ideas and creativity. In the future, she plans to pursue a career in journalism.

Helen Peng (Starkville) plans to study art and design as it applies to a sustainable future, while continuing to write sentimental poetry on the side. Her favorite book is *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Helen acknowledges, "I write because I like to relive and communicate moments and stories through different lenses."

Sophia Pepper (Jackson) says that an influential icon in her life is Gloria Steinem. Her favorite book is *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, and if she could meet anyone, she would choose to meet Robert Heinlein.

Sarah Perry (Columbus) relates that one of her first memories of writing is "when I was little, before learning to write, I would draw pictures for stories of princesses and horses and narrate the stories to my mom so that she could write them down for me and make little books out of them."

Millie Rocco (Ocean Springs) lives by the motto, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well." For her readers, Millie hopes that "they will look beyond their circumstances"; for herself, she acknowledges that "art is a stress reliever. I struggle with anxiety, but when I produce art, it's like the anxiety flows out of me and sticks to whatever I made." In the future, Millie plans to major in genetics.

Samaria Swims (Grenada) plans to become a pediatric surgeon. He favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and if she could meet anyone, it would be Michelle Obama. Samaria says that her mom is her hero because she is a positive role model in her life.

Victoria Waller (Tupelo) says that if she could meet anyone, living or dead, real or fictional, she would want to meet Percy Jackson. Her favorite book is *The Martian* by Andy Weir. Her hero is her roommate, Victoria Gong, because she loves her.

Kailah Ware (Greenwood) says in the future she plans to work in the "doctoring and training of animals." Kailah writes, "I make art because I feel creative sometimes."

Audrey Wohlscheid (Stringer) lives by the motto, "Have a good time; that's all that really matters." Her hero is Eunice Kennedy, an advocate for the mentally challenged and founder of the Special Olympics. Audrey says she writes to make herself happy while hoping to make others happy as well. She confirms, "I also write to get all of the story ideas out of my head and onto paper."

Madison Wypyski (Pass Christian) says that if she could meet anyone, she would want to meet Julie Andrews and Marilyn Monroe. She says her hero is her mother, because she is relentless, hardworking, and powerful. When asked why she writes, Madison admits, "Honestly, just for fun."