

Southern Voices 2020



Southern Voices

Volume XXXII • Spring, 2020



Art Editor: Alden Wiygul

Photographer: Linda Arnoldus

Assistant Art Editors:

Linda Arnoldus, Auriel Quiroz



Editor: Ryley Fallon

Assistant Editors:

David Barber, Meg Bryant

Catherine Min, Shelby Tisdale

Staff Members

Amanda Anderson

Alicia Argrett

Catherine Boltz

Luke Bowles

Samantha Broussard

Felicity Browning

Hua Chen

Fiona Dawe

Raven Day

Karlene Deng

Whitley Hester

Samantha Holland

Neziah Igwebuike

Leo Kinney

Lily Langstaff

Bryonie Mandal

Weslyn McMurrin

Raghav Nallani

Gina Nguyen

Skylar Nichols

Davan Reece

Alexis Richardson

Gracie Rowland

Dakota Strait

Abby Strain

Esmond Tsang

Taylor Willis

Rachel Zheng

Cover Design

Alden Wiygul

Cover Art

Carter Moore

Film Is Forever

Art Contest Faculty Coordinator

Andy Snyder

Faculty Advisor

Emma Richardson

Snow for Sky

Cash and Carter

Keeper

Blistering Burning

**A Midnight
Adventure**

*Five Miles 'til
Kentucky*

Hushed Tones

*Falling
Through Air*

The South

Gache

Speech Leapin'

*So This Is Wayne
County*

Quê Hương

*Stitches, Scissors,
and Seams*

**Song of an Urban
Southerner**

Venus Weeps

I Call That Beautiful

Reruns

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WRITING

POETRY

Linda Arnoldus	Bryonie Mandal	Abby Strain
<i>Weeds</i> 41	<i>Gache</i> 10	<i>Home(less)</i> 33
Luke Bowles	Gina Nguyen	<i>King Street</i> 30
<i>So This Is Wayne County</i> 18	<i>Qué Huong</i> 9	Cameron Thomas
Felicity Browning	Skylar Nichols	<i>Dim Your Light</i> 27
<i>Grandmother</i> 44	<i>Stitches, Scissors, and Seams</i> . . 10	Shelby Tisdale
Raven Day	Davan Reece	<i>Color-Changed Collar</i> 46
<i>Summer Day</i> 28	<i>Song of the Urban Southerner</i> . 16	<i>So This Is Mississippi</i> 39
Ryley Fallon	Gracie Rowland	Taylor Willis
<i>Speech Leapin'</i> 19	<i>Venus Weeps</i> 21	<i>Hushed Tones</i> 5
<i>Suds and Summer Sunset</i> 25	<i>Washing Machine Heart</i> 24	Alden Wiygul
Lily Langstaff		<i>Falling Through Air</i> 14
<i>Seventeen</i> 31		

ESSAYS

Luke Bowles	Lily Langstaff	Shelby Tisdale
<i>The South</i> 6	<i>Backyard Bugs</i> 45	<i>Reruns</i> 20
Ryley Fallon	Gracie Rowland	Rachel Zheng
<i>A Series of Unfortunate Cats</i> . . 32	<i>Pretty</i> 36	<i>The Importance of Yan Yu</i> 40
Neziah Igwebuiké	Abby Strain	
<i>Angels</i> 37	<i>I Call That Beautiful</i> 22	

SHORT STORIES

David Barber	Violet Jira	Gracie Rowland
<i>Really</i> 42	<i>Snow for Sky</i> 15	<i>Blistering Burning</i> 13
Luke Bowles	Lily Langstaff	Shelby Tisdale
<i>Chester's Birthday</i> 29	<i>Cash and Carter</i> 17	<i>Sunday Morning Coming Down</i> 38
Felicity Browning	Auriel Quiroz	Alden Wiygul
<i>A Midnight Adventure</i> 7	<i>Keeper</i> 11	<i>Ride On</i> 34
Ryley Fallon		
<i>Five Miles 'til Kentucky</i> 3		

ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

DRAWING

James Harden

Mason 10

Brighton Hutchinson

Cow 12

Ashley Mangus

Bamboo 14

Auriel Quiroz

Warped 5

Shelby Tisdale

Julius 43

Layers (Self-Portrait) 24

Rebecca 36

Stuck in Time 9

Sophia Toner

Funky 21

Rosie Lowe 23

Ada Fulgham

Wanderlust 31

PAINTING

Katy Chen

Myrtle Beach 24

Laney Etheridge

Blue Moon 12

Claire Justis

*There Are Other Worlds
Than These* 20

Ella Lauderdale

Hooper 22

Gina Nguyen

A Bee's Flower 39

Autumn Mountains 26

Somber Daisies 44

Ellen Overstreet

Lonely Road 16

Minimalist Daydream 28

Auriel Quiroz

Trippy 19

Alden Wiygul

Aesthetic 21

SCULPTURE

Linda Arnoldus

Is Entropy an Illusion? 21

We Are Killing This Planet 33

Michael Begley

Lifsins og Stríðsins Tré 18

Camille Newman

Bubbly Bonsai 28

Courtenay Sebastian

Earth: 2100 48

Alden Wiygul

Koi 25

Picture of Music 5

The Birds 25

PHOTOGRAPHY

Linda Arnoldus

Huangshan Mountain, China 41

Catherine Boltz

Window of Leaves 30

Hua Chen

Bridge to Canada 23

Butterfly on Flower 25

Monkey in the Mountains 26

Karlene Deng

Sunrise on the Dock 25

White Trees 41

Whitley Hester

Seewen Pride Rock 28

Samantha Holland

Siblings at Heart 37

Daily Farm 6

Michael Lu

Dragonfly 46

Carter Moore

Film Is Forever Cover, 26

One Day 26

Gina Nguyen

Hamden Coneflower 9

KAG 39

Wyatt Shanahan

Rainy Evening on

Beale Street 27, 34–35

Nina Vo

Red Side of the Moon 27

Alden Wiygul

Smoky Mountains 14

Five Miles 'til Kentucky

Ryley Fallon

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

Her knuckles strained white from gripping the steering wheel, and she kept her gaze steady as her Honda Civic wound down an empty road. The sound of a morning radio show trickled in through the stereo, but Demi hadn't processed a single word. With nothing but the glow of the dash and the headlights present, the noise was out of place. Demi drove and drove through what seemed like a repeating loop of cornfields. She had grown up with the crops, but never had she felt so alone while surrounded by them. Driving in complete darkness felt like the stalks of corn might cave in through the windows and sprout up from the bottom of the car, leaving the vehicle disguised until harvest. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks in the same way that the land of Lincoln would start to scorch under the rays of the sun in the next few hours.

She had to make it there—for Addy.

To distract herself from the unwavering line of crops, Demi glanced in the rearview window to look at her daughter. She saw Addy slumped in her car seat, with one of her chubby cheeks pressed against her shoulder. Every few minutes, Demi would hit a pothole, sending Addy's tiny eyelashes fluttering, but for now, she was lost in peaceful slumber. Her hair was disheveled and needed to be brushed. She was wearing nothing but a thin t-shirt, so Demi turned on the heat, even though it was the middle of summer, willing to do anything to keep Addy asleep, anything to keep her at peace. Watching Addy made Demi loosen her grip on the wheel. Her daughter had always given her a sense of clarity. In moments when it felt like she was being consumed by this place, by the corn, Addy's tiny hand was there to pull her out. Because of Addy, Demi had to make it to her destination.

Although Demi tried her best to ignore it, she could see her tank of gas dwindling. She would have made sure to have a full tank had she known she would be

trekking across the state, but she hadn't. She let out a deep breath, an attempt to steady her breathing. There had to be at least one gas station on the way. Growing up as an Illinois native, she knew this wasn't true; she knew that there could be nothing but corn for the next fifty, one hundred, two hundred miles. She didn't need it. After thirty minutes of driving with the gas light on, Demi saw a red Texaco sign glaring in the distance.

From afar, it looked like an evil entity waiting to seal their fate, but in reality, the gas station was a saving grace. When she arrived, Demi locked Addy in the car and went inside to pay, not wanting to wake her. She walked into the small convenience store with her fingernails buried into her palm. The sound of bells clashing against the glass door was enough to make her

heart race. Demi paid with a few crumpled dollar bills. The cashier smiled at her.

"Where you headin' to?" he asked, while printing her receipt.

Demi kept glancing over her shoulder to look at Addy, missing his question. She left before he could hand Demi her receipt. While she

pumped gas, she stared at the sun peeking over the horizon. Her time was running out. She needed to leave. She needed to be on the road, for Addy.

Demi was thirty miles outside of Kentucky when the sun burst out and melted over the horizon like butter on corn. The rays filtered in through the backseat window and landed on the arch of Addy's nose, just below her eyes. As time passed, the light grew brighter, waking her. Demi saw her reach for her stuffed rabbit but did not find it. Longing for her crib, she wailed out; Demi shushed her while trying to get her attention.

"It's going to be alright, baby. Listen to Mama," she said, her voice calm but strained. Demi bit her lip and prayed her child would stop crying. Her daughter's high-pitched screams pierced her heart.

**"How could anyone
take away her child...
the child that she loved
more than anything
else?"**

"I want Daddy," Addy screamed out, her cry at a higher pitch.

"No, you don't, baby. Mama's here now. Mama's got you." Demi reeled at the mention of "Daddy," the only man capable of ruining her life. She had made one mistake, one mistake. She was better now. He was pushing for full custody, though. Addy's screaming grew. Full custody. How could anyone take away her child, the child she carried for nine months, the child she had named after her grandmother Adelaide, the child that had her eyes, the child that she loved more than anything else? How could he do it? She pressed down harder on the gas pedal, now approaching other vehicles, tears streaming down her face.

"Twenty more miles," Demi sobbed, praying just to make it out. Flashbacks from the previous night came flooding. All she could think about were the Cinderella bed sheets on her daughter's empty crib. She did it for Abby. It was the only option she had. If she could make it out of the state, the odds of finding her dropped. Demi turned up the radio to drown Addy's crying. Country music blared, filling the car with its steady strumming of guitar. One hand of Demi's was now off

the steering wheel and on her face. What had she done?

Demi saw red and blue lights flicker in the corner of her eyes; she had run a stop sign but had not heard sirens over the music. She sank into her seat. This was it. She pulled over and attempted to wipe the smudged mascara from under her eyes. When the officer walked up, she pulled down the window, her hands shaking.

"Ma'am, are you aware that you just ran through one of the busiest intersections in town? You're lucky that you and your baby didn't get hurt." After saying that, he took another glance at the backseat. She knew he knew.

"Ma'am, wait right here while I write you a ticket." Demi knew an Amber Alert had probably been sent out hours ago. It was only a matter of time. As soon as the officer was far enough from her car, Demi took off her seatbelt. While keeping her eye on the cop, she slowly lifted herself up and into the back seat. She unbuckled Addy and pressed her into her chest. Addy had stopped crying and seemed calm. Demi stroked her tousled curls and rocked back and forth.

"Mama's here now," Demi said, her voice calm. △

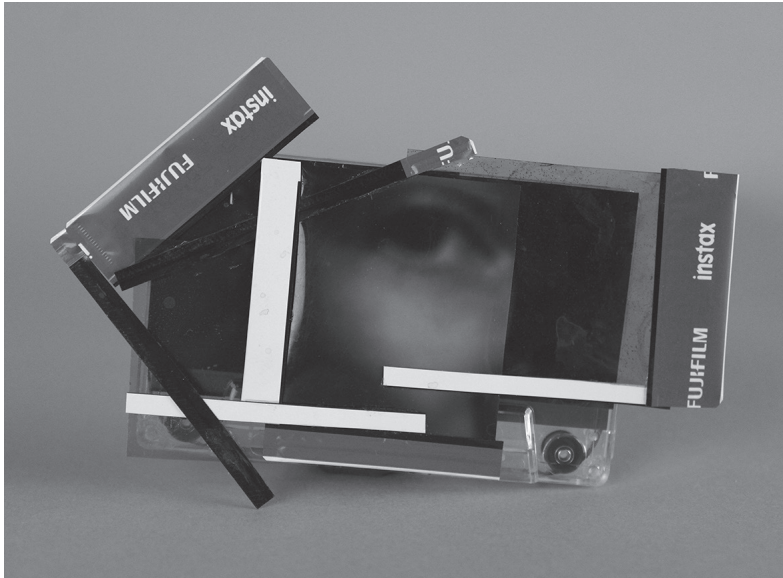
The Chris Read Award for Fiction

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



Picture of Music

Alden Wiygul

Sculpture—cassette tape, polaroid pictures



Warped

Auriel Quiroz

Drawing—pencil, watercolor

Hushed Tones

Taylor Willis

With each subtle crash
 Waves whisper
 And move
Swish Swish Swish
 Divulging their stories
 In a rhythmic pattern
 As if the sea
 is murmuring a soothing lullaby.

With each puff of wind
 Whispy clouds graze past one another
 Like strangers breathing hello
 “How are you today?” one says
 “I’m fine, and you?”
 “I’m wonderful.”
 And then they pass
 Exhaling goodbyes and never meeting again.

With each hushed voice behind porcelain hands
 Secrets flow through child-like ears
 Blurring hundreds of muffled words
 Into a single mass of ill-defined babble.

With each night beneath the sheets
 Pillows eavesdrop
 On the two lovers
 Who lie in each other’s gentle embrace
 Mouthing almost inaudibly,
 “I love you.”

The South

Luke Bowles

I love the South: the land of hillbillies, heart attacks, and herpes just has a certain ring to it. What other region can lay claim to such prestigious titles?

The South is a funny place. Everyone will ask you how you are doing, yet no one will care about your reply. “Good” better be your answer, or you’ll quickly be drowned in a sea of fake sincerity. Don’t you dare tell anyone you aren’t a Christian, or you’ll soon be flooded with self-righteousness and judgment. It’s impossible to go twenty miles on the highway without seeing a cross or sign mentioning Jesus. Confederate statues litter town squares, monuments to the very thing that stole the future and lives of so many southerners. There is no other place in the world with such a résumé.

When I was a freshman in high school, I was called “gay” for playing tennis. People use “gay” as an insult often in the South. If you like pop music, play any non-traditional sport, read, care about your grades, dress nicely, along with a million other things, you’re at risk of being called gay. Even if I were gay, why does it matter? The bigotry here runs rampant. Some people actually have to hide their sexuality for fear of being kicked out by their families.

Those are just simple examples. Growing up in the South brings up many more challenges. You’re likely to be ridiculed, gossiped about, and made fun of if you do anything contrary to the common rigid moral standards. Teenagers get drunk on Friday night and show up to church on Sunday, looking picture perfect in their blouses and button-ups. Racist old folks preach love and acceptance. All I have ever wanted is *authenticity*. So many voices, so many promises, so little consistency. Nothing is more frustrating.

It’s not all so bad, though. I think back to my grandmother dying when I was just a kid. I barely remember her if I’m honest, but what I do remember is the reaction of the Buckatunna community. I had never seen so many cakes, pies, casseroles, and other assortments of food in my life. People came by nonstop to just give Poppa a hug; and he needed it, too. The community was the only bright spot in his darkest

days, something for which I will always be grateful. Eventually, Poppa remarried. My step-grandmother is southern-born and southern-raised, just like Poppa. Both are the kindest people I know. They’re always there for a hug, always there for words of wisdom.

More people are like my grandparents than I realized. What some may perceive as fake sincerity is actually often genuine kindness. When they ask you how you’re doing, they mean it. Isn’t that a great feeling? If you get a flat tire, chances are someone you know will pull over and help out. That’s another beautiful thing about the South: In many places, everyone knows everyone. After every trip to the grocery store, you’ll become an expert in family news from all the people you know you’ve met but barely remember.

So sure, the South has its fair share of problems. But where doesn’t? In the end, the South is one of the most beautiful, heartwarming, and caring places on Earth. It may not be perfect, but it always feels like home. And most importantly, problems cannot be fixed when all the solutions run away. So here I am, and here I’ll stay. △



Daily Farm
Samantha Holland
Photography

A Midnight Adventure

Felicity Browning

“Liam, wake up!” I heard a voice like honey, and my eyes fluttered open to reveal a dark silhouette resting on my knees. I jolted up, causing the figure to fall off the couch with a thud.

“Ow!” Florence-Eloise grumbled, rubbing her head. “You’re gonna wake your granny up. I didn’t mean to scare you or nothing.”

“How did you even get in here, Florence?” I whispered. I swung my legs off the edge of the couch and stood up. She stayed on her knees, looking up at me with her nose scrunched up.

“It’s *Florence-Eloise*, boy” she repeated for the thousandth time that summer, “Mama named me it for a reason. It’s not your job to shorten it.”

“It’s just a mouthful, that’s all,” I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck. She huffed and pulled at my hand.

“C’mon, Liam! Daddy just bought a new boat.” Florence-Eloise’s white, crooked smile illuminated her otherwise shadowed face in the dark living room. Only small specks of moonlight shone in from the cracks of the windows that the curtains didn’t quite cover.

Florence-Eloise was the type of girl that my mother would stare at, horrified. Mother said I needed to find a girl like the ones at Saint Mary’s Catholic School, but I figured it would be kind of difficult doing that considering I had been kicked out. Father said I just “wasn’t invited back for the upcoming year,” but I knew that was code for getting sacked. I probably deserved it. I’m not even quite sure what it was that made Sister Marjorie snap. Maybe it was because I brought my friend Alan’s pet snake to school and let it loose in the girls’ locker room. I also set off the fire alarm during final exams. If I’m being honest, I probably should’ve been sacked a while ago. I guess Father told them that despite all of my “accidents,” I was a pretty good kid. That’s what Mother and Father like to call my misbehaviors: “accidents.”

“Don’t you think your dad will be mad if he finds out?” I asked, rubbing my eyes. Once they adjusted, I could see Florence-Eloise’s dark almond eyes pleading with me.

“Liam, who cares? That’s a problem for the morning.” She looked down at her lap before murmuring, “He’ll just find something else to yell about, anyways.”

Florence-Eloise’s daddy was a hollow man with a candy-cane temper: calm and bleak one second, fiery and hateful the next. When my parents first dropped me off at Maw and Paw’s house, Mr. Palmer was outside screeching like a banshee at Mrs. Palmer. Since staying next door, I learned that he tends to do more than just yell. I tried to ask Paw why he never intervened, but Paw told me it was best that I minded my business.

“Alright, fine,” I groaned, earning a delighted shriek from Florence-Eloise. I hushed her before pulling the cover off my legs.

“Liam!” she exclaimed, turning her body away from me. “You could’ve told me you were in your boxers! Ew!”

I snickered as I pulled back on my jeans. “Sorry, girl. That’s just how I sleep.”

“Are you done yet?” she asked, standing and extending her hand behind her. I took it, and she tiptoed through the quiet house to Maw and Paw’s doggy door.

“That’s how you got in?” I stared in disbelief. She nodded and cracked a smile.

“Now you go first,” she insisted. “I don’t want you looking up my nightgown.”

I rolled my eyes, getting on my hands and knees to sneak through. Halfway through the door, Beau the Golden Retriever rushed towards me, licking my face.

“Beau,” I groaned, pushing him off as I got the rest of my body out of the cramped entrance. Beau wagged his tail, burying his face into my neck, and Florence-Eloise forced herself through the doggy door.

“Hey, sweet boy!” she cooed, planting a kiss on Beau’s head. He panted, his tail beating the side of the house so hard I feared that Maw and Paw would wake.

“Okay, boy, you can come with us,” she said, patting to her side after standing up. We began to walk down the gravel driveway. I cringed each time the sharp rocks edged my bare feet, but Florence-Eloise barely

batted an eye. I don't think I had ever seen Florence-Eloise ever wearing shoes, except for church. Even then, they were thin, worn-out sandals that definitely weren't comfortable. Sometimes I'd glance over at her and her family's pew and see her sandals tucked under the seat, her bare feet propped against the pew ahead of them.

"Here she is!" Florence-Eloise sang, pointing towards a wooden canoe with *Aimee* written on it. "Named after Mama. Isn't that sweet?"

"Florence-Eloise, when you said *boat*" ... my words drifted away from me. She giggled.

"Oh, you thought I met one of those fancy-shmancy big boy boats? Liam, you sure are a trip! I'm sure your mama and daddy could afford one of those nice ole' boats to be parked in a marina back in New York, but we aren't those types of people. Now, go on. Get in!"

Florence-Eloise held the boat steady as I waddled inside. Uneasiness drifted into me as the canoe rocked back and forth, but I kept my balance. Florence-Eloise swung her legs over with gusto, fearless as always. Beau backed away slowly, whimpering softly.

"Can't swim, bud?" She frowned. "That's alright, Beau. You stay on shore and look out for any adults, okay?"

Beau didn't answer, but he instead lay on the grassy bank of the lake and closed his eyes.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked, as Florence-Eloise handed me a paddle. She tossed her frizzy brown locks into a ponytail before sinking her paddle into the water.

"Of course this is a good idea, Liam."

"Then why do I feel like we're going to get caught?"

"'Cause that's the fun in all of this. Don't you know how to have fun, boy?"

In all twelve years of my life on Earth, my ability to have fun had never been questioned. I huffed and pushed my paddle into the water, swiftly rowing. Before I knew it, we were spinning in circles in the water.

"Liam, this isn't how you row! We have to do it together! If we don't do it at the same time, we might overbalance and—"

I leaned too far into my rowing and set the boat

rocking rapidly. Florence-Eloise tried to off-set my rowing on her side, but the unsteadiness of the boat caused her to lose her grip. Her paddle sank to the bottom of the lake.

Florence-Eloise fell into a fit of giggles as my face fell.

"Why are you laughing?" I stammered. "We're stuck out here now because of you!"

"Because of me?" she chuckled, "I'm not the one that decided to make this a theme park ride."

"Like you've ever been to a theme park," I huffed. Her laughter died out.

"What'd you say to me?" she accused, furrowing her brows. My eyes widened as she leaned in close to me, her scrunched nose nearly crashing with mine.

"You don't know nothing, Liam Walters." Her index finger jabbed my chest so hard the boat began to rock. I cowered at her as tears welled up in her eyes. "Nothing at all. Y-you d-don't know me."

She attempted to sniff and wipe the tears away, but they flooded her flushed cheeks. Before I knew it, the girl was uncontrollable! Huffing and gagging, causing the boat to shake like boats do when girls throw fits on them. I touched her shoulder, but she thrust my hand away, finally tipping over our distressed canoe. I didn't even have time to hold my breath; the murky green water infested my eyes, clothes, and lungs. I came up hacking, and Florence-Eloise did, too, except her hacks soon turned into giggles.

"Are you crazy or something?" I asked, desperately trying to keep afloat. "We're soaked! How can you be laughing like some maniac when you were just throwing a fit over me hurting your feelings?"

"Oh, I got over it the second I saw your face when you hit the water." She laughed so hard water pooled into her mouth, causing her to gag and laugh even harder. At this point, I was even laughing, too. Here we were, wets as dogs forgotten in a storm, swimming in a dirty lake way past curfew. How I was going to explain my soaked clothes to Maw and Paw, I wasn't sure. Guess I didn't have to be, since Maw came out after a few minutes of us splashing to raise hell.

"What on God's green earth are you two doing? Do you know what time it is? Look at y'all, all disgusting! You should be ashamed of yourselves!"

Hamden Coneflower

Gina Nguyen

Photography



Maw carried on and on, but Florence-Eloise and I just waded in the water, looking at each other with goofy, euphoric grins.

“We should do this again some time, kid,” she whispered, lightly splashing in my direction. “You might be some fun after all.”

“And I’ll tell you what, Liam Walters, when your Paw hears about your little adventure, he’s gonna be fit to be tied! Oh—”

“Definitely,” I whispered back. The silence between Florence-Eloise and me, the white noise that poured out of her moonstruck eyes and dripping brown hair, blocked out any hoarse curses or threats coming from Maw’s smoking-strained voice. △

Quê Hương

Hometown

Gina Nguyen

Home can be hard to reach
When it is nearly ten thousand miles away.
But when I do manage to visit, the same question
resurfaces:

“Quê hương con ở đâu?” *Where are you from?*
Every syllable articulated
But blending softly from one to another,
And looks of curiosity and wondering faces
From friends, from family, from friends of family,
Even strangers I’ve never met.
And every year, I hesitate before saying,
“I was born in the States, but my parents are from
Vietnam.”

Like a record on replay,
The words roll off my tongue.
But this answer only works for my peers and
some.

The older generation expects something more:
“Mẹ is from Sa Đéc, Cha is from Phước Khánh.”
When these words are spoken,
I am reminded of my roots.
My ancestors bathed in the Mekong just as I had;
They, too, woke to the sound of clucking
chickens,
They walked the same path I did to the flea
market every morning.
Hearing my native language makes me wonder
Where everything I know about my culture
Started.



Stuck in Time

Shelby Tisdale

Drawing—pen

Gache Bryonie Mandal

Glistening dewdrops make the morning sun rise faster.
I hear the gentle water, *tip tap*, as my morning alarm;
It gushes out like a ravaging waterfall
Until the handle is turned, causing the pressure to be
reduced.

I look out my blinds, seeing the plants.
They are looking for their essential morning coffee.
I see in their leaves the starved look that only one
person can replace.
Her eyes glazed, her body moving robotically through
each step,
Her face flushed by warm sun rays, she is radiating,
Skin lustrous from the specks of sweat.

She bustles around as on all other mornings
From blueberries, strawberries, and watermelons
covering the earth like quilt squares,
To ungrown mangos, lemons and figs and ripe pears.
She leaves no one behind,
Watering, watering, watering
They flourish, not only the fruit-bearing plants
but okra, bitter gourd, bottle gourd, and the red
amaranth.
Zinnias, marigolds, and hibiscus strike the air waiting
for her attention.

Her love and care for these foreign creatures
Awes me.
Any withered-away soul she touches becomes life.
Plants grow in love and get tangled up around her.

She herself is interlaced in the greens of the earth.

Mason
Third Place—Drawing
James Harden
Ink

Stitches, Scissors, and Seams Skylar Nichols

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

Grandma's eyes have aged
So that she sometimes misses a stitch
And the seam goes jagged.
She has become like a vocalist
Whose throat fights against the melody.
With a curse under her breath,
She yanks the polyester from the machine
And gets into good lighting;
Hands shaking and gentle, she pulls out thin threads
With seam ripper and tweezers.
After she starts again,
She puts everything into those threads,
Back bent with foot pressed on pedal
And needle dancing lightning quick
Almost sewing her fingers into fabric.
My grandma sews to make ends meet,
Late nights filling order after order,
Hands cramping from stitching every stone to glittering
dresses
Her scissors cutting sharp lines for tuxes and suits,
Laboring over clothes she'll never wear.



Keeper

Auriel Quiroz

Mama was a single lady, a widow; Daddy had died about three years ago in a construction accident. We had all lived in the vast industrial sea of Pittsburgh and were getting good money from all the houses Daddy was building, though too many houses were getting built too fast without proper regulations and a building had collapsed on top of twenty men. Daddy had been one of them. Mama couldn't handle the pain in her heart to live in the city anymore, so we moved down South, to Mississippi, with Grandpa and Grandma. It was cheaper down there, and Mama could make a small living off of sewing gowns for the all-girls school a few miles east.

With two boys, Mama had a hard time wrangling us up, so once she decided she had enough of the bickering and wrestling, she shipped us to Uncle Randy's house so he could teach us to be proper men. I didn't take too kindly to Uncle Randy the first time I met him; he was Daddy's older brother, but he was nothing like my daddy.

"Randy only got motivation to chug booze and touch pretty ladies," my grandpa told me as he was driving me and my older brother, Robert, to Randy's house.

I never did like the way Uncle Randy looked at Mama; he always gave her a wide nasty smile that showed all his missing teeth and made his eyes all squinty. It also made my stomach churn when he always insisted on giving her a long hug and a kiss on the cheek. Not only that, he treated Robert like scum.

Robert had been diagnosed with an illness by a fancy doctor in Pittsburgh. Mama had got nervous that Robert wasn't acting like the other kids at school and so she and Daddy decided it would be best to get him checked out. The doctor said that Robert got *autism*, and that means that even though Robert is seventeen he can't act like it, and sometimes he gets real bothered by things like sounds and new people. *Autism* was a new name in Pittsburgh, and in the South it didn't even exist. Uncle Randy liked to pick on Robert: he would smack his hands together real loud like, and that would cause Robert to slap his hands to his ears and wail.

"You're the man of the house now, Michael," Mama said, before she shipped us off for the summer. "You have to look out for your brother since he don't know any better; you're his keeper."

Now in Mississippi, mud sucked our boots as we all trudged up the hill to the pig shed that leaned and shook when the wind was bad. The humid air clung sweat to all of our necks and backs as Uncle Randy slung two rifles on each shoulder while I hauled five buckets. Robert lagged behind; he was distracted by all the lovebugs that danced in the blades of grass. He was in charge of carrying the knives.

Once we arrived at the doors of the shed, Uncle tossed one the rifles onto the chipped floorboards and snatched a knife from Robert,

"Michael, go grab that young one back there." His gloved finger pointed to the young piglet that lay sleeping at the sow's plump belly.

"But that one's little."

"It's a runt," he grumbled "We don't needa waste any food; it's useless." I nodded.

My boots sank into the soft earth as I tiptoed around the other sows lying on the floor of the shed and made my way towards the baby, but the edge of my rubber boot must have stepped on a tail because one of the adult pigs hopped up and began to screech. With that, they all began to shriek in unison. My hands tried to snatch the young piglet, but that only made the mama mad because she began to cry and jump in circles around my feet.

Robert's hands leapt to his ears, and he began to wail as well.

"You idiot!" Uncle yelled and began kicking the buckets to the corner of the shed. Tin crashed against the wood, making it worse for Robert.

"Stop it! You're making Robert cry!" I yelled at Uncle, pressing the sobbing piglet to my chest.

That must had made Uncle angry, me standing up for Robert, because with a dead look in his eyes he walked over to Robert and slapped him right across his freckled face. I had never seen Robert so distraught,

because as quick as the slap was given, Robert ran down the hill. I could see his platinum hair making its way into the forest, and soon I had to squint to see him.

“Robert!” I shouted, setting down the piglet and racing out the door.

As one foot leaped over the other, my body jolted backwards, and the neck of my shirt choked out my shouts. Metal tapped at the back of my head; Uncle Randy pushed the barrel forward just a bit more.

“Now, Michael, you be a good boy and head on back to the shed. Those pigs need to be taken care of.”

“But Robert—,” my voice croaked, as Uncle began to drag my body back.

“Robert ain’t nothin’ but a damn menace. Bein’ trouble to your ma and all.”

“He ain’t trouble, Uncle Randy, he just got autism, that’s all. Mama knows and she loves him ver—”

The barrel of Uncle Randy’s gun collided with the back of my head and I fell to my knees. I knew that if I didn’t want a good beating from Randy, I would have to

do what he told me, so I made my way back to the shed to slaughter that piglet.

Those innocent beaded eyes peered up like a child to my looming stature; the rifle pressed against my shoulder and my finger danced with the trigger. The piglet didn’t know any better, it didn’t understand the detrimental effects this had for the both of us. As soon as the barrel of the gun settled between its eyes, my own grew clouded, and the rifle felt too strong against my weakening body; I wanted to throw it and charge into those woods. However, as I felt Uncle Randy’s body loom behind me, the nerves in my body tensed and my finger clutched the trigger.

BAM!

I couldn’t bear to sleep that night, grasping the hope that I’d hear Robert’s laugh or feel him toss in the bed beside me. As the night air began to close my eyes, I heard coyotes calling out in those woods. That night I dreamt that Robert was one of them, one of them carnal predators running free, dodging in between towering trees and being the man of his own tribe.

That morning nothing was ever heard about Robert, and things stayed the same forever on. I wonder what story Uncle Randy told Mama, but whatever it was, I know I gotta be the man of the house; the truth would only hurt Mama more. △



Blue Moon

Laney Etheridge

Painting—acrylic



Cow

Brighton Hutchinson

Drawing—pencil

Blistering, Burning

Gracie Rowland

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

Cavernous craters in the road made the small car lurch like an unsteady carnival ride; the gaping crater of dread in Elizabeth's stomach widened with each bump. The thought of going to first period made the black pavement ahead seem white, a murky pearl of concrete continuing to swirl. Her legs shook so badly she resembled a recovering addict; her left foot tapped the black carpet of her Toyota while the right foot attempted to press the gas at a steady pace. "Asleep" played faintly through the car radio speakers, and the soft morning light shone through her car windows, revealing dull violet circles under weary green eyes.

The weight of the oncoming school day bore down on shoulders far too weak to withstand it, and soon hot breathless tears overcame her compliant body. The car swerved to the side of the road with a wheezing screech; the tire marks left behind would later exist as a glorious symbol to Elizabeth. Her body rocked back and forth, a small ship in a tumultuous, frightening sea. The oncoming waves were boiling and merciless; they blistered and burned her skin. The water rose and fell with every stammering gasp, and the ship began to sink. The heat of the car suffocated her like a pillow on a patient; who knew a Toyota could produce such fiery flames. Hell itself could not imitate the damning destitution felt in that vehicle. She frantically rolled down the windows; the freezing temperature outside was a small penance to pay for the liberating freedom of wind.

Elizabeth sat back and breathed. *In and out. In and out.* Four-eight-four-eight rhythm, just like she had learned. An unsteady hand fumbled for the volume adjuster, and soon, The Smiths were the only voice in her head. Just one year of living in Mississippi had turned her mind into a creature of despair and anxiety. Elizabeth had always been a sad person; her mind and memories would never allow true happiness to abide

in her, but here, the sadness became unbearable. She ached for the soothing comfort of home, her real home, where her friends loved her, and she loved them. She longed for the pale blue tile hallways of her Dallas school, not the beige matted carpet hallways of her new one. School used to be her lofty refuge, but here it was her sinking abyss. She pulled into the school parking lot slowly, her fingers clutching the wheel in a white-knuckled grip.

Elizabeth pulled the sun visor down and checked her reflection. Shaky fingers smeared Shape Tape concealer over bleary raccoon eyes and warm blotchy cheeks. Her eyes remained bloodshot and red-rimmed,

but there was nothing to be done. She got out of the car and slung her backpack over her shoulder, like a sacrificial lamb accepting its fate.

"Honey darlings, sit down now, and let's begin this fabulous day, why don't we now!" Her teacher proclaimed this in a high pitched, aspartame sing-song voice.

The pit in her stomach transformed into a canyon, swallowing and all-consuming. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead in an ominous, almost threatening melancholy, and the smell of Clorox wipes permeated the cramped room. The nauseating mixture of bleach and cheap perfume seared her lungs to a tormented terror every time she breathed in. She was about to faint, about to fall.

"Mrs. Mortem, may I be excused?" Elizabeth spoke with authority; the need of release from those dreaded gray cinder blocks became dire. She walked to the bathroom and splashed water on her white face. The mirror in front of her glared back, watching every move. Her limbs looked too foreign to be hers, and her thoughts seemed to float. The breakdown resulted from a buildup, not a collision.

"Wait a minute," she whispered. I can leave. I can leave!" she practically yelled this time, smiling

**"...the idea of escape
from the place she
called prison existed as
a marble pillar in the
palace of euphoria."**

at herself in the mirror in sweet content. The idea of autonomy suddenly returned to her in a moment of revolution, and the idea of escape from the place she called prison existed as a marble pillar in the palace of euphoria.

Abandoning all trivial notions of her coat and bookbag, she walked out those begrudging doors and practically ran to her car. She turned the ignition with a giddy twist of her wrist and changed the gear to Drive. That sacred car ride became remembered by her as the best she'd ever known, the way that a first love feels. The rushing feeling of self-determination filled her with utter, unimaginable bliss. Listening to "Asleep" by Smiths, she smiled a genuine smile for the first time in days. Life was what she made it, and by god she was going to make it hers. △



Smoky Mountains

Alden Wiygul

Photography

Falling Through Air

Alden Wiygul

The sharp fibers of the rope chafe my hands.
Rubbing up and down the ridges,
as my body flies through the air.
Splinters pierce me from the rough seat,
made just that morning from a broken log.

Wind whistles through my hair,
whispering a warm fall memory in my ear.
I stare at the elephant plants growing,
my favorite of the foliage.

The tree creaks with every pump,
threatening to crack, pop, and snap.

Down, down, down, I go,
onto the soft leaves below.
The branch gives and leaves
me with a new story.

Mother Nature's signature left behind,
taking the shape of a new bump and bruise
that stay with me till she sleeps in Winter.



Bamboo

Ashley Mangus

Drawing—Sharpie

Snow for Sky

"I'd rather swallow—gargle with—rusty razor blades than chop cotton."—Billy DePrist

Violet Jira

For Sky, the magnolia had always been a thing of wonder. She had been five years old when she and her family first moved into their new home in the countryside and was disappointed to find that tree was no good for climbing. But when the seasons changed, and the large tree with its waxy green leaves bore huge flowers of white, seemingly overnight, she had found herself smitten with it. Sky and the magnolia had been inseparable ever since.

But now, three years later, there was nothing white on the trees, or on the ground, much to Sky's dismay. It was the lagging end of February. Winter was edging away, meaning that the bite of the cold was mostly gone by noon, making the outdoors fair game for Sky, where she would stretch out on the soft patch beneath the tree, stare through the branches at the clear sky, and wish for snow.

Mrs. Jennings lived almost an acre away from Sky and her family, but she walked down the tired gravel road anyways and brought them a Mason jar of homemade jam their first week living there. She was a kind but stern elderly woman, well into retirement, who had little else to do but make jam, go to church, and take walks. It was on one of these walks that Mrs. Jennings found Sky beneath the tree, as she often did, and stopped to talk to her.

"I'm surprised your momma doesn't whoop your butt, getting grass stains all over your clothes," the older woman chided.

"Well, we gots a washing machine, so momma really don't care," Sky murmured quietly.

"What's the matter, doll?" Mrs. Jennings asked, realizing with haste that something was wrong with Sky.

"There's no snow," Sky said, a fat tear rolling down her cheek. "There was no snow last year, or the year before that. I just want some snow. I hate Mississippi. I hate that it don't snow."

To Sky, Mrs. Jennings was a grandmother of sorts. She always had wise words hidden within the smooth

folds of her dark skin, butterscotch candies tucked inside her pockets, and her home, decorated like a Cracker Barrel that had shaken hands with a church, was always perfumed with the sweet scent of whatever it was she had decided to try her hand at baking that day. She hoisted Sky up from the ground and together they walked to her house for a slice of blueberry pie.

"Come on, doll. There's a story I think you'd like to hear. Somethin' to keep your spirits up."

The inside of Mrs. Jennings's house was one that made it glaringly obvious that she didn't have kids. The home boasted countless art pieces that the woman had collected over the decades around every corner, paintings of the same nature, and glass *everywhere*. At one of those glass tables, Mrs. Jennings and her house guest sat, a slice of pie each between them, and a tummy already full of peppermints from the glass jar on the counter, at least for Sky.

"So. What's this story?" Sky asked around a mouthful of pie.

Normally, Mrs. Jennings would have scolded her but she was just happy to see that Sky was back to her normal self.

"Well. I want to tell you about the time it snowed in Mississippi so bad, I couldn't even open my front door."

Sky's eyes widened, and her fork fell from between her fingers. "*Really?*" she said, mouth open in disbelief.

"Really."

Sky's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you."

"Well, aren't you gonna let me tell my story?"

The young girl huffed and leaned back into her chair to listen.

"It was one of those storms people talk about for years to come. April, if you can imagine, of 1978. I had only been living here a couple of years...." She continued on, telling a story of what had been one of the most unexpected and severe weather occurrences of that decade.

“Powerlines were covered in ice. All of my flowers, even my perennials. My car had three feet of snow piled on top of it, and I had to climb out of a window and shovel the snow out from behind my door, so I could walk in and out. It was terrible. Terrible.”

Sky dramatically finished her pie and put her fork down. “I don’t believe you. It don’t snow in Mississippi.” She sucked the inside of her cheek and a pondering look flooded her face. “I mean, unless you count the cotton.”

Mrs. Jennings flexed her fingers, “Cotton? Pardon?”

“Yeah, the cotton. It’s so beautiful! Sometimes, Daddy takes me to run through it.”

“Beautiful ...,” Mrs. Jennings whispered.

The memories hit her in waves.

She had been born into a time in the South when there hadn’t been anything to do but pick cotton. She went to the fields as soon as her hands had been capable. It hadn’t been terrible, but it certainly hadn’t been fun. The burrs were fine once, twice, but after you’d picked hundreds of pounds of cotton, your fingers would bleed, staining the cotton white. To this day, scars still littered her fingers.

When she was six, they had seen it fit for her to chop cotton. That work was worse, and it was made worse by the fact that she wasn’t paid for the work. Chopping cotton hurt; if picking cotton was a scratch, chopping it was a bullet wound. She could almost feel the sun beating down on her back.

For Mrs. Jennings, these memories were like bruises; they hurt, but it was easy enough to forget that they were there until you bumped into it, and there was nothing left to do but poke at them, prod at them, and wait quietly for them to fade again.

So, as tears wet her cheeks, and Sky’s unmarred hands covered her own asking *why*, she responded quietly, “Because it makes me so happy that you can look at cotton and see something beautiful.” △



Lonely Road

Second Place—Painting

Ellen Overstreet

Acrylic

Song of the Urban Southerner

Davan Reece

I grew up south of the Mason Dixon,
A victim of the smothering sun
With sweat bleeding through corduroy jeans.
I loathed it.
Tried as I might, I never found my truth.
I didn’t find solace in the hard work
Of those who came before me.
But I appreciated it;
It bred the wild ambition that runs through me today
Like red blood cells coursing through my veins;
But it wasn’t for me.
I have a distinct Southern drawl
That signifies the rolling hills of the Tombigbee
From which my family built a name,
But my accent nor my dialect has an influence
On the way my life is headed.
I live in the most developed area of the state,
Yet I still find myself searching and yearning,
Clamoring for a life that I don’t have.
I have renounced the way my ancestors lived—
Off the land and off the grid—
Yet I have held on to the dance of their tongue,
Perhaps as a pay of respect
Or perhaps as a way to build my own truth.

Cash and Carter

Lily Langstaff

Second Place—Short Story Competition

It occurs to me as the cool wind kisses my face that we could be the last two people on Earth in this moment.

Neither of us is exactly sure where we're going, but we know how we're feeling. I watch him, following his gaze through the dashboard onto charcoal road disappearing behind us. He drives with one hand, the other on my leg, and the sun is shining in my world despite how late it is. His hand lingers for half a second before gripping the shift to change gears and absentmindedly fiddling with the radio knobs, turning the song up loud enough for the deer in the woods to hear.

He loves country music and I love him—it occurs to me in this moment as he's singing "Folsom Prison Blues." Not for the first time, I've had plenty of mini revelations about my feelings for this boy, but under the velvet, star-studded sky, it feels real. He is so alive with Johnny Cash that I feel like June Carter. Hazel eyes are warm, and when they turn to look at me—just short, second-long glances—something inside me melts. Nobody has ever been so fond of anything as I am of him. His shirt is stained with cappuccino (two sugars) and his hair is finally out of his face, tousled by the breath of air from the trees and his foot on the gas. Johnny Cash is singing thanks to his Spotify playlist, from the phone nestled in the cupholder, resting against mine. We're on the outskirts of town now, and though we know we'll return, we don't look back.

I don't look at anything other than him. The way his lips curl when he smiles is earth-quaking and it makes me wish I'd known him way sooner in my life, like, *Where has he been this entire time?* He is in his element like this, on the open road, and I wish I could paint him and frame it somewhere important.

"God must have taken his time when he made you." I'm surprised he even hears me over "Jackson."

"God took his time with everybody." That smile comes back when he speaks and I wish I had a Polaroid camera—I would take that picture with me everywhere.

He's right, but it's almost angering that he doesn't understand what I mean about him.

He is heaven on Earth.

It makes me feel like I can finally breathe for the first time in my life, and *God*, how deeply I breathe him in. I breathe in his coffee breath and the teasing words on pursed lips and his lingering gazes.

He is just this: a maddeningly perfect breath of air on a maddeningly perfect night in a maddeningly perfectly imperfect boy's car.

Perfection in people is impossible, but he comes close.

It's a bit early and I am young, but if I can live this for the rest of my life, I would be happy—he is everything I need.

Six feet of frustration and love.

There that word is again.

It's been thought so many times, but never spoken before.

"I have to tell you something." I breathe in a chilled breath of the nighttime Mississippi air, and breathe out the three words.

The four words he exhales back sound just like a supercut.

It takes me back to the very first time that he ever made me really *think* about him, in front of the river. It was sweaty August and his hair was long. He wiped his palms on khaki pants and that night when we began walking we didn't know it would be the first time of many. He told me that night that he liked me and I felt a spark of hope in my chest that has grown, flickered, dimmed, and brightened—but will never die.

That hope has dwindled a couple times, through a couple words and a couple sentences.

"I just can't handle this right now; there are more important things I need to focus on."

"Most teen relationships don't last, you know."

"There's like a .001% we'll stay together after high school."

**"He loves country music
and I love him."**

He plays with fire, simply sighing against the flame
like he knows he could blow it out. Other days, though,
he is gasoline.

"You're so pretty."

*"I'm sorry—you know this is going to happen
again, right? You're so patient."*

"How was your day?"

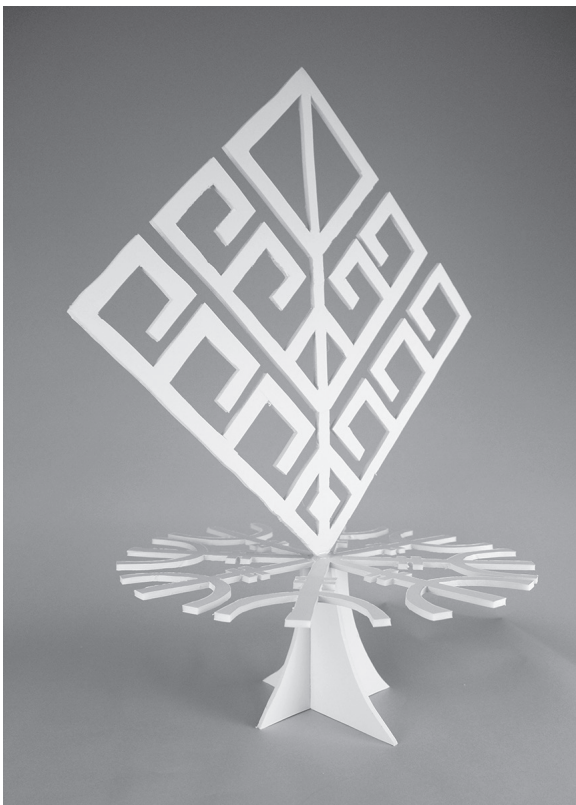
*"I love your smile. There's not a part on you I don't
like."*

I am emotionally turbulent. I cry rivers over him
and dry them on his hoodie sleeve. He is frustration and
love.

He is very left-brained. He overthinks and
overanalyzes everything. He gives balance when I think
too little and decide too quickly. He is the calm to my
storm.

Johnny Cash made June Carter cry, surely, but he
made her smile and laugh. He made her dance and sing
and fall in love.

And June Carter sure did love him. △



Lifsins og Stríðsins Tré

Third Place—Sculpture

Michael Begley

Foam board

So This Is Wayne County

(after Ted Kooser)

Luke Bowles

Leaving the old dirt driveway,
Pines stretch as far as the eye can see.
The houses by the road
Rest in patches of earth
Like old widows in recliners.

Asphalt twists and turns
As a meandering river
That never settles, always restless.
The stoplight flashes
Like a dying star
In a dying town.

So this is Wayne County.
A Sunday morning,
Everyone going to church.
Blouses and button-ups,
Elders in every nook and cranny.

Prideful teenagers,
Now models of modesty.
Racist adults,
Now advocates for acceptance.
Hateful old folks,
Ever careful to bring their Bibles,
A monument to their hypocrisy.

You feel like that;
You feel like saying something,
Like trying, attempting, anything,
Just to see a speck of authenticity.

You feel like leaving forever
Just to escape the cycle of insincerity.
Hello's, Goodbye's, How you doing's
Those fake smiles surround you
Like a masquerade.
You feel like replying something spiteful,
Anything not to conform.
You smile instead and say,
"I'm good, how 'bout you?"

Speech Leapin'

Ryley Fallon

Second Place—Poetry Competition

With my tongue, I wage the Mississippi River,
Against the current, up to Illinois.
My mother's homeland, bound by corn.
She spoke her first words
Three hours south of Chicago.

In the summer of 1999,
She slammed her Lincoln-tagged talk
Into a Toyota Camry and moved South
With her Gulf Coast-bound accomplice.
For their Last Supper, they shared a "pop."

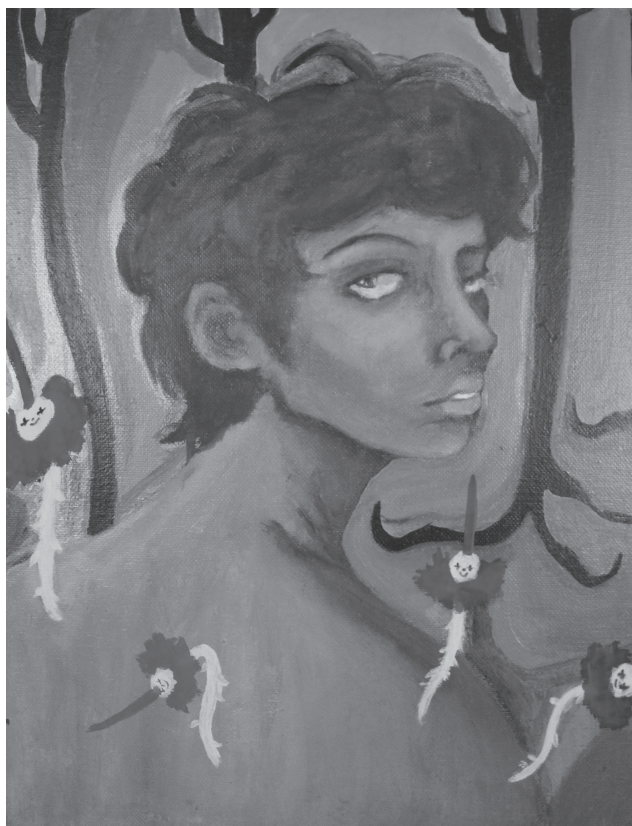
My mother met my father through a blind date,
But his voice stuck with her.
With a golden, cross-engraved band on her finger,
My mother promised to love my father more than
grammar
And to pick baby names that rolled off the tongue
Nice n' easy.

From birth, my mother and father
Had me leaping between voices;
Mom did her best to mimic my father and his
community:

"You're dad's fixin' to get off of work."
"Get out from under us, this is adult conversation."
But her mother was to be called "Grandmother,"
Nothing more, nothing less.

I can tell if my mother has been talking to her family:
She tucks her voice into a neat package, tied with
ribbon,
Her words, tailored to her tongue
With inches of phonetic fabric cut to fit her,
Pinned with precise pronunciation.
The sound of her childhood.

My mother listens to advice
At her Wednesday night Bible study:
How to raise "young-un's," memorize verses, and clean
pans.
She nods to a group of women she trusts.
There's one thing she will never share with them,
though:
She doesn't make me call her "ma'am."



Trippy

Auriel Quiroz

Painting—oil, gouache

Reruns

Shelby Tisdale

“Oh, me!” he is taken aback, chuckling as I walk through the door. I inhale the year-round seventy-five-degree air conditioning, and I prepare to lose my sanity under sweat stains and whatever comments the old man chooses to make about my shorts today. But Papa resorts to waving his hand above my head with a toothless grin and asking if I’ve measured myself lately, always saying, “You gon’ be taller than Daddy before long!” and every time I grit my teeth and tell him I am five foot seven, even though I have told him every day for the past year. Every time I collapse onto the loveseat, “Shelby,” he says from his crimson recliner, and I don’t flinch. “Look here one second.” Reluctantly I do, to give him the satisfaction, averting my attention momentarily and being reminded once again to look at him. “I’d ’preciate it if you didn’t fall down on that couch.” I believe years of my falling on that couch has only made it stronger, yet I mumble a *yessir*, and retreat into my momentary diversion, realizing earbuds can’t dissolve the static of television speakers wailing underneath clichés, as Papa hums along with *Gaither Gospel Hour* on Saturday nights, or gives me periodic plot summaries of his beloved *Beverly Hillbillies*.

Mimi will often plead my case with a “Shut up, James!”, her dialect defined by swollen vowels and extraneous syllables. Those proud blue eyes and painted lips entertain me with exaggerated words and stories when she uses my legs to run her errands, and she flirts with fast food employees and takes in flattery like a sponge. That disposition fades under her hardened grimace toward her husband, who, the first time they met, informed her that her hair was too high, and her skirt was too short.

Every time I enter that house, I hear some variation of the phrase “James, would you stop making that noise!” in response to my grandfather’s routine laughter to himself (which he swears he doesn’t do).

“Nell, I told you I don’t like it when you use that tone of voice now,” he always responds, which she addresses with slurred curses and hostile glares.

My grandparents never loved one another, and it haunts me. Unwilling necessity tied them into a

distorted knot, bound by her inability to walk and his inability to remember. Their bitter dependency feeds off infinite complaints and reluctance to help one another. They sit in the same recliners every day watching reruns of television shows that resemble a world they once knew, as trivial annoyances materialize into poorly masquerading resentments, embodying the stereotypes of an old married couple. The same phrases echo in that house as the sun rises and sets, days draining into the horizon line, replicating hours of Mimi’s solitaire puzzles and Papa’s Channel 3 news. Every day they stretch inflection into the same words, while never giving them new meaning.

“Would ya tilt back a little?” Papa says, waving the remote like a madman aiming a gun at the television. God forbid my head disrupts his episode of *M*A*S*H*. I inch further into the couch, wondering if my blue jean shorts are as short as Mimi’s skirt was. This house is like a badly written sitcom, like one of Papa’s reruns, echoing the same lines, each episode following the same trite plotline. I envision myself as a younger version of my grandmother, so desperate to love a child that she would settle for a husband, and I pray that the great screenwriter above might twist my story into a romance, or at least provide a happy ending. △



There Are Other Worlds Than These

Claire Justis

Painting—acrylic





Aesthetic

Alden Wiygul

Painting—acrylic

Venus Weeps

Gracie Rowland

The idealization of the female form

Haunts me, day and night, wake and sleep

Whispering, taunting, chasing

I scream into the mirror, throw salt over my shoulder

My eyes bleed red and my teeth shine yellow

I've tried every diet pill, every laxative tea

'Cause I don't know how to live if I'm not pretty

"A woman's worth her looks, isn't she?"

Sex appeal equates to feminine worth

I hate the patriarchy, yet I accept its oppressive ideas

Manic pixie dream girl trope is all I've ever known

All I'll ever want to be

Barbie in Malibu, Rapunzel in her tower

Venus weeps for me, her tears scalding the earth

While Mars laughs at the ignorant folly

An addict of self-approval, I'll sell my soul or body

Stabbing a dirty needle of perceived happiness

Into my pale and sickly skin

Becoming my own ghost



Funky

Sophia Toner

Drawing—colored pencil



Is Entropy an Illusion?

Linda Arnoldus

Sculpture—paint, pipe cleaner, Sharpie



Hooper
First Place—Painting
Ella Lauderdale
Watercolor, ink

I Call That Beautiful

“It is not blasphemy / to see God in the skyline.”

Abby Strain

First Place—Essay Competition

I can’t help but see poetry in everything.

When it is three twenty-four a.m. and my best friend calls to tell me that he is sitting in a motel room, alone, reading my favorite book for the fourth time, I call that Loneliness. I would kiss his forehead if he was next to me. Tell him, “you are the starry-night” and wipe the tears off of his cheeks. But instead I say, “191 days.” And he replies with, “658 miles.” And the call ends.

When I sleep in my sister’s bed, she wakes me up with a video, a voice I now only hear in my dreams. “Abby, I love you.” and my voice responds, “I love you

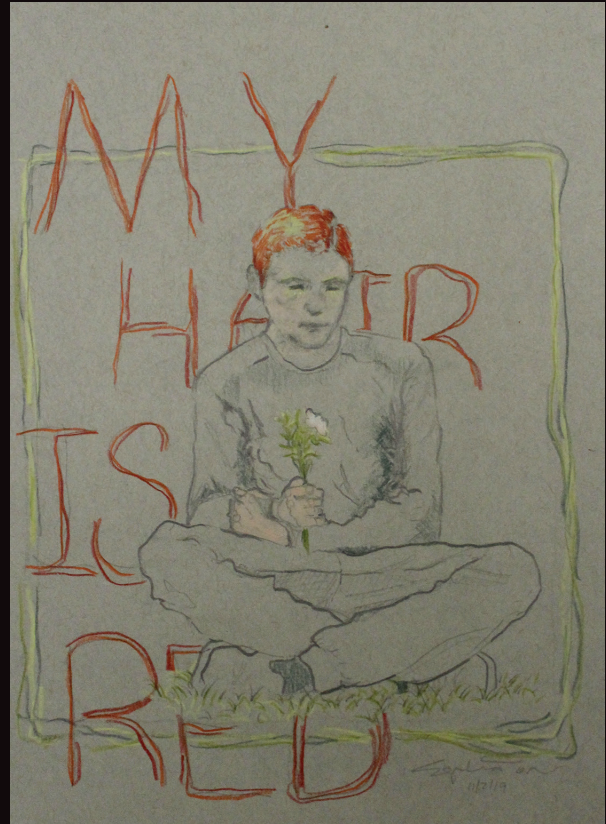
too,” thick with laughter. I call that Long Dead. My tears scream for exodus and I tell them they have only been in Egypt for eight months. They have 499 years and four months left before Moses comes.

When it is four thirty-two a.m., and my head swims with things I shouldn’t have been drinking, I tell a boy that he is beautiful. By the way his heart beats in response, I don’t think anyone has told him he is the ocean before—beautiful, beautiful, beautiful—and I call that Injustice. I hear myself tell him that I am not a foundation. That he cannot build something here. But when he kisses my forehead and tells me “you are the

starry-night,” I don’t think he remembers the traffic signals. Red and yellow and green. Synchronized flashing. Beautiful. Harmony.

When my mother tells me she bought a wedding dress, we are riding on the bypass. She does not mention that there are no plans for a wedding; she does not take her eyes off the road. I call that Discretion. She plants daisies in her chicken coop and cries over missed grad school assignments. She is the night sky. I love her enough to water the daisies.

When the car is going seven miles per hour, I slip out of the door anyways. Feet bouncing off asphalt trampoline. Legs swinging over the side of my friend’s boyfriend’s convertible. I’m chasing the wind in my hair, and I call that Freedom. We look up at the starry night and someone tells me they love how quickly Columbus, Mississippi, fades to the middle of nowhere. And I tell them that I’ve been raised to fade to nothing, just like my town. In this moment, everything is forever—and I count the seconds and the stars until it’s all nothing again. △



Rosie Lowe

Sophia Toner

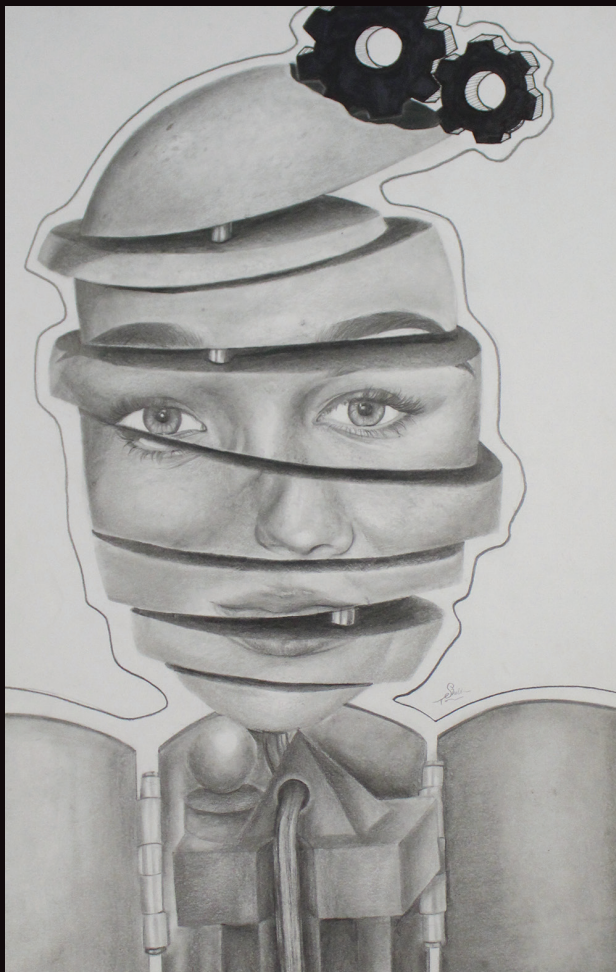
Drawing—colored pencil



**Bridge to
Canada**

Hua Chen

Photography



Layers (Self-Portrait)

First Place—Drawing

Shelby Tisdale

Mixed media

Washing Machine Heart

Gracie Rowland

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

Mama sits on her knees, the pile of clothes
Beside her like a lumbering stack of books
Laundry room lights transform her blonde hair golden
She looks smaller somehow, but wiser
She picks up the blouse on top with leisure
Folds it in two in one graceful fell swoop
Smooths the creased lines with her palms
Places it on the floor, moves to the pile again
Her head sways to the music playing
Back and forth her hair falls
Like a curtain of silk, opening, closing
She's not rushed, takes her time
Chaos of living dims in this moment
It feels like a photograph should be taken
Like one of those polaroids that make me wonder
If I ever seem as content as that, if the light
Ever graces my limbs in resplendent outlines



Myrtle Beach

Third Place—Painting

Katy Chen

Acrylic



Butterfly on Flower

Hua Chen

Photography



Sunrise on the Dock

Karlene Deng

Photography

Suds and Summer Sunset

Ryley Fallon

Faded denim and baby blue cotton
Take the place of my Sunday best.
The oak becomes my hiding place.
Through the kitchen window, I can
see my mother;
She cannot see me.
Suds launch into view
As she plops another dish into the
sink.
Her forearms and forehead glisten.

Curlers nestle in her hair,
Weighing down her neck.
I know she is humming.
I hear the sound of crickets, crickets.
But I don't have to hear Mama to
know her song.
My mother hums when there is work
to be done.
Her expression grows blank,
absorbing golden hour.

She is preparing, prepping, and
planning
For the week to come.
The sunlight pours in,
And the white trim of the window
Frames my mother's pale face
Reminding of a magazine cover,
Maybe *Southern Living*.
As the sunshine withered away,
My admiration grew.



Koi

Alden Wiygul

Sculpture—paint, cassette tape



The Birds

Alden Wiygul

Sculpture—paint, cassette tape



Film Is Forever

First Place—Photography

Carter Moore



Monkey in the Mountains

Hua Chen

Photography



Autumn Mountains

Honorable Mention—Painting

Gina Nguyen

Acrylic



One Day

Carter Moore

Photography

Dim Your Light

Cameron Thomas

Little boy, oh little boy
Your pants are up too high
You have a shortage of tattoos
Your luminosity is a bit too outlandish for us
Tone it down

You weren't born to go any further
than that corner
The one over there
With the graffiti on the wall
You rock the color orange so well when you wear it
You're irresistible to the po... 12
Don't bother learning your "rights" as a U.S. citizen
Regardless of what they say
You will never be as esteemed or respected
You're in a race
In which everyone else was given a head-start
You're never going to win



Slavery is over
But we're still slaves to the system
Still trapped within the boundaries of the stereotypes
There ain't a place in this world for us outside

The hood
Oh, I almost forgot
Make sure you wear your hood
Criminalized so much
We feel the need to hide our nappy hair

Your light is shining way too bright
Dim it now
Watch as the light fades;
The melanin will provide your camouflage
Matching the darkness of your complexion with the
shadows of your fate
Lights out, little boy,
Lights out

Red Side of the Moon

Nina Vo

Photography

Rainy Evening on Beale Street

Wyatt Shanahan

Photography



Bubbly Bonsai

First Place—Sculpture

Camille Newman

Wire, root beer boxes, beads, flowers, string



Seewen Pride Rock

Third Place—Photography

Whitley Hester



Minimalist Daydream

Ellen Overstreet
Painting—acrylic

Summer Day

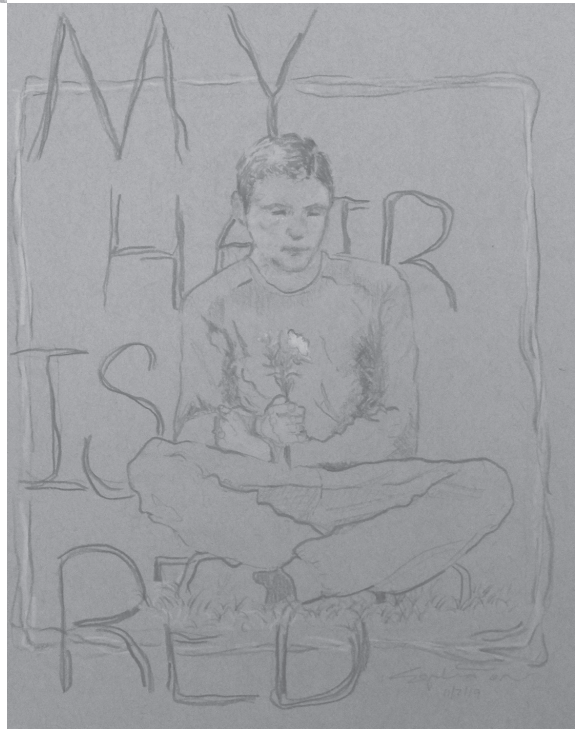
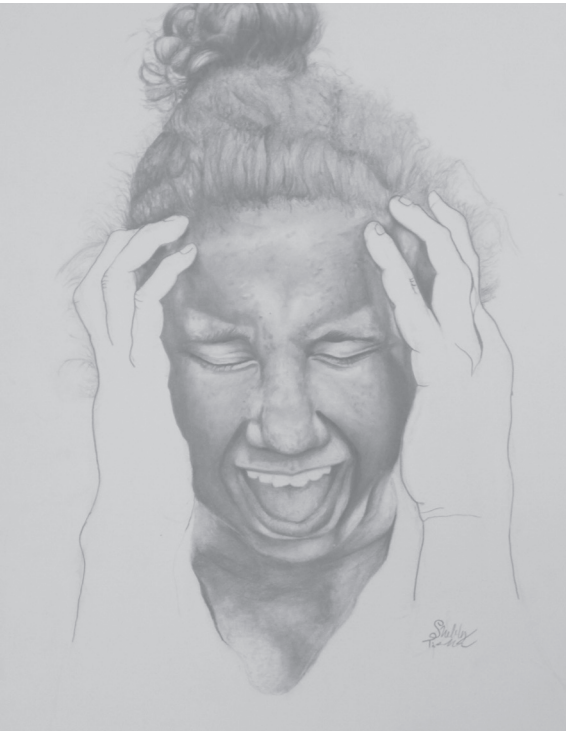
Raven Day

First Place—Poetry Competition

Scalding hot sun
beamed down in mid-July.
Summer almost over,
I glanced outside our living room window
into our front yard.
On a lawnmower
as red as a newly painted stop sign
sat a 72-year-old man.
Dark skin, standing 6'2,
wearing that old tan straw hat and chewing
the same tobacco pack from the day before,
my granddaddy did our yard work with
“Cooling Water” by Lee Williams blasting from
his nearly broken radio.

That was nine years ago.

Sometimes
I can look outside and still see him.
Sometimes
My cousin can get the old lawnmower to crank.
Most times
I can listen to “Cooling Water” and
see him laughing, telling me how good
tobacco is while we ride around the yard.



Chester's Birthday

Luke Bowles

Third Place—Short Story Competition

The sun had not peeked above the blanket of clouds when Chester's father woke him.

"Get up, boy," he said.

Chester could tell he was gritting his teeth and rose without protest. Although he had been working in his dad's lumber mill since he'd turned ten, it was still a challenge waking so early. Today on his twelfth birthday, he got up as he did every morning and thought nothing of the date. A birthday celebration seemed foreign.

After stuffing his face with bacon and eggs, Chester slipped on his worn work boots and fell in line behind his father walking to the 1932 Ford pickup parked in the grass. The smell of chicken shit filled his nostrils, and the first rays of sunlight bounced off the dew. As he slammed the truck door shut—the only way it would close—the rooster screeched its wakeup call. The truck started with a rumble while Chester sat in silence, feeling the rough leather beneath him and tasting the burnt bacon from breakfast.

The days at the lumber mill seemed to last forever, and all Chester could think about was getting home. All day long, he noticed his dad taking swigs from a slender silver flask; memories of his father's drunken beatings flooded his memory, and warm blood reddened his cheeks.

"Just don't make him mad, don't mess up on the job, and stay out of his way. Come on, you know what to do," Chester said to himself in little more than a whisper.

After the sun began to dip below the cow pasture on the horizon, Chester helped his dad clean up the mill. When he and his father finally pulled out onto the gravel road, the stars shimmered in the coal sky. The truck seemed to swerve often, and Chester could smell the raw stench of whiskey on his father's breath. His father began to lean up and then jerk upright in

an attempt to stay awake. As the truck began to pass over the one-lane wooden bridge with no side-rails, Chester's father slumped over. The truck slowed to a stop dangerously near the edge.

"Dad? Dad! Wake up! Dad?" Chester kept nudging his father.

His father did not stir. Chester crawled over into the driver's seat, squeezing in and pushing his father against the door. With only one headlight working and a forty-foot drop to the creek below, nervousness hit him like a hammer to the face. His head swam, and the headlight swirled in dazzling patterns on the road ahead. He tried to talk himself through it, but his voice caught in his throat.

Finally, he gripped the steering wheel with shaking hands and forced himself to push his foot against the pedal. The truck lurched forward and the smallest swerve toward the edge sent a jolt of panic up his spine. Chester prayed to himself, *"God, I'm here. Help me!"*

**"...and wondered to
himself what other kids'
birthdays were like."**

but his anxiety only intensified. Before he knew it, the truck had passed onto the other side. His father had yet to make a sound. Cotton fields, corn rows, and wooden houses flashed by; hot tears stung

his eyes and glistened in the moonlight, illuminating his bony face. The rest of the drive home passed in silence, and Chester thought about how his birthday. *His birthday.* It meant nothing to his father.

Truck tires met the familiar gravel driveway, and Chester's mother came outside. When she saw his father unconscious, she moved in to help Chester carry him inside. When they were pulling him out of the driver's seat, he jerked upright.

"What do you think you're doing? I can walk myself, damnit," he said, his words slurred and threatening.

"Please, Shelton, not tonight. I've had enough of this already."

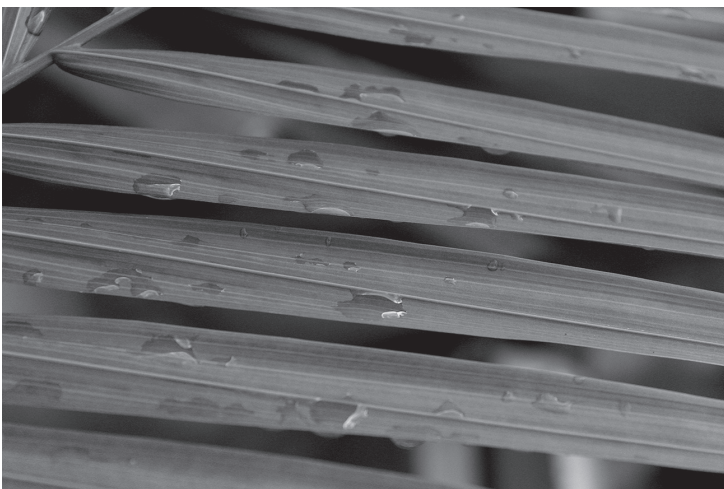
“Don’t talk to me like that, woman.” He slapped her, the mark staining her face with an angry red handprint.

“You know there’s no need for that, Shelton,” she said, holding back tears, “especially around Chester.”

Her impotent protest enraged him. He smacked her across her face, her back, and her head again and again. She fell to the ground sobbing and pleading with him to stop, but he was determined to go on until his rage had been satiated.

“Stop! Stop! She didn’t do anything!”

Before he could react, Chester’s father redirected his blows. The blood tasted familiar in Chester’s mouth, and the beating came so quickly that there was no time to feel pain. When it finally ended, Chester stood, bruised and bloody. He limped to the potato shed in the backyard, crouched down, and began to crawl under it, too afraid to go inside the house. He saw his father stumble into the house while his mother lay on the ground sobbing just before his head passed under the shed. The night air was crisp, and his head pounded, and the dirt was cold under his overalls. Chester lay under the shed shivering, tears streaming down his cheeks, and wondered to himself what other kids’ birthdays were like. △



Window of Leaves

Honorable Mention—Photography

Catherine Boltz

King Street

“Down in the holler / Where folks are real.”

Abby Strain

Honorable Mention—Poetry Contest

I come from a place of plywood windows
and houses painted with garish colors,
where proper grammar is as rare as
a house without electrical problems.
With thin walls and slurred vocabulary,
everyone is always fixin’ to get their life together,
and yet, they all make the same bed every morning.

I am hiding behind this shoplifted identity
of a promising individual,
as if I was raised in a brick house—
as if my future will be handed to me
on a silver platter of college funds and support—
as if I am not running from my upbringing
amid cockroaches, cowboy boots, and nighttime gunshots.

My best friend has to travel ten hours
and thirty-six minutes to see me.
He tells me that my plywood windows are my best-kept secret,
he tells me that it is sad that I am so ashamed.
This boy did not know that
I fashioned my Monopoly-money smile
after his dollar-sign grin.

I was raised in a broken neighborhood,
that even Southern folk won’t drive down
when riding in shiny, new cars.
I beat my accent out with books and Northern friends,
as if I could come from somewhere else
if I denied where I was for long enough.

No matter how many hours I devote
to saying “either” without the *e*,
soaking in crisp words doesn’t mean
that I am fixin’ to get my life together.
But it does mean that
I’m making the same bed every morning.

Seventeen

Lily Langstaff

At seventeen,
We understand
That we can be seen
But not noticed,
Unnoticed, but objectified,
Heard,
But not listened to.
We
Understand
When our angry teeth gnash
Ferocious, furious hands ball into white-knuckled fists,
They see
Pearly whites in a dimpled smile on blushing cheeks,
Bubblegum painted lips,
Pretty magenta-painted nails, curling against soft palms,
The gentle hands of their mothers.

They see pink, delicate;
We are red, destructive, devastated.

We are bloodthirsty, but They want something else.
Have They seen the feet of a ballerina?

Have They seen Our stingers?
They think We make honey.
We make venom.
They think We are rosebuds, but We are thorns.

When our brains beg to be acknowledged, valued, at
least *validated*,
Crying out complexities and intellect, opinions and
politics,
They see two lumps of fat—appetizing until a newborn
must be breastfed.
When We see short skirts, push-up bras, and lip-gloss,
They see an invitation.

We are not welcoming Them. We are not asking for It.
We are not here to bear Their children.
We are not fragile, and neither are *our* egos.

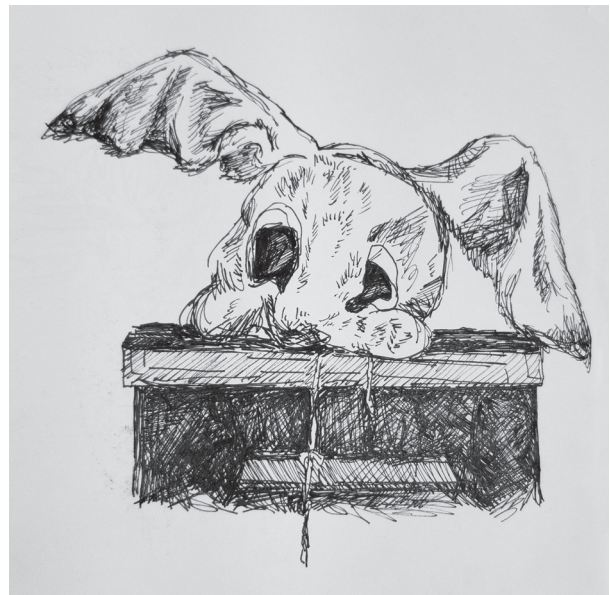
We are not a generation of housewives and obedient
mothers—we are businesswomen,
Sharp, smart, savvy.

We do not have moneymakers—we are moneymakers.
The only thing I will shake for Them is the finger in
between my index and my ring.
They classify us as virgins and prudes or sluts and
whores.

We are not virgins or prudes or sluts or whores. We are
young women.
They are careless, hungry fathers and sons.

We should not be fearful and They should not be
fearless.
They do not bring security or comfort. They bring a
wave of uneasiness—clutched purses,
pepper-spray, whistles in case It happens. Never wear
heels you can't run in and always watch your drink.

Yes, They have angered Us. Must We really explain to
Them why?



Wanderlust

Honorable Mention—Drawing

Ada Fulgham

Ink

A Series of Unfortunate Cats

Ryley Fallon

Third Place—Essay Competition

“Ronnie, we go through cats quicker than the milk expires.” These are words of my father pleading with my mother not to buy another cat. Throughout my childhood, my family never had inside cats. In fact, I didn’t even know that the vast majority of domestic cats were kept inside until I visited my aunt’s house in Tennessee where lived the fattest pile of fur that I had ever seen. The name of the cat was Casino, and I remember placing bets on how long that cat was going to survive. The cats that I grew up around were lean and quick. They did not like to be held, but my mother would press their bodies up against her chest, attempting to squeeze their affection. The love my mom had for cats never died even when our cats did.

The name of our first cat was Tang. My mother said the Tang’s orange fur reminded her of a pop she drank as a child. I was not old enough to read, so I just assumed that “Tang” was how you pronounced the word “Fanta.” After all, the only orange soda I knew of had that written across the label. Tang was much like orange soda, beginning with a bite and ending with sugar. My brother and I would rub our tiny palms in between the cat’s ears short strokes. Tang’s initial reaction was to clench his jaw down on our fingers, but sooner than later, Tang would be brushing his body against our knees, purring. Much like the stage of childhood I was in when we got Tang, the cat was there one day and gone the next. My mother claimed that he had wandered into the woods and not been able to find his way back, so for weeks, my brother and I stood in the humid air and our rain boots, calling out Tang’s name. We never saw Tang again, and one day, we stopped calling.

I remember naming a cat Coco that my parents had brought home from the Wednesday morning stockyard. The cat earned this name by simply being brown

because as a nine year old with little creativity, “brown” was just about the only description I could think of. I have to give it to Coco because he lasted the longest of all our cats; six months passed and Coco was still there. Summer came, however, and the humidity forced the rattlesnakes out into the open. The rattlesnakes liked to play in tall grass, and so did Coco. When the cat came limping to the front porch with a swollen paw, my mother tried to put him in a crate so that she could take him to the vet. Coco must have been more scared to be trapped than to die, though, because the second we

closed the lid, Coco let out a single, high-pitched screech and toppled over on the spot. My father broke the silence by saying, “At least we don’t have to pay a vet bill.”

Our next cat’s fur was black and white, so the only plausible name for the cat was Oreo. Oreo arrived in a wooden crate the day before I started

Kindergarten. My mother’s preferred parenting style was distraction, and there is no better distraction from the fear of the first day of school than a brand-new pet. My mother told me that Oreo and I were bound to be the best of friends because we were both being thrust into a new environment. Oreo was the only cat that wasn’t a kitten when we got it, though. This made the transition a bit more traumatic. While I was off getting gold stars on my progress reports, Oreo spent most of his time lounging under our wooden porch. Although Oreo’s water and food bowl were always filled, the cat was out of sight, out of mind, so when Oreo got sick, my mother didn’t realize it until a week later, which the vet said was past the point of revival. Oreo died, and my father buried him in a shallow grave with a tiny wooden cross. There is an art to grave digging, and my father was no artist. The following morning, I walked out in rainbow Skechers and a Tinker Bell bookbag, unsuspecting. Another animal had dug up Oreo and

**“Much like the stage of
childhood I was in... the
cat was there one day
and gone the next.”**

Home(less)

Abby Strain

Third Place—Poetry Contest

scattered the cat's remains across the yard. That day gave a whole new meaning to the phrase, "That's how the cookie crumbles."

My father and mother have since decided that we are dog people. Dog seem to have a much longer shelf life in our household, though I can tell my mother doesn't love our dogs in the same way that she loved our cats. I think the difference is that with dogs, there is no game in winning their affection. No matter how unacquainted you are with a dog, if you have food, the animal is at your feet grinning with a wagging tail.

As for me, I have grown indifferent to pets. After all, I don't know when their companionship will be ripped away. Much like most of my cats, my affection has been short lived. My aunt's cat Casino, though, is still trucking along in life. Every time I visit, I glare at it, letting it know how lucky it is. △

Silver station wagon bumps over craters,
pulling into the same asphalt valley
that has sheltered my dreams
for seventeen days.

Lining the car doors: trash bags
filled with belongings, sleeping sister
with cramped legs.

Cracked black stone is my green-grass backyard.
The back of my mother's seat
is my living room hearth,
and I curl beneath the flames.

This is the back of the mall parking lot
where blue-clad security would
rather patrol clearance-marked stores
than walk across the heat waves
emitted from my asphalt wasteland.

Worms wither and die away from their dirt
after God sends his plagues of rain.
God sends his plagues of angry landlords,
and his children join his worms.

Your child-feet dangle out of the open door;
you feel like taking the money
from your friend's bookbag,
like sleeping on the asphalt so your
sister can stretch her legs. Like
being no more than the parking lot.
No more than home.

The cars who pass by whistle
with pity, whistle with anger
like the landlord when the
money wasn't paid, like the principal
after you punch that boy for
laughing at your sister's greasy hair.
Pity and anger are twins
and no one has known a closeness like that.



We Are Killing This Planet

Linda Arnoldus

Sculpture—paint, globe, plastic

Ride On

Alden Wiygul

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

The wind whistled through Clarisa's hair as she rode on the back of Rodney's motorcycle down the highway. Its deafening tune combined with the motorcycle's roar and the padded helmet that sat tight over her ears. The helmet squeezed her head so hard she could barely think.

Clarisa realized, however, that Rodney's last girlfriend had a much smaller head than hers.

"Clary was more petite in general," she remarked bitterly to herself.

The similarity between their names also haunted Clarisa at night. Not for too long, though, because Rodney was always quick to wrap his big arms around her and distract her. That made it easy to remind herself that she was dating him, not Clary. It brought a smirk to her face even now as she thought about Clary's ugly green car that she left a spray-painted gift on after finding one of her old t-shirts in Rodney's house.

A quick, harsh squeeze to her thigh brought her out of her jealous thoughts.

"Are—back—ere?" Rodney yelled back at her. Clarisa could feel the vibrations his words made underneath her hands that were tightly gripping his v-neck, but she couldn't make out the words.

"What?" Clarisa shouted in Rodney's ear.

"N—mind."

Clarisa shrugged, figuring that Rodney had dismissed his earlier words; she hated when he shouted like that. It was one of her least favorite things about his motorcycle that he insisted they ride instead of taking a regular car. He knew that she couldn't hear him, but he would still try to talk to her just for an excuse to get angry at her at their next stop. Rodney loved to fight.

She shook herself out of those negative thoughts and shifted to admiring the sunset. It cast the perfect glow on Rodney's tanned skin. His beautiful face marred with scars from years of refusing to wear a helmet and—

Heaving a sigh, Clarisa started to think about the wind. She didn't want to think about Rodney anymore; she would have to deal with his nagging presence enough at the next diner.

"Why do I do this? Why do I fill my head with him! I'm much too pretty to be thinkin' about him all the time, Mam said so! I'm smarter than him, too; I should be thinkin' about bigger things. Things he ain't involved in. Maybe when I get back home I'll start goin' to church just like Mam wants me to. Why, I could stop the smokin' and drinkin' and drugs and—and kick Rod to the curb!" Clarisa thought to herself and then giggled.

She knew she'd never do any of that. She pledged her loyalty to Rodney the day she let him take a tattoo gun to her thigh. He signed his name in that awful handwriting of his, but it was either that, an actual

brand, or leaving him, so she took the least painful of the three.

The motorcycle rumbled against Clarisa's thighs as Rodney sped up. He was getting impatient and that meant they were close to their next stop. She cleared her mind, closed

her eyes, and let her head fall to rest on Rodney's back. Riding like this made her sick, but she needed a distraction from the knot in her stomach tying itself up into the shape of the cold gun that was tucked in between her jeans and her oversized leather jacket that once belonged to Clary—and before her who knows how many girls. All she knew was that it once belonged to Rodney. She told herself that was all that mattered.

Clarisa felt her hair settle as the motorcycle slowed to a jerky stop. Rodney always insisted that he knew how to ride a "hog" like it was a bicycle; it came easy and natural to him. She had told him one time that if that was the case then he did not know how to ride a bike. That was back in the early days of their love when Clarisa could still tease him. Of course, that remark still earned her a small silvery scar on her left thigh, marring the smooth freckled constellation above her knee; however, it did not have the effect it would have

**"Riding like this made
her sick, but she needed
a distraction."**

today, where the mere thought of speaking that brought ice to her veins. Those nicks in that honeymoon period with Rodney's beloved pen knife named Ronda were warning kisses, teaching her that she was always wrong, and he was always right. Out of all of Rodney's girlfriends, Clarisa hated Ronda the most.

"Okay, stop holdin' me like that and get off," Rodney said.

He parked between two big pickup trucks, right on the white line of two spaces. Clarisa thought people who did that were beyond annoying, but Rodney deserved the best, so she never got too mad when he did it. She mostly just didn't want to fight him about it; she would rather let some angry owner of the truck that would pull in after Rodney do it for her.

Clarisa released his jacket and climbed off the motorcycle with a swing of her legs as she took off her helmet, making her hair cling to the inside. The static caused her hair to reflect her inward desire. She wanted to squeeze her head back into that matte black helmet and hide her face from Rodney's searching gaze.

With a rough grunt, Rodney began to walk inside. That was the only indicator Clarisa ever got to follow, but she had learned to follow his silent demands. Her teal-flowered cowboy boots dug into the dirt as she dragged her feet after him. The bright red neon glow of the sign reading "Starlight Diner" burned her vision. It made Clarisa feel even more sick, and she broke out into a cold sweat even as they entered the warm building.

"Hello, how many will it be?" the hostess greeted. The hostess's voice was perky, and her bright demeanor matched the bubblegum pink, sixties'-era dress the diner had shoved her in. Her pep made Clarisa's teeth grind. Clarisa knew it was fake, but it made Rodney smirk behind his neatly trimmed beard and so it made her blood boil. She slipped her hand into Rodney's and he shot her a glare, removed his hand, and nodded.

Clarisa sighed and reached behind her back to grasp that cold metal of her gun—yet another thing Rodney's other gals had owned before her. It was time to put on their show, their choreographed display of love for the world to watch.

"Get down on the ground and put your arms behind your backs!" Rodney yelled.

"And put your wallets in front of ya and you—you get the money from the register," Clarisa said after him.

Clarisa's gun pointed at the workers while Rodney's was pointed at the patrons. Everyone dropped down faster than bullets, adrenaline rushing through the diner like a shot in the air. Clarisa started to gather all the money and wallets into a bag while Rodney circled the hostess.

"Aren't ya a pretty thing," Rodney grinned, knelt next to the girl, and lifted her nametag. "Sydney is an awfully cute name." Clarisa, distracted from the wrinkled man in the corner that was hunched over his phone, whipped around and glared at Rodney from across the diner.

"Stop talkin' to her."

"What?" Rodney turned around slowly. His gun fixated now on Clarisa's upper shoulder as his nostrils flared in anger. Clarisa had snapped, though, and he had never openly flirted with another woman in front of her before.

"Stop flirtin' with that girl!" Clarisa's shriek echoed in the silent diner.

"Do not talk to me that way!"

"I can talk to you however I want! I would be better off without you, Mam says so, and I don't know why I ain't listen to her till now. I could shoot you right now and be free of you!"

"You ain't got the guts to shoot me, little girl. Ya don't think I don't know your safety is always on? You're weak. Now come here, apologize, and stop pointin' my own gun at me," Rodney laughed out.

The ring of police sirens echoed in the distance and Clarisa's eyes became wild. The old man had called the cops during their fight.

"Crap! This is all your fault, Clarisa! Stop being an idiot and let's go before I kill ya right here. We'll deal with your punishment later," Rodney said.

Clarisa backed away from him, shaking hands holding tight on her gun. Rodney's tight smile made his love pump through her veins like a drug, altering her mind and reasoning. Her breathing sped up and when she looked down her vision went red. In her wide blue eyes, her hands were dripping blood.

The echo of the safety being clicked off boomed in Clarisa's head over the sound of sirens. She lifted the gun and a single shot rang out in the diner.

Clarisa was finally free. She died with the neon lights of the diner's sign reflecting in her eyes, making them twinkle like stars. △

Pretty

Gracie Rowland

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

Grandma said that no one will love me if I'm not pretty, that attractive people get further in life, and that ugly people never achieve true happiness. Southern women are held to a higher caliber than "those silly Northern girls," and Miss USA is often Miss Mississippi for a reason. Our glistening, golden southern suburbia breeds bronzed beauty queens and debutantes clothed in ivory silk. The Bible Belt is steeped in ideals of transcendent excellence, swirling and darkening our clear waters. If only Slim Aarons could see us now, with our country clubs of shine. My mind and heart didn't seem to check those legalistic black boxes of "enough." No one cared if I had a brain; only beauty could make me whole

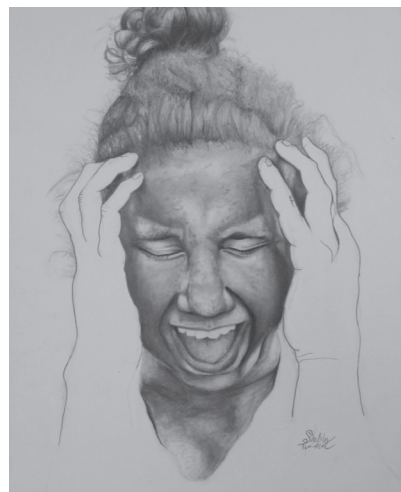
I wanted to be loved, so I became lovely. I learned what calories were, and how to count them. I stuck two fingers down my throat after most meals and popped laxatives like Skittles. *Pride and Prejudice* lost its crown of literary favorite to *French Women Don't Get Fat*. I replaced broken nails beds with shiny pink acrylics and bleached my hair till it shone gold and yellow, constantly trying to cover up the pain of the past and the threat of the future.

My relentless fixation upon perfection stemmed from the lack of control I had in my life. I was dying, and I wanted to feel whole again. I felt as if I was standing on a precipice, and that someone could push me at any time. The rivers of dismal anguish churned and roiled beneath me, and the idea of jumping existed as a singular comfort. I was depressed and anxious, but most of all I was tired. I wanted to reach for something, anything, to justify my existence, to prove to myself that my life was worth living. Validation became my drug; and the dependence made me into a reckless addict. I wanted to be beautiful, and I wanted to be admired.

After a while, Grandma said I was a pretty thing. That I was a Southern Belle now, her greatest achievement. Yet I still found it hard to battle that aching, screaming melancholy sitting in my bones. I

still stared in the smudged mirror and remembered my childhood, remembered the pain I felt sitting alone in that empty hotel room. The mirror haunted me, and as my eyes disassociated from my body, all I saw was green. My throat closed with a sticky gasp and my mind became desperately crowded. I wept on the cold bathroom floor in a haze of weariness, and I wept on the warm car seat in a haze of anger. I was searching, clawing, itching for something to make me feel worthy. I still didn't like myself, even though others did. I didn't feel pretty, but at least I looked it.

I've overcome my demons now; I've banished them away in a chest stuffed with size double zero jeans that no longer fit. I decided not to be another statistic, and I decided to live. It took me a long time, a really long time, to love myself, but now that I do, the feeling is euphoric. I eat pizza without feeling guilty and I wear makeup because it's fun. I cry a lot less and I smile a lot more. I'm not the Southern dream and I'm not without flaw. But I claim my place in the world because I claim myself. I love who I am, and I love what I've become. I realize now that I'm more than my perceived face value. Now, even when I don't look pretty, at least I feel it. △



Rebecca

Second Place—Drawing

Shelby Tisdale

Graphite

Angels

Neziah Igwebuike

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

My grandmother decorates her house around Christmastime with animatronic angels wearing fluffy fur coats. They complement the rooms at first glance; the gold of their halos and the white of their outfits blend with the yellow lights strung on every wall. But they creak when they turn their heads, and some of them used to be able to sing—used to, because the only thing you can hear now is a couple of choppy notes of a hymn that no one can recognize. Grandma has a closet full of replacements—one of my aunts bought her a working version of every angel she had several years ago—but the same nightmarish, decades-old angels continue to stand in every corner of the house. “It’s always been like this,” she likes to say. “It’s too late to change them now.”

Grandma has a rule that we can’t touch the gifts under the tree until all the cousins arrive on Christmas Day, not because of the importance of family or love, but because it’s easier to take pictures for New Year’s cards that way. It’s not a problem for the relatives who don’t live a full day’s drive away from her, but I can always expect dirty glances from my cousins when I get to the house three days after the festivities have ended. Sometimes I’ve entered the living room only to find the floor devoid of presents, a pair of moving angels in their place. Two weeks later, an industrial-sized box of gifts for my parents, my sisters, and me shows up at home, along with an envelope containing a picture of all the relatives who’d made it and an almost-sarcastic note saying, “Wish you were here!”

One year, my family parked on the snow-covered driveway on Christmas Eve, buzzing with the excitement of at last coming to Ohio in time. None of my cousins were there yet, but that wasn’t abnormal; they tended to arrive early on Christmas morning, so I sat on the couch in the living room next to one of the better-quality angels, watching it wave a fake flickering candle back and forth. I glanced at the gifts, what looked to me like hundreds of them, stacked in neat piles around the tree so high that I feared they’d fall if I touched them. I tried to count how many of them were for me—five, not including the ones marked for me and both of my sisters that I knew they’d never be willing to share.

Grandma came in once I’d worked up the courage to pick up a box and shake it to hear what was inside, and she sent me to bed. “The wait will go by faster if you sleep,” she said, but I knew she’d just grown tired of watching me try to sneak around the living room. I fell asleep after gazing up at the ceiling in the dark for an hour, and I awoke close to lunchtime to a silent house. The only sound came from the news playing on the television downstairs and my parents chatting about politics with Grandma at the kitchen counter.

“Your sisters have been waiting for you,” my mother said when I entered. “They’ve wanted to open their presents since early this morning, you know.”

“But where is everyone else?”

“Oh, they’re not coming this year. Look at how bad the snow is!” She pulled the curtain to the side to reveal the backyard blanketed in white. “Now put your clothes on so we can take our picture for the New Year’s cards.”

Later that day, I helped my grandmother pack everyone else’s gifts into giant boxes and load them into her van to take to the post office the next day. I asked her again why she insisted on mailing the presents instead of waiting for the rest of the family to arrive within the next few days.

“I told you,” she said, taking a seat on the living room couch with a glass of water. An angel across the room began to sing its unrecognizable song. “That’s just the way it’s always been.” △



Siblings at Heart

Samantha Holland

Photography

Sunday Morning Coming Down

Shelby Tisdale

*Well I woke up Sunday morning / With no way to
hold my head that didn't hurt*

The bounce of Johnny Cash's voice and the stench of gasoline permeated Candice's ten-year-old sedan. She swayed in response to an inner melody in guitar strums, as the CD stuttered and the clarity of the lyrics died under the engine's hum. With a final chug of Red Bull, she shifted into park at the back of the lot, flinging chewed spearmint gum to the pavement.

*And the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad / So I
had one more for dessert*

Morning dew distorted red light through the closed passenger window; numbers of the same hue glowed below her air vents: 3:56. Streetlights broke through the denim blue sky and reflected into the driver's side mirror enough for her to pencil black rings over yesterday's smudged mascara. She jerked her bleached hair into a ponytail to reveal salt and pepper roots, her bangs flopping over eyebrows penciled with haste.

*Then I fumbled in my closet
through my clothes / And found my
cleanest dirty shirt*

Candice swaggered through the parking lot with a natural smirk on her face, weaving khakis through a maze of puddles. She leaned into the chime of the door, and the neon OPEN sign clattered above the handle.

*Then I washed my face and combed my hair / And
stumbled down the stairs to meet the day*

Candice adjusted her nametag and stifled the pain in her chest to a hardened demeanor, approaching the wall of cigarette boxes behind the counter. Glorified addiction painted the walls of every corner of the truck stop: \$5.39 for a pack of cigarettes; she'd say, "Here's your total," "Have a nice day," and smile. She'd sell junk food to gluttons and lottery tickets to gamblers, feeding on the dimes of the self-serving to fuel her own crutches of self-pity.

That's what she did for a while anyway. Now she had nothing. She'd given the jackpot to the tithe plate

last Sunday, convicted by the Bible rotting beside baby pictures in her dresser drawer. Lord knows where those children were now; Candice's flip-phone chimed about twice a week, and it would seem her only family members were AT&T and the occasional telemarketer. She'd decided it was best she didn't run anyone else off. Now she was a cat lady with a temper, wishing away days without a drop of solace from a bottle.

"Give me ten minutes, Jackie." Candice ambled past her coworker to the Ladies room, needing water to dissolve the darkness in her face. A confetti of toilet paper shrouded the tile, and the trash, which was Jackie's responsibility, piled like the DVDs in the three-dollar bin.

Candice coveted Jackie's apathy in a way; Jackie wore false lashes every day, long enough to hit a customer in the eye, and reeked of cheap perfume. She

**"Candice had sacrificed
her bad habits for
Red Bulls and
country music."**

had no ambition and couldn't hold a conversation to save her life. Jackie focused on maintaining a pathetic appearance of class and addressed Candice with an air of blatant haughtiness. Candice should have been offended, but she liked that Jackie looked at her as if she didn't belong

in this job; most of the time Candice wished she didn't.

"And sixty-two cents is your change," Jackie rained coins into the hand of a young woman at the counter, exchanging some type of over-the-counter pill. Candice held her tongue about the bathroom; she was destined for a life of hard work, but maybe Jackie still had time to marry a rich man or strike some other luck.

"How was your weekend?" Candice's attempted conversation fell to Jackie's side-eye. Jackie slumped against the back shelf, engaged in a serious affair with Facebook and Bluetooth earbuds.

Candice grabbed a broom and hummed in passage to the bathroom.

*On a Sunday morning sidewalk / I'm wishing Lord
that I was stoned*

Anything to cope, she thought, would help. She

KAG
Gina Nguyen
Photography



A Bee's Flower

Gina Nguyen

Painting—acrylic

swayed the broom in circles on the floor. Everybody had a crutch—money, appearance, a substance to set them free. Candice had sacrificed her bad habits for Red Bulls and country music, an hourly wage, and an empty apartment. She waltzed along to the tune in her head, delivering paper towels to the trash.

'Cause there's something in a Sunday / That makes a body feel alone △



So This Is Mississippi

(after Ted Kooser)

Shelby Tisdale

The disturbed perfume of weighted sky
Tempt mosquito feasts and feeds static hair.
Greased sunscreen sweat drips to searing
asphalt. Liberation condenses in my fingertips.
Hands of burdened temper swing
beside me and release at rising heels.
Past high fences and higher walls, I see only
electrical boxes under guise of plastic rocks.
But I run to taste this lethargic air on the tongue
I lock away when this city says, "Be still."
To feel my foot rise and fall
with certainty I choose its steps.
So this is Mississippi. A familiar face
in the advancing pickup, to which you avert your
eyes and repeat a prayer that you will one day
run past the neighborhood bounds.
You feel like running nearer to the gutter, forgetting
your mother's warnings not to fall in. You feel
like defying elders' fixations
and children's mistakes.

You feel like running until you find a soul
Who isn't wearing a counterfeit Bible Belt with
judgement
staining pursed lips. But you run back home. You run
to crockpot dinner and eat with silenced tongue.

The Importance of Yan Yu

Rachel Zheng

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

锄禾日当午,	<i>Hoeing crops at high noon,</i>
汗滴禾下土,	<i>Sweat drops down on the soil under the hoe.</i>
谁知盘中餐,	<i>Everybody should know that in the plate,</i>
粒粒皆辛苦.	<i>Every grain of food is gained with hardship.</i>

The first time I heard the poem above was in third grade. I was at the dinner table, and dinner, as usual, was rice and vegetables. That evening, I could not finish the bowl of rice I had scooped out for myself. I was about to throw it away, but my mom stopped me and recited the poem. She gave me a stern look, and I, reluctant, gobbled up the rest, tossed the bowl into the sink, and raced to my room to continue the last episode of “Hannah Montana.” For most meals with rice, I often overestimate how much food my stomach can take. When this happens, my mom repeats the poem to me and asks me to recite it back and finish every grain of rice on the plate. I remember I used to complain, believing that I would be overeating and gaining unnecessary weight. My mom then proceeds to tell me that it’s my fault that my eyes are bigger than my stomach, which is another one of her sayings (眼睛大肚子小). Through her constant reminders and drilling of the poem, I have learned not to grab everything in sight when I’m hungry and portion it out instead, remembering that every grain of rice is valuable.

少壮不努力老大徒伤悲 (Shàozhuàng bù nǚlǐ
lǎodà tú shāng bēi)

“And the little red hen ate the bread all by herself,” my mom said as she closed the book and tucked me into bed. “Poor little red hen; the dog, cat, and chicken should have helped it gather the wheat and bake the bread,” I protested. She tells me, “少壮不努力老大徒伤悲.” My mom read this story to me frequently when I

was younger, and each time, she would tell me how the little red hen had to work tirelessly for the bread; then she related it to a life lesson: if I ever wanted to achieve anything, I should not depend on anyone else. The Chinese proverb that was read earlier states that “if one does not exert oneself in youth, one will regret it in old age.” I never understood any of the proverbs when I was younger, but as I grew, this was one of the phrases that stuck with me. I learned that I must work hard now, like the red hen, in order to reap the rewards, or eat the bread, later.

机不可失, 时不再来 (Jī bùkě shī, shí bù zàilái)

In seventh grade, we had a geography bee. In order to advance, you had to win a class bee, which would lead you to participate in the school bee. That year, I remember being the last one in the bee, specifically answering the last question with “the Arctic Ocean.” After the class bee, my teacher, Ms. Davis, approached me and asked if I wanted to compete in the school bee. I told her I was nervous, that I didn’t wish to compete because I thought I was going to lose. She attempted to encourage me, but I rejected the offer. On the day of the bee, the principal called for all qualifying students to come to the library. I didn’t go. Later that day, I told my mom about it. She, like always, pulled out a proverb: “机不可失, 时不再来,” and proceeded with a lecture, telling me that opportunities only come once. I regretted it after. I regretted not participating, not trying at the very least to see how I would do. From that experience and that proverb, I learned to take advantage of all

**“If I ever wanted to
achieve anything, I
should not depend on
anyone else.”**

opportunities that are given to me to grow because only through growth will I truly learn.

Chinese proverbs were one of those things that my parents said to me, but at a young age, I never listened. To this day, there are still instances in which I pick out too much to eat and waste the rest. I procrastinate

and half-heartedly complete homework in classes that I don't enjoy, and I still, at times, don't catch chances that are thrown to me out of fear. But I remember; I remember what they've said, what my past experiences are. Through them, I learned to not undermine the importance of Yan Yu. △

Weeds

Linda Arnoldus

The sun sets below the trees
Now dark silhouettes
Backlit in orange sunlight

The thin crescent moon
Already hangs in the sky
Twinkling in the firmament

My mother bends over
The stone pathway that
Runs in front of my house

The pathway is overrun
with persistent weeds
Eager to undo slabs of stone

With a stone hatchet she hacks
At the stubborn weeds
That block the path

Her gray hair starkly contrasts
Her dewy and youthful skin
And her resilient smile

Ever since I was born
She has cleared the path for me.



Huangshan Mountain, China

Linda Arnoldus

Photography



White Trees

Karlene Deng

Photography

Really?

David Barber

The rain had bombarded Luke and his father, Klaus, as they traversed the unforgiving Indiana highway in Klaus's beat-up Honda Civic. Sure, the cross-country road trip as a senior trip for graduating high school had sounded like a marvelous idea, but Luke knew this trip wasn't going to be a pleasant experience. Two weeks together stuck in the passenger seat next to his father gave Luke goosebumps just thinking about it. They hardly ever talked when they were around each other, but most times that was a good thing. He always felt miserable around Klaus, as if he was a vampire sucking up his youthful energy. He only agreed to go on this trip with Klaus because his mother made him, and *whoop-de-do*. This was the worst trip of his life. First thing his dad told him when he got into his silver car a week and a half ago was not *hey* or *how are you* but a rough voice saying, "Watch your head, I don't want you scratching my car since I just got it waxed."

Luke did his best to listen to his father's rules, but he couldn't help slamming down the trunk when he had put his luggage in the back. Even though his dad and he didn't get along, he didn't think that would be the first thing to come out of his father's mouth a few days after Luke had graduated. Boy, Klaus never did fail to amaze him with how bad of a parent he could be. Taking a deep breath before walking to the passenger door, he reminded himself to be polite and start with a few basic questions as a courtesy. If the questions fell flat, then boredom would overtake him if an argument didn't ensue first. Before Luke had closed the side door, Klaus slammed in reverse and shot out onto Highway 82.

"What are you doing?! There's no need to go that fast and reckless. I could have fallen out the car!"

Great, Luke thought. There went his efforts to start the cross-country trip right. His father glanced over at him with a hint of malice in his salty blue eyes, then looked back towards the road as he spoke.

"Well, you didn't fall out of the car now, did you? You never answered my text last week about when I should pick you up, so I had to call your mother. I didn't enjoy that in the slightest, and on top of that you

showed at the McDonald's drop off ten minutes late. Ten minutes. You know I hate waiting, and having to pissed me off."

"Mom and I caught a lot of red lights on the way there."

"Not my problem, son."

Well, this is just terrific Luke thought. Maybe if he had waited an hour or so to be courteous Klaus might have respected it better.

"Oh, and before I forget, since we are starting our road trip from here in Georgia, I thought it would be cool to check out an aviation museum at a military base right on the Georgia-Alabama state line. Only catch is you need to be eighteen. What's your age again?"

Luke hadn't answered for a moment. He just turned towards Klaus and gave him a half head tilt as if to ask if he was serious and what kind of lousy parent are you.

"I'm eighteen. It mentioned that in the graduation invitation I sent you, but you never came so I assumed you didn't read it. How could you forget my age?"

"Eh, I've been busy at work and paying bills lately. I didn't have the time to open your letter."

"I sent that invitation to you in December!"

"Eh. Who cares about what you do in high school anyways? What matters is college."

"Can you just take me home? I'm not going to deal with this if that's how you are going to act this entire trip, Dad."

Klaus merely had shrugged his shoulders, locked the car doors, floored the accelerator, then returned his attention to the road as they both remained in a mutual, aggravated silence. The tension between them was so thick a person would break a knife trying to cut it. The aviation museum didn't make matters any better. They just stood a few feet apart from each other as they walked around. They didn't speak a word to each other unless Klaus asked Luke the names of the old World War II planes there. At least being the former president of the Aviators Club had paid off for him. He was tired of feeling the tension between them. Luke enjoyed not having to speak to him, but the aura coming off from

his father when he was quiet felt too eerie to let his guard down. Almost like he was mugger who might jump him at any moment if he wasn't careful. Things didn't improve when they were about to leave.

"If you need to use the restroom, go now. We'll be driving six hours this afternoon before it's dark, and I don't want to stop."

"I'm good." Normally this would have infuriated Luke, but after dealing with nonsense like this over the years he had mastered mind over body to handle his father's outrageous expectations. He could never relieve the tension between the two of them, but it meant fewer arguments with his father so he was content. He could just listen to the radio and zone out or keep himself sane by completing the *Odyssey* when they passed nothing but wheat fields when they reached Nebraska. When they had sat down in the car and got back on the highway, Luke soon faced two problems.

"Dad, have you seen my book? It's tall and thick. Called the *Odyssey*. It almost looks like an instruction manual."

"I did see a giant book in here earlier, but I threw it away at the museum because why would I carry an

instruction manual for a Honda Odyssey if I drive a Honda Civic? My bad."

His father's voice had been filled with false sincerity, but Luke let it slide because he knew better than to call him out. No way was he going to belittled by him again like when he was a kid. Instead, he settled on saying something simple to save him from tense silence by asking Klaus, "Can you at least turn the radio on then so it's not so awkward in here?"

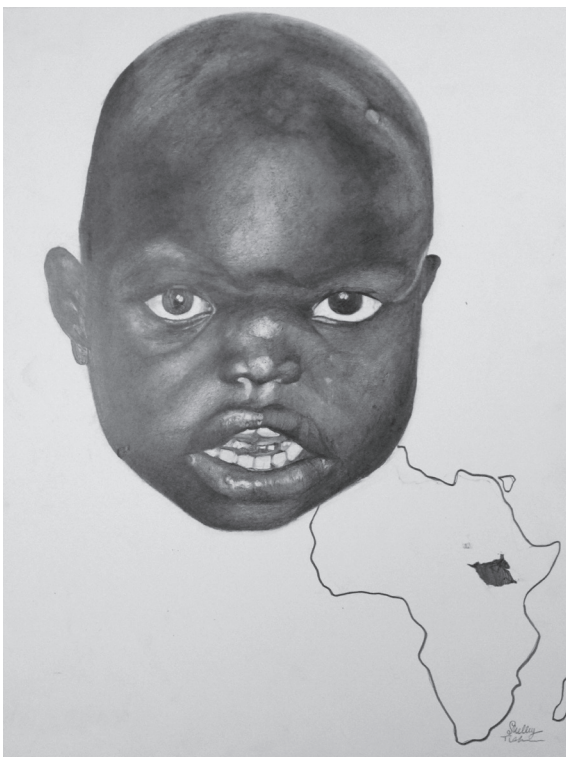
"Nah. We can just talk. We haven't seen each other in a while."

Uh-huh. Luke thought. *Between how petty and belittling you've always been, I have no idea why I wouldn't want to talk to you.*

"I feel wore out after the museum, though. Perhaps in a few hours." Luke had no intention of talking to him after a few hours, but at least he could regain some peace in his life by listening to music. His father mused it was fair and plugged his phone in to Pandora to start playing some music; Luke couldn't help but grin on the inside because the first song that came on was "Highway to Hell." Boy did that fit Luke's situation perfectly. He couldn't resist tapping the touch screen on the dash to give the song a thumbs up. As soon as he did that, Klaus had turned off the radio; and Luke turned to look at the groves of trees out the window so Klaus couldn't see him contain the laughter tickling the inside of his throat.

"Luke. I know you aren't a fan of me, but I planned this road trip out so we could at least try to be on speaking terms. I get you don't plan on seeing me anymore once college starts so could you at least say few words to me here and there on this trip."

Luke's grin had faded away in an instant, and he considered what his father had just told him very carefully. He was right. This was his last trip with him and he wouldn't have to see him ever again afterwards if he didn't want to. After all, he had thought, *Even though I despise him I would like to not argue with him for once in my life before I leave.* Luke knew he might attend his father's funeral in the future, but his father wouldn't exactly be able to say hello to him then; this might be the last time they spoke. He came to a decision and said,



Julius
Shelby Tisdale
Drawing—graphite

“I’ll try, but you have to as well. I’m not going to share my personal life if you refuse to share yours as well.”

Klaus had paused for a moment to swallow loudly before showing a rare smile, then said, “Okay.”

It took them a couple hours to get a conversation going, but over the course of two weeks they managed to communicate and learn a lot about each other as they grew closer together driving through state after state to check out national landmarks such as the Grand Canyon to wacky attractions like the world’s largest ball of twine. Before Luke knew it, they had turned around in Oregon and had taken a separate route home to drive through more of the cities than fields to stop at a few museums along the way. Seven days later, they had arrived back in Luke’s hometown of Sherman, Georgia; he was surprised that he had actually enjoyed himself on a road trip with the man who had hounded him all his life. Luke knew that Klaus realized his time was up; he took his time to back into the McDonald’s parking lot. Scratching his head from nervousness he said, “I hope you had fun and enjoyed yourself, Luke. It was great actually getting to know my son for a change. Maybe we can do this again sometime.”

Luke had felt his heart jump into his throat because he wanted to say *yes*. He wanted to be like every other normal person in this world and feel the love of a father; but his gut told him he shouldn’t. His saying *yes* would only bring him more pettiness and belittling of his accomplishments that his father had done since he was a child. Acting kind once was not going to erase the past like his father might have hoped. Eighteen years of abuse was eighteen years too late to pretend nothing had happened.

With a look of determination in his eyes Luke had responded, “I had fun, but I have no intention of doing this or seeing you again. Though I do forgive you, I can’t forget the eighteen years of abuse I have suffered. It’s time for me to be free to live life by my own terms. Goodbye, Dad. I wish you the best.”

With tears in his eyes, Klaus had given Luke a firm handshake and whispered, “I love you. You’ll always be my son.”

Luke had nodded, “I know,” before opening the car door and walking into McDonald’s to wait for his mother to pick him up. △



Somber Daisies

Gina Nguyen

Painting—acrylic

Grandmother

Felicity Browning

Grandmother washes away worries with Windex,
Makes beds and memories;
Grandmother smells of bleach and the beach;
Her hair tied with a rubber band, she strips away grime,
Holds our hands when our hearts have committed treason,
Washes away the secrets only sheets know,
Whisks us up good Southern cooking.
After hours of hunching over tiled walls and dirty laundry
baskets,
Grandmother never complains until the pain engulfs her.
Still, she tucks us into our starched sheets
Just as her clients do their children after her hard day’s work.
She says her work is insignificant,
That I will go on to do bigger and better things:
Don’t you dare become some housekeeper like me, kid.
She doesn’t know of the housekeeping I wish to do.
I want to be the cause of wide smiles,
The kisser of hurt knees,
The magical enigma she has always been.
Grandmother is the rag worn out from hours of cleaning,
Filled with debris only generations can bring;
You come to see it as something tattered, abused—
But looking at the shiny floors and countertops,
You can’t help but feel grateful.

Backyard Bugs

Lily Langstaff

Second Place—Essay Competition

Love feels so good when it's at home.

And home feels so good when there's love.

I dream about it sometimes, waking up in a cold room after being somewhere warm in slumber. I would say, *imagine*, but not even I could do it justice. Though I'll try.

North Mississippi, sheer suburbia. Something irreplaceable. I think mostly of the backyard I spent all of my time in. The sun melted into lavender and baby blue, darkening into black, velvet studded with stars and lightning bugs. The lightning bugs were largely symbolic to my childhood, encouraging words into my brain that just felt and still feel right.

Chemiluminescence. Entomology. The little creatures would land on my finger, lighting up like the rides at the Delta fair, or the string lights that come with December. They brought literal light into my life, and it didn't stop there. In that same backyard, on the same lightning bug lawn, I stalked down butterflies and daddy long legs. They were such

small, delicate beings, and I admired them like my own mother admired my chubby baby cheeks and incoherent babbles. A primal instinct resided in me, telling me to protect them, to save them, to befriend them. The feeling was love. I harbored nothing but love for all of these things, for the jumping spiders and the tail-dropping lizards and the millipedes and ladybugs. I loved them like they were my friends. I named them. *Mustache* was the black caterpillar I befriended at five. He went everywhere with me for about a week. *Corndog* was the granddaddy longlegs I found in fifth grade, holding him in small fingers, wondering how anybody could ever *hate* or *kill* something so small and innocent. Harvestmen spiders do not bite—they have fangs too small to. So why are they so terrifying? Carpenter

bees are big and buzzing, but they're just stubborn babies. Male ones can't even sting, they'll just aggressively kamikaze into you, and they're a bit clumsy. It's cute, really. It was with no fear I coexisted with bugs. I refused to put them down until my mother's eyebrows knitted together in the same old angered frustration. She'd stand at the screen door, watching my hands to make sure they didn't hold any friends. But she's an arachnophobe, and so is everybody else. And I apologize, to every person reading or hearing this, that their home isn't my backyard. I shared a home with such magnificent creatures and it was *glorious*. People don't even notice bugs until they're slapping a mosquito from

their arm or chasing down a fly with a dollar store swatter. Bugs are the greatest secret of our backyards. And they make my backyard the homiest place in all of Mississippi. There's a reassuring familiarity in watching a cricket jump from one blade of grass to another, in studying a praying mantis and wondering why God made it like that, in admir-

ing the wing colors of the butterfly on your finger, in naming beetles. I can close my eyes and be home in my own backyard, with humid wind blowing and bare feet on grass greener than envy. I realized, recently, how important it was that I was raised with a big backyard open to woods. It's shaped me to be a true entomophile, for lack of better words. It's in the little things, from my collection of bee socks to my inability to step on an ant. No matter how small, we must always remember that compared to the rest of the universe, we're infinitesimally tiny. It must be terrifying to be a bug under a sneaker. I've developed habits of watching my step and looking closely at trees and bushes, at cracks in the sidewalk, at the sky. They're everywhere, more present and closer than one might think. As all arachnophiles

**"No matter how small,
we must always
remember that
compared to the rest
of the universe, we're
infinitesimally tiny."**

Color-Changed Collar

Shelby Tisdale

know and appreciate, no person is more than a few yards away from a spider, wherever they may be. Isn't it lovely, to know there's no such thing as really being alone?

Now, as a junior, living away from my backyard and my family and everything I've ever known, it's clear that old habits die hard. I chase butterflies into busy roads, hold my breath to listen to cicadas, and stop to observe every spider web. At least once a week I sweep up a dead ladybug or moth and I just can't throw it in the trash. No matter how much I try not to think about it, I always end up behind the building I live in, letting them rest under the same tree, under the same sky. I think I accidentally killed a little beetle once, and I wept over him for longer than I should have. But everything needs and deserves loves, and who else would love something so unnoticed and hated? Whenever I let free a spider that found its way into my bathroom or into my room, or pick up a ladybug, or watch an ant and wonder where he may be going, I think of the backyard and the bugs that raised me. △



Dragonfly

Second Place—Photography

Michael Lu

My father's hands unnerved to calloused fingertips,
so that oven mitts were not as necessary
as scorching brew
in garage sale coffee pot at sunrise,
strong enough to compensate
for enlarged, aching knees
and black as the beard on his chin.
He said he cleaned carpet,
but vacuum cleaners could not paint scars and bruises
under his blue striped collar tinted by mold and sewage.
Chemicals and machinery darkened creases
under drained eyes of my bedside motivational speaker,
preaching value of work ethic and praying
at late arrival home while I feigned sleep.
Now scarred arms of manual labor
hide beneath polo shirts and desk chairs.
Nonprofit grants bleached his collar white,
dimmed his tanned neck to the same shade.
He interviews men under bridges,
asks, "Sir, where did you sleep last night?"
His calloused hands enter data one letter at a time
while driving rented sports cars down the Interstate,
laptop on khaki pants.

He achieved a practiced perception toward his homeless
clients
and specialized in reading the fine print of people.
Sometimes treks through the woods
bring him home with muddy shoes
that blemish the kitchen floor like spilled coffee
and its bitter taste that lingers like my father
during overworked hours in a salary job,
like the heat of burns my father doesn't feel.
The mud reminds me of the way
they say he will never be promoted
without a degree,
the way he smiles at the stubborn work ethic
I sculpted to put his sacrifice on a pedestal.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Linda Arnoldus (Starkville) says, “Life is tough but so are you,” and finds Willow Smith and Elon Musk to be the most influential icons in her life. She hopes people look at her art the way she looks at life: saturated with meaning.

David Barber (Greenville) wants his short story “Really” to help people learn to live and move on but not forget their experiences. He would like to meet Nikola Tesla.

Michael Begley (Meridian) finds art relaxing and fulfilling. If he goes too long without making something, he gets an itch to create, only resolved by a project around the house, a bush craft project in the woods, or an art piece.

Catherine Boltz (Lounis) lives by a Ralph Waldo Emerson admonition: “You can never do a kindness too soon, for you never know how soon it will be too late.”

Luke Bowles (Waynesboro) plans to become a professor of philosophy or history; his defining quotation is from Thomas Huxley: “Skepticism is the highest of duties.” He says his hero is John Brown “for he was willing to die for a just cause.”

Felicity Browning (Pascagoula) is deeply influenced by American author Rick Riordan and remembers writing a Percy Jackson “rip-off” in the fifth grade. She hopes that her writing creates an emotional response within readers.

Hua Chen (Lucedale) makes art to capture a piece of memory that she doesn’t want to forget. She believes art is a way to express thoughts and feelings and a connection between people.

Katy Chen (Louisville) believes that art is a way to express herself and finds it therapeutic. She recalls “doodling, drawing, and painting fun things” in her elementary school art classes.

Raven Day (Ruleville) hopes that her poem “Summer Day” will encourage people to cherish their loved ones. Despite not having listened to a single song of his, she admires Nipsey Hussle for what he did for his community, Crenshaw.

Karlene Deng (Starkville) says her first memory of photography was taking pictures of her friends. She describes photography as a way to remind herself of all the cool things she has done and seen.

Laney Etheridge lives by the words of John Mayer: “Just keep me where the light is.” Her favorite book is *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare.

Ryley Fallon (Lucedale) writes to build bridges and to explore the beauty in life. Her defining quotation is from Ernest Hemingway: “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” She plans to major in chemistry.

Ada Fulgham (Starkville) wants to meet her soulmate so that she can tell him that she doesn’t need a man. She looks up to her mother, an artist and breast cancer survivor, for her strength and free-spirited art style.

James Harden (Hernando) plans to pursue a career in game design. He expresses himself through art and creates as a distraction from the real world.

Whitley Hester (Meridian) wants to meet Zelda Fitzgerald. Her defining quotation is by Fred Rogers: “Nobody else can live the life you live.”

Samantha Holland (Lucedale) hopes that her photo “Siblings at Heart” will show people that there is beauty in things which may first appear as filthy. She aspires to become a cardiothoracic surgeon and get a minor in the fine arts.

Brighton Hutchinson (Kosciusko) lives her life by the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: “The future belongs to those who believe in their dreams.”

Neziah Igwebuike (Clinton) says that her first memory of writing was creating whimsical stories in notebooks and pretending that they were published novels. Her favorite book is *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell.

Violet Jira (Cleveland) wishes she could have met Oscar Wilde because she feels he would have been a great conversationalist. Her heroes are her parents, who are “shining examples of every good thing” she wants to be in life.

Claire Justis (West Point) finds it magical to scribble an abstract thought into existence with her art. Her defining motto is “Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back.”

Lily Langstaff (Olive Branch) writes to express a truth she can’t just say out loud. She hopes that her work will elicit emotion and understanding and finds Hope Jahren to be the most influential icon in her life.

Michael Lu (Starkville) finds rap music to be an influential part of his life and says his hero is Dave Chappelle because the comedian is funny and rich, the two things Lu wants to be in life.

Ella Lauderdale (Petal) wants people to know that you don’t have to choose one or the other: you can like math and science *and* love art in any form.

Bryonie Mandal (Starkville) wants to meet Priyanka Chopra and says that her ma and grandmothers have been a huge influence in her life. She lives by the motto, “Blessed are the broken, for they shall let the light in.”

Ashley Mangus (Columbus) believes art is a great way to express yourself in endless ways. She finds it amazing to have a creative outlet at her fingertips.

Carter Moore (Grenada) aspires to join the scientific community but can see himself in photography for the rest of his life.

Camille Newman (Pass Christian) says that her dad is her hero and that she has always looked up to him. She hopes her art will brighten at least one person's day and wishes she could have met Robin Williams.

Gina Nguyen (D'Iberville) remembers creating a Jackson Pollock-style painting in her third-grade art class, which consisted of just splattering paint everywhere. Her favorite book is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky.

Skylar Nichols (Stringer) wishes she could have met English novelist Mary Shelley because she enjoys reading Shelley's writing and learning about her life.

Ellen Overstreet (Wiggins) makes art because through her work she can inspire others to do the same. Her first memory of painting was being handed Crayola watercolors by her mother and told to do whatever she wanted.

Auriel Quiroz (Ocean Springs) aspires to become a theoretical physicist. She hopes people remember how her stories and artwork made them feel and believes that the ability to transport someone into a story is a great feeling.

Davan Reece (Byram) sums up his future plans into three simple parts: college, law school, and then, hopefully, not too much debt. He hopes his writing can help people recognize the strengths and downfalls of the modern American South.

Gracie Rowland (Columbus) has always kept a journal, in which she finds an unrivaled sense of catharsis. She lives by the motto, "It's all chaos, be kind."

Courtenay Sebastian (Carriere) says her hero is her mom, who, through difficult times, has remained strong for her and her brother. She wants to become a forensic chemist and cure cancer, for her dad.

Wyatt Shanahan (Starkville) makes art to express himself and bring joy to others. His favorite book is *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline.

Abby Strain (Columbus) remembers writing a "book" about a horse when she was seven years old. She cannot recall a lot of details about the book apart from the fact that it was about five pages long and opened the wrong way. She started writing because her mom suggested it.

Cameron Thomas (Port Gibson) aspires to be an author and journalist and wrote his first short story titled "Mom and the Monkey" during class in the first grade.

Shelby Tisdale (Pearl) writes and makes art to draw attention to irony in the world and any issues she believes are important. Her favorite book is *The Circle Series* by Ted Dekker.

Sophia Toner (Pass Christian) loves challenging herself to find a new detail to bring to the viewer's attention when making art; she says that accuracy and realism mean less to her than what's evoked in the viewer.

Nina Vo (D'Iberville) plans to cross half the items off her bucket list in the next ten years and lives by the motto, "Do what scares you." She wants to meet rapper Rich Brian to see how he views his success as an Asian immigrant.

Taylor Willis (New Albany) writes to relive stress and let her emotions out. She hopes that her poem "Hushed Tones" encourages readers to slow down and acknowledge the simple things in life.

Alden Wiygul (Columbus) says she has been making small pieces of art her entire life, but it wasn't until last summer that she started painting a lot. Creating art relaxes her and inspires her to work on bigger projects.

Rachel Zheng (Madison) believes that art and writing are beautiful ways of expressing one's inner thoughts. She says that her future is undecided, but she is considering majoring in cognitive science.



Earth: 2100

Second Place—Sculpture

Courtenay Sebastian

Cardboard, metal cans, plastic bottle

Grandmother

Summer Day

Washing

Machine Heart

Home(less)

King Street

Dim Your Light

Color

Changed

Collar

So This Is

Mississippi

**A Series of
Unfortunate Cats**

Seventeen

Angels

Backyard

Bugs

Pretty

**The Importance
of Yan Yu**

Really

Chester's Birthday

Weeds

Sunday Morning

Coming Down

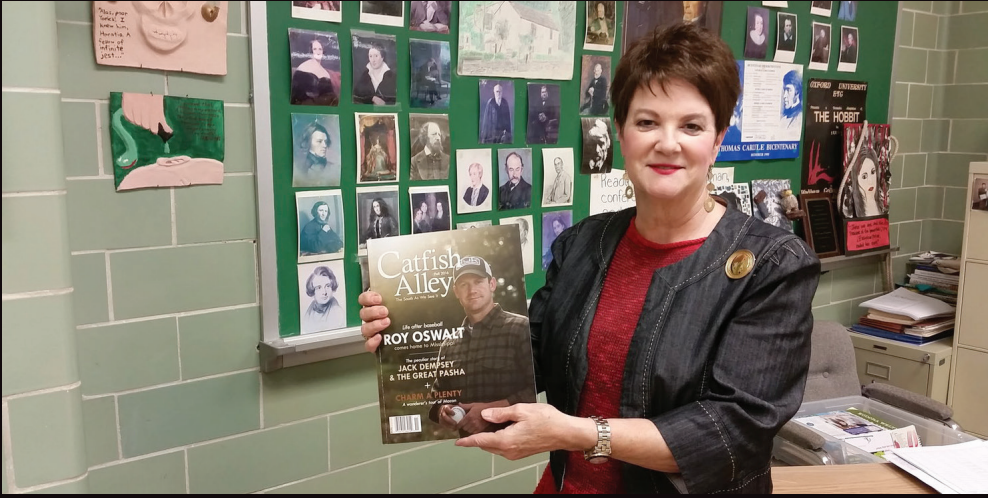
Ride On

Suds and

Summer

Sunset

Mrs. Emma Richardson



Judges

Art and Photography Judge

Now a Professor of Ceramics at Mississippi University for Women, Ian Childers spent his youth in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, mired in punk rock, hip hop, and the rave culture of the 1990s. He apprenticed as a tattoo artist immediately out of high school, and spent his evenings writing graffiti, riding BMX bikes, going to shows, and causing general mayhem.

Since his graduate studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Ian has shown his work and conducted workshops both nationally and internationally, including in La Bisbal, Spain, where he gave a lecture about his techniques in crystalline glazing. Ian's work and technique have been featured in the July/August 2016 issue of *Pottery Making Illustrated*.

Essay Judge

Elizabeth Seratt is a writer living in Birmingham, Alabama, where she's the in-house content writer for a local non-profit. Her work has appeared in the *Santa Fe Reporter* and *Legends* magazine. An alumna of the Mississippi School for Math and Science, she served as Editor of *Southern Voices* in 2009 and was elected to the 2009 MSMS Hall of Fame.

Poetry Judge

As a member of the MSMS Class of 1998, Emma Johnson Linn served as Editor of the

1998 edition of *Southern Voices*. A recipient of the North Carolina Science Teachers Association (NCSTA) Outstanding Middle School Science Teacher award, Emma holds degrees from Guilford College and Elon University.

She is a High Point University Leadership Academy fellow and endeavors to expand STEM learning experiences in Guilford County Schools, where she serves as STEM Coordinator for more than 130 schools. Emma resides in Greensboro, North Carolina, with her husband and sons and two confounding cats.

Short Story Judge

Mary Miller is the author of the novels *Biloxi* (2019) and *The Last Days of California* (2014), and of the story collection *Always Happy Hour* (2017), all by Liveright Publishing. Her first collection of short stories, *Big World*, was published by Short Flight/Long Drive Books in 2009. Her work has appeared in the *Paris Review*, the *Oxford American*, *Norton's Seagull Book of Stories*, and the *Best of McSweeney's Quarterly*, among others.

She is a former Michener Fellow at the University of Texas and John and Renee Grisham writer-in-residence at the University of Mississippi. She teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Mississippi University for Women.

This edition of *Southern Voices* is dedicated to Mrs. Emma Richardson, who retired in December of 2019 after forty-five years of teaching. Mrs. Richardson started working at the Mississippi School for Mathematics in the fall of 1988 as one of the original twelve faculty members. During her time at MSMS, she taught a variety of classes, including Creative Writing, University English, and British Literature. Mrs. Richardson supervised thirty-two editions of *Southern Voices*, starting in the spring of 1989. After proposing the idea for a literary magazine, Mrs. Richardson appointed editors from the original creative writing students, who chose the name of the magazine and solicited writing from the student body. *Southern Voices* staff first sponsored an in-house poetry and fiction contest with judges Larry Brown and Ovid Vickers; in later years, essays, art, and photography were incorporated. The magazine has showcased decades of literary and artistic talent from the student body.

On behalf of everyone Mrs. Richardson has inspired through her passion for teaching and the magazine, the *Southern Voices* staff and creative writing students would like to say thank you and wish her a joyful retirement.



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