



# *Southern Voices* 2021



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### Art and Photography Judge

**Kari Breitigam** is a multi-disciplinary artist and Professor of Art at Lone Star College—University Park in Houston, Texas. Her studio artwork focuses on oil painting and fiber techniques such as textile dyeing, latch hook, and appliqué. Her work has been included in various exhibitions and publications including *New American Paintings*. In addition to her fine art, Kari also creates limited edition jewelry and accessories that explore the use of fiber and metal. Recently, she co-founded Pretti.Cool, a design company that creates functional and beautiful products for the home. Kari earned a BFA in Painting and Drawing from the Ohio State University and an MFA in Painting from Indiana State University.

### Poetry Judge

**Dr. Kelly Norman Ellis** is the author of *Tougaloo Blues* (2003) and *Offerings of Desire* (2012). Her poetry has appeared in *Sisterfire: Black Womanist Fiction and Poetry*, *Spirit and Flame*, *Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social and Political Black Literature and Art*, *Boomer Girls*, *Essence Magazine*, *Obsidian*, *Calyx*, *Cornbread Nation*, and *Appalachian Reckoning*. She is a recipient of a Kentucky Foundation for Women writer's grant and is a Cave Canem fellow and founding member of the Affrilachian Poets. Ellis is an associate professor of English and creative writing and chairperson for the Department of English, Foreign Languages and Literatures at Chicago State University.

### Essay Judge

**Dr. Phillip "Pip" Gordon** is an Associate Professor of English and Gay Studies Coordinator at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Born in Memphis and raised in West Tennessee, he graduated with a BA in English (2005) from the University of Tennessee-Martin in and with an MA (2008) and PhD (2013) in English from the University of Mississippi. He has published essays on Alice Walker, Harper Lee, Hubert Creekmore, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez as well as essays on LGBTQ+ Young Adult Fiction and Trans rights. He has also published several essays on William Faulkner. His book, *Gay Faulkner: Uncovering a Homosexual Presence in Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* was published by the University Press of Mississippi in 2020.

### Short Story Judge

**Lauren Rhoades** is the director of the Eudora Welty House & Garden, a literary museum in Jackson, Mississippi. Originally from Colorado, Lauren moved to Jackson in 2013 to work with FoodCorps, an AmeriCorps program. She is currently an MFA candidate at the Mississippi University for Women. Her fiction, book reviews, essays, and editorials have been published in various journals and outlets, including the *Southwest Review*, the *Mississippi Books Page*, and *Jackson Free Press*. Lauren's work has been nominated for Best of the Net, and she is the recipient of a 2019 Tent Fellowship at the Yiddish Book Center. She is currently working on a collection of essays about daughterhood, identity, and religion.



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# SMALL TOWN SECRETS

Emma Spinks

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

Stuffy air choked me as I entered the small, dimly lit shop. Weak rays of sunlight leaked through the window, lighting the dust drifting through the air. My fingers brushed the same books that had resided there for at least a decade. I slowly looked down before jumping at the sight of an unfamiliar gray shape.

“Christ!” I shouted.

I grabbed my chest, catching my breath before glancing down at the small cat beside me. She wove through my legs, purring deeply. Bending down, I scooped her up and carried her to the cat bed lying on the checkout counter.

“It’s rude to scare people,” I mumbled, rubbing her head softly. “Where is that Southern hospitality?”

“Jo, dear, try not to take the Lord’s name in vain in my shop.” Ms. Regina moved from behind the shelves. “Certain patrons could take offense.”

“My bad,” I said before I hugged my elderly friend.

Since we moved here when I was a little girl, my dad had taken me to Ms. Regina’s small bookstore. My dad always said we needed to support local shops over chains to keep our small economy alive. I remembered sitting in the middle of the tiny children’s section as I pored over the selection. My father and I didn’t get along as well as we used to, and this place painfully reminded me of cheery days of the past.

It didn’t keep me from coming back, though. Ms. Regina still welcomed me with open arms. Her New Jersey accent refused to mold into the thick Southern drawl typical to this area, and I appreciated the reprieve from the same thick molasses voices. Her bony arms wrapped around me, gnarled hands gripping my back. Her powdery floral scent hit my nose, and I fought off a coughing fit.

She moved behind the counter before sitting on her lime green stool. Her drooping eyes glanced at me as she asked, “Did you hear about the teacher at the local high school?”

I sucked in a breath, “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

One of my old friends called me last night to inform me that Mr. Letcherson, my old U.S. History

teacher, was found dead in a burned soybean field. No tears fell from my eyes as she told me how he overdosed. I only felt shock.

I could only think about his beloved German Shepard, General. Mr. Letcherson loved his dog, and I wondered how he could leave General behind.

“Such a shame,” she said. “How could they let him fall into such a state?”

I looked at my feet. “He had a pretty horrible year. His life pretty much fell apart.”

“I heard his wife kicked him out of the house after he was fired for being drunk on the job.”

“She did.”

“She divorced him, too, didn’t she?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ms. Regina shook her head, “Poor man.”

I nodded before petting the small, gray cat again.

*Why did nobody help him?*

- - -

The drive home was nothing out of the usual for me. My windows rolled down as Chris Motionless shouted through my speakers, and I screamed with him. I quickly turned down the music before pulling into the driveway.

The house felt quiet when I entered. I expected to trip over pairs of muddy boots in the doorway, but I was surprised to find nothing there. My dad must still be at work.

It seemed my dad was never home anymore. He was a farmer and worked from sunup to sundown in scalding hot fields. I felt conflicted about his absence. When he was here, we argued constantly. The house ended up in a chaotic mess no matter how hard my mom and I cleaned. Whenever he was gone, it was quiet and peaceful around the house, yet I missed him.

Stepping into the kitchen, I was immediately assaulted by my mother.

“Why did you take so long?” she demanded, eyes narrowed.

I set my keys in the dish. “Ran into Ms. Regina.” She nodded. “What did y’all talk about?”

*“How could you be selfish  
when you’re suffering?”*

“Mr. Letcherson’s death.”

She fell silent as she continued to flip through her planner, contemplating what to say. I watched her, waiting.

“Did you behave yourself?”

I glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” she said. “Did you behave yourself around town? Did you actually behave like a lady this time?”

I rolled my eyes. Why should anyone care how I behave? Why should it matter what people think? “I did,” I said.

“I better not get a message from anyone saying you were acting like a fool,” she warned.

That’s right. She has eyes everywhere in this town.

The room fell quiet as I stocked the fridge with Ozarka water bottles. I thought the conversation was over, but she spoke again.

“People who commit suicide are selfish.”

“What?”

“They’re selfish,” she said. “They don’t think about how much they hurt the people who love them.”

I bit my lip, letting her talk as I tuned out her ramblings. How could you be selfish when you’re suffering? That’s like saying a man is selfish as he lies on the ground bleeding from a gunshot wound to the chest.

“Jo, are you listening to me?”

I snapped out of my trance before nodding hurriedly. “I’m gonna go on a bike ride.”

She didn’t even look up. “Be home before dark.”

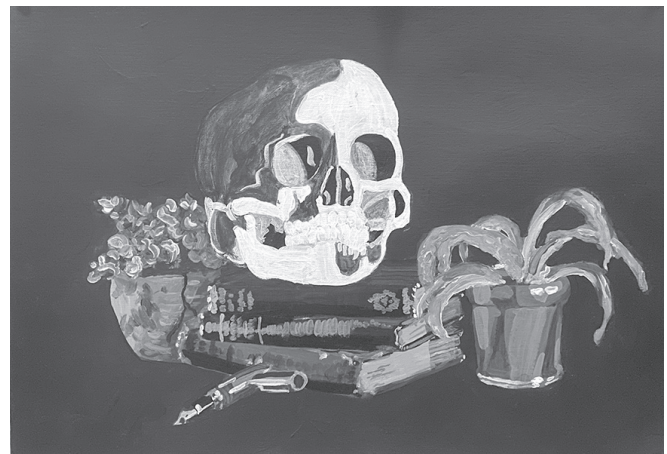
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“I’m outside your house, punk. Hurry up.”

Finley’s agitated voice cut through my speakers sharply. “It’s not my fault you didn’t give me a heads up, butthead. I’ll be out in a second.”

My phone beeped as he ended the call. I sat in the narrow driveway, my bike leaning against the wall of his garage. Finley was possibly one of my best friends, but I would never admit that to him. He would tease me endlessly; I’d never live it down.

Finley and I met in ninth grade in gym class after he asked me if he was in the right place for gym. To say our friendship was rocky would be an understatement. Finley used to be hateful and pessimistic, and our friendship hit a snag in the middle of ninth grade after an explosive argument. Then at the beginning of tenth



## *Bob, a Still Life*

Sophia Toner

Third Place—Painting

Acrylic

grade, he approached me and said he was working on himself. He asked if we could be friends again.

We’ve been inseparable ever since.

The screen door banged shut, and I quickly looked up. Finley pulled his hair into a messy bun and grabbed his bike. We kicked off, pedaling into the cool autumn afternoon.

“Where are we going?” he shouted.

“Just follow me.”

“Following you would lead me into a car.”

I flipped him off over my shoulder, and I heard him laugh behind me.

The winds fought against us, but I wasn’t in the mood to give in. Reckless drivers raced past us as we flew down pothole covered roads. Usually, Finley and I would be chattering away, but something was wrong with me today.

I couldn’t smile.

Finley asked me every now and then where we were going, but I didn’t respond to him. I turned left and led us down a dirt road. My thighs burned as I struggled through the shifting path. The smoky stench of burned crops caused my lungs to weaken. I didn’t care. Let my asthma act up.

I turned off into a field before abandoning my bike. I walked to a nice patch of ground before lying down and staring at the fluffy clouds. I heard Finley’s shoes crunch the plant corpses as he walked toward. He squatted down, tapping my head.

“What are you doing now, idiot?”

“I want to know what he saw before he died.”



He grunted before lying down beside me.

The birds chirped softly, and the wind gusted overhead. The dirt cooled my sweating body as the weak autumn sun gently warmed me. Small bugs crawled over small mounds of mud, and I prayed they wouldn't touch me.

"Do you think he was scared?" I whispered.

Finley shrugged, "Maybe. Maybe not."

"I guess it depends on if he was ready or not."

"Probably."

"Finley, let's get out of this town."

He laughed, "Alright, what'll we do?"

I paused before presenting him with my idea.

"We'll make a movie, right? It's about these hot teens on bikes who live in this small town."

"Sounds familiar."

"Shut up and let me finish. Anyway, one of them decides they can't take small town life anymore, and they decide to leave with only their bike and a backpack. So then the other teen goes on this huge journey to find their missing friend."

"I think it would sell," he said.

I rolled over and looked at him. "Are you ready?"

His hazel eyes shot to me, questioning me with their intense gaze. "Ready for what? To leave and make the movie?"

"No, death."

"No," his deep voice startled me with its seriousness. "I don't want to die yet."

"I don't mean do you want to die right now," I said. "Are you at peace with the concept of death?"

"The answer is still no."

I nodded before lying on my back again. My eyes began to close, and I began to drift into a dreamless sleep when Finley interjected.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

He sat up, frowning as usual. His bun fell apart and allowed his hair to cascade down to his shoulders.

"Are you at peace with death?"

I laughed as I always did whenever death was brought up.

"I'm serious, Jo. Are you?"

I looked at him, scared to see the concern in his eyes.

I chuckled softly, "Don't be ridiculous, Finley. Come on, let's go somewhere else."

"Jo, just answer-"

I grabbed my bike and started running down the dirt road. "Come on, dummy!"

Finley sighed but pedaled after me anyway. I'm glad he realized that I wasn't going to answer his question.

Some things are better left unsaid. △

## ***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

## *Open-Casket*

Jaylin Jones

Second Place—Poetry Competition

My sneakers scream as I smile, shooting up splintered  
steps,  
swinging the screen door open.

I look past the counter, straining the tips of my toes,  
my ragged laces dirty and untied.

You spring from the couch quick but slide to the coun-  
ter slowly,  
grin spreading ‘cross your face as you send that old,  
tired line my way.

*Looking sharp there, Boogie. I need me some new  
threads like that.*

I laugh hard, knowing my shirt is stained  
and scarred with sugar you gave me.

I outgrow that shirt soon.

And I see you and those crooked stairs less as I stretch,  
getting longer, and apparently far sharper.

*Whew, you could cut somebody with that suit. Bet it’ll  
drive the girls crazy about you.*

I laugh again then, trying to not notice how  
you’re bent lower, carved thinner.

The last time I see you, my church shoes scuff smooth  
carpet softly.

I make each step count, slow and steady.

I lay eyes on your lapel, collar crisp and cufflinks loose.

And silently I say

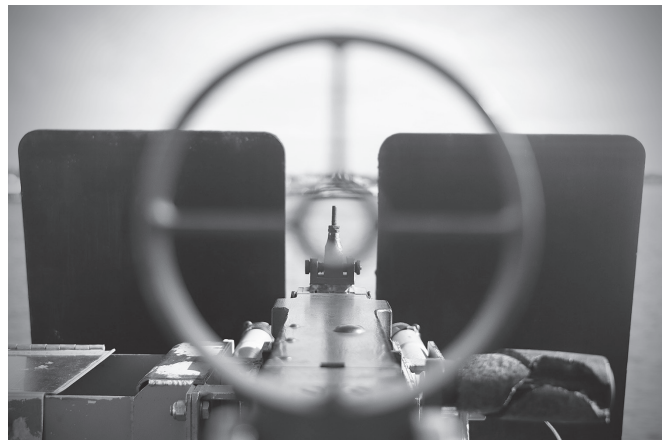
*Looking sharp.*



## *Fountain of Pearls*

Amanda Zhou

Gouache



## *Bullseye*

Michael Lu

Photograph



# WHY DIDN'T I DO SOMETHING?

Mason Pettit

Sadie Lewis moved to my high school from the nearby private academy midway through tenth grade. Other than her strange infatuation with “Africa” by Toto, she was forgettable enough when she arrived. Mr. Simpson, one of maybe three teachers at my school who actually knew what they were teaching, decided to sit her right next to me, but she added nothing new to the daily routine of class except the fact that I grew to hate “Africa.” She wormed her way right into the inner circles of many of the “popular” kids at school, fitting right in with all the basic white girls who liked to pretend they weren’t basic white girls. Their baseless self-righteousness and sense of superiority crept into my corner of class and infected our conversations with white noise about Tom Holland. On top of that, the boys in our class liked her because, well, because she was a breathing female. Their standards were not exactly high, and Sadie easily rose above their low bars.

I sat talking to my friends in the corner of Mr. Simpson’s room, trying my best to block the familiar silent condescension that the rest of the class had for the “smart kids.” Mr. Simpson wasn’t there, so we didn’t have any real work. He left something for us to do, but not even the resident nerd (me) did anything he had written on the board. Our substitute teacher had all the qualifications of a McDonald’s cashier, except they may actually be able to make change, and our “teacher” slouched down in Mr. Simpson’s chair staring at her phone. The only person who was working on the assignment was Aaliyah, who was set to graduate a year early if she passed all her classes, and she couldn’t risk another failing English grade.

“Hey, could y’all please try to be a little quieter? I can’t focus.” Aaliyah turned around and made her plea to Sadie and Jacob, one of the boys that never stopped flirting with Sadie, who brushed her off with

a “Yeah, sure,” before returning to their conversation at full volume. I sent my empathy across the room telepathically to Aaliyah and prayed for something to shut up Sadie’s whiney voice. For a few minutes, I thought nothing would until I heard a familiar intro and “Africa” began to play.

“Would y’all please shut up!” Aaliyah exploded as her frustration spilled out onto the two flirtatious nuisances seated in front of me.

Then Sadie turned and said something unrepeatable. The dirtiest, filthiest, nastiest word in the English language hung in the air like an invisible fog. That poison word from Sadie silenced half the room, soon followed by the other half when they realized the hush that had fallen over the rest of us. She sat with hatred

in her eyes leaning forward with a finger raised to Aaliyah like she was disciplining a child who had misbehaved. She didn’t say that word in a “Look at me, I’m such an edgy girl,” kind of way. She didn’t say it in a “I swear it just slipped out” kind of way. She said it in a “you should be lucky to be in the same classroom

as me” kind of way. She said it in a “you should know your place” kind of way. She said it in a “If you think about it, slavery was actually better for Black people” kind of way.

My first thought was disbelief. People don’t do stuff like this in 2018, not out in the open where everyone can hear. My next thought was *What’s the worst that could happen to me if I just knock her out right here?* One clean blow to the side of the head sending her straight to the floor. She was within striking distance right then. In the end, I did nothing, but I will admit that I was excited for when Aaliyah was going to walk over here to begin a monumental beatdown.

“You can’t do that here.” I think Jacob meant to keep his warning to Sadie secret, but his words echoed for a split second in the silent classroom. Aaliyah stood

*“The dirtiest, filthiest,  
nastiest word in the English  
language hung in the air like  
an invisible fog.”*

up, and I got ready. I wasn't going to hit Sadie, but I definitely wasn't going to stop Aaliyah from absolutely thrashing her. Instead, Aaliyah surprised me.

"Ohhh noooooooo! Mrs. ummmm substitute teacher, you hear that? The hard r and everything."

"I didn't hear nothing," the substitute teacher said as if this was the only response she was allowed to have. "Y'all don't get to fighting while I'm in here. I don't wanna fill out the paperwork, so I'm not gonna do anything here."

"What!" Aaliyah vocalized what we were all thinking. "But you're Black, and you just heard her call me that word, and you ain't gonna do nothing?" The teacher merely shrugged in response. "Well can I at least go report this to the principal then?"

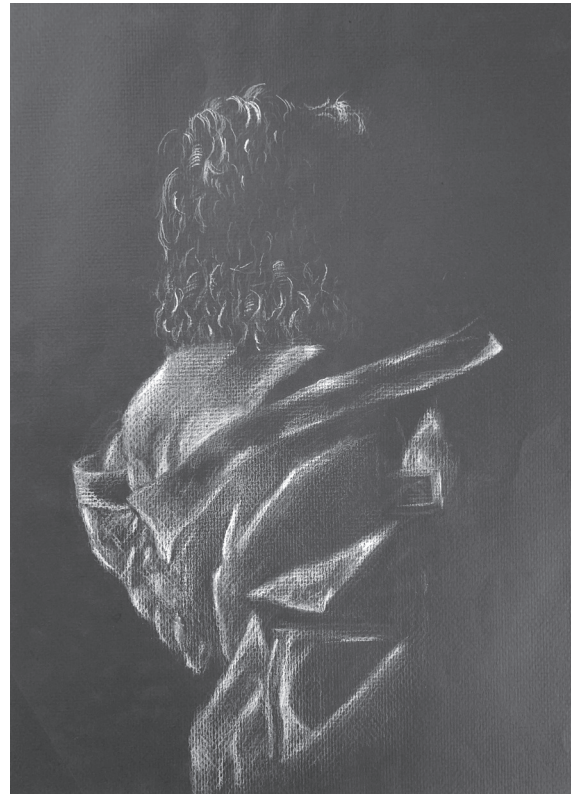
"You can handle whatever you need to after this class. I'm not dealing with it."

I was stunned. Not only had Sadie said something like that in 2018, but she was going to get away with it. I sat in silence telling myself I'd go up to the office with Aaliyah and be her witness, but when the bell rang and she bolted out the door, I made my slow march to seventh period instead. Why didn't I do something?

I forced the whole experience out of my mind until a few weeks later when I was talking to Shawn. "Whatever happened with that, did she get suspended or something?"

"Nah, man. They just called her into the office and Mr. Graham told her she can't do that anymore. She's not at the academy anymore."

The extent of her punishment was the same warning that a high school boy had whispered to her after she did it. "You can't do that *here*," as if it was perfectly fine to do in a place where you know you won't get your tail kicked. As long as you're only racist around white people, it's perfectly fine. I gritted my teeth as I internally gave myself the beatdown I thought Sadie had coming. Why didn't I do something? △



## ***Vague Memory***

**Amanda Zhou**

Charcoal



## ***Road to Nowhere***

**Wyatt Shanahan**

Photograph



# ENTRY 49: 2073

Faith Bradford

I despise living by the bullet factory, but all my fathers have lived here. My father, his father, and his father. I am not granted a choice. Therefore, poverty has become a family tradition and it is only righteous of me to follow in their footsteps—out the door and into the factory. A glance outside the window makes me wish I would have done something grand; the view of the bullet factory serves as a big “we own you” symbol to everyone living here. An eight-story building complete with clouded black-out windows, ashy gray bricks, security guards at each entrance, and “safety” nets around each floor. The O’Khasis sector officials concluded that two suicides last week were too many, and hastily threw up another security measure there and at all residential complexes. I think an off day would have done us better. I suppose I deserve it, though; I cannot afford thirteen bells to ride the metro into the capital square, so business sanctioned housing must do. Maybe one day, I’ll become a turnstile jumper, but I know getting caught means execution. It happened to my brother, Judas, and now his ashes sit in a plastic bag in my nightstand.

Once, I was convinced that it was the presence of his ghost and the scent of his ashes that woke me up in the mornings. Last month, I would have described the stench as metallic, the air drenched with the blood and dread of everyone who succumbed this ghastly society. But I know better now. I’ve come to terms with the truth: it was a foolish distraction from the reality of my life. Smelling noxious fumes of metal alloys and rubber polymers still jolts me awake promptly at six o’clock, seven days a week. Being lucky enough not to have been drawn for the first shift, I lie in bed until the stench arrives in the mornings to remind me that “work is in an hour!” *Thanks.*

O’Khasis is a sector on the equator, where we have 110-degree temperatures year-round. At bedtime, my father would tell me stories about the ancient times—the dark days, as the officials call it—and how it got cold in the winter. I guess everyone back then was rich; cold is a luxury only granted to the wealthy in O’Khasis. The blistering weather makes it excruciating to sleep with the windows closed, so soot creeps through holes in the unbolted screen. Undeniably, the air is toxic, but I’d rather die this way rather than by

sweating my sorrows into my bedsheets. With each breath my nostrils sting, undoubtedly staining my throat an iron-grey hue. Every inhalation is a lick at my lungs, paired with wheezing windpipes through a too tight trachea. It is a cancer with no treatment and no cure.

Maybe dying by heat exhaustion wouldn’t be the worst choice. As I reach up to shut my cracked window, I involuntarily wretch at the sight of my hands. My ashen fingertips resemble the gravel roads I plod on: chalky and cracked, beaten to bone. I should be used to them by now, but I have ignored for years that I am ill. I embody death in the form of life.

Two hundred fourteen thousand thirty-two. I have spent 214,032 hours slaving for O’Khasis, fabricating those pristine clean antimony bullets. The same antimony bullets to be locked, loaded, and let loose onto my people. We are the proprietors of our own suffering. Not always, though, because being assigned to an industrial job was a guarantee for freak accidents to happen. Last year, a proletarian failed to secure the packaging on a box of bullets, causing 200 of them to spill into the conveyor belt. Like an automatic assault rifle, the ammunition went rogue, injuring five and killing two others, one being my other brother. I don’t have his ashes, but the oxidized blood splatters on the leaden cinderblock walls act in his remembrance. *I still miss you, Isaac.*

The rise of my lungs alerts me that it’s time for work. Sitting up to look at my mirror, I wince at myself. After forty-nine years of building in the factory, the factory has built me: a sickly wage-slave worthy of nothing but serving my superiors—or so they would like me to think.

I slip on my work shoes (which double as my house shoes) where the no-slip grip has been worn smooth, grab my rucksack, and throw on my gloves. Before I trudge through the decaying country pine doorway, I hesitate and gaze upon my room once more. There’s a bed with broken mattress springs and a few missing floorboards. It’s manageable enough, so I’m sure they’ll be moving someone in next week because today I will be the martyr for change, even if it means I join my brothers in the sky.

My barren nightstand could use an alarm clock. Judas could use some company. △

## *Exodus*

Shelby Tisdale

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

Woman:

the title is only luggage I carry  
when I am two steps  
from the Mississippi border.  
I bake my mother's accent into cornbread  
and chew so no one will know who I am  
until crumbs slip from the corners of my lips.

My grandmother can play the piano by ear.  
She wanted to write poems like her father  
but never did, so when I write stories about her tall,  
bleached hair and how when you look into her eyes  
you can see her hope for deliverance, she applauds.  
When you look into her eyes, she is proud  
and sad and will tell you stories about dead cousins  
and jumping from the backs of pickup trucks  
in Pelahatchie.

My mother laughs when I call myself woman  
as if womanhood is something you must earn  
by signing your dreams into a will for the son or daughter  
you promise you will bear. I tell my mother  
that if I earn a doctorate and marry, I will hyphenate  
my last name, and she prays that I don't forget  
where I come from.

When you are a woman in the South,  
you are only who you come from,  
where you come from.  
You play in the marching band at the school  
your mother went to and live in the house  
where she grew up.  
You say you will marry a tall man with broad shoulders  
who will break his back to feed as many children  
as you can have and all the unborn children  
you will grieve.

I am two steps from crossing the Red Sea,  
and I don't plan to forget Egypt,  
but how many women will sink  
before the waters part?



## *Food for Thought*

Shelby Tisdale

First Place—Drawing

Graphite pencil



## *Bike in Quarantine*

Sophia Toner

Second Place—Drawing

Pencil and paper



# SUNFLOWER

Joshua Murphy

They walked to the same corner store every Thursday afternoon. Nancy and Scott lived about three blocks down from Crescent's Corner Store where they bought their two grandchildren knick-knacks because they had nothing else to spend their money on. Scott invested \$5,000 in Amazon when it was only \$18 per share, and after 15 years he finally checked how much it was worth and realized he was a multi-millionaire. He dreamed of traveling the world with the love of his life, but Nancy was diagnosed with dementia a few years ago, so traveling was no longer an option. "That's okay," he frequently thought to himself when dreaming of the view over France at the Eiffel Tower and the beaches in the Bahamas. "I still have her. That's all that matters."

"Where are we? What are we doing here?" Nancy asked.

"We're at the Crescent's Corner, Nancy. We're getting Aaron and Reina a little treat, remember?"

"Oh, okay. Who's that?"

"Our grandchildren, darling. What do you think of this?" Scott asked as he looked over a Rubik's cube.

"What do they like?"

"We've gotten them practically everything in this store already, so I think this might be our only option."

"Hmm. You're paying. I can't remember where I put my wallet."

"That's fine, love. I've got it. I love you."

"I love you too," Nancy replied as a smile spread across her face and her cheeks flushed.

They shared the same conversation every Thursday for the past three months. As Nancy's condition worsened, Scott's heart broke more and more. He tried to convince himself she was still the same person he married, but deep down he knew she was not. The thousands of memories they shared were kept safe in his mind, but the treasure chest was unlocked in hers, and seemingly every day another memory was gone.

As they walked home, Scott picked a sunflower for his love and said, "This is for you, my little sunflower."

"These are my favorite! I used to pick the petals off one by one saying, 'He loves me, he loves me not,' about my third-grade crush," she reminded him for the seventh time in a row. But at least she still remembered something, even if it was from her childhood. "Thank you, dear."

"You are most certainly welcome. What do you want to do when we get home? We can watch a movie or something if you would like that."

"Sure! Let's watch *Forrest Gump*. Tom Hanks is an amazing actor in that movie. Did you know I met him at a Yankees game two weeks after it came out?"

"Yes, I did know that. *Forrest Gump* sounds great. I'll put it on when we get back."

The walk back home made her feel young again. She was once a botanist, so her life's work was studying

plants. She went to the University of Mississippi, first hoping to be a lawyer but she later changed her mind because of her love for sunflowers. She did not really like biology, but it was worth it in her mind.

Scott was a janitor when they first met. He came from an abusive father and a drug-addicted mother, so college was never an option for him. He was cleaning the biology lab in Nancy's third year of school when she walked in looking for her professor to ask him a question.

"Hey, I'm Scott. What's your name?"

"I'm Nancy. You look pretty young to be a janitor. Are you a student here?"

"Uh, not exactly. I got this job about a year ago after I finished high school. Sometimes I hear bits and pieces of lectures. Did you know that gravity is constant? I learned that last week when I was cleaning the halls outside the Intro to Physics class."

"Yes, I did. Have you seen Dr. Jamie?"

"She left about twenty minutes ago. What do you need? I'm sure I could help."

"No, I don't think you can. Unless you know the genetic make-up of the offspring between a twice

*"She was once a botanist,  
so her life's work was  
studying plants."*

cross-pollinated yellow star thistle and a red clover, then only Dr. Jamie can help.”

“No, I can’t, but if I see her, I’ll let her know you’re looking for her. Can I get your number in case I see her before you?”

“You’re gonna have to be a little more clever than that. Nice try, though,” Nancy replied as she walked out of the classroom.

And so he did. He looked around campus every day to try to find her. He didn’t have much luck at first, but after waiting outside the biology lab for four days straight, he finally ran into her again. He quickly fixed his hair and the collar of his best shirt before he repeated the speech he practiced in the mirror to her. Fortunately for him, she was free for dinner that Friday night. He did not have much money, but he scraped together all he had and paid for her dinner at the local seafood restaurant. He had to borrow a few dollars from his friend, which he promised to pay back after he got his next paycheck.

Nancy shared her life story over an overcooked tilapia and a water with lemon while Scott listened intently. He couldn’t help but fall in love with her when her eyes lit up as she talked about her love for her happily and healthily married parents. Seeing her so joyous made him long for that loving childhood, and he hoped to provide that to his own children someday.

Three years later, after Scott became the manager of a rundown diner and Nancy received her bachelor’s

degree in botany, the two were married. They honeymooned in Florida, not being able to afford much more. They bought their first house three blocks down from Crescent’s Corner Store and had their only child two years after. Scott became the father figure he always wanted, and Nancy the mother Scott needed.

After their walk back from the store, Scott put on *Forest Gump* like he promised. After the opening trailers, Scott left the room. Nancy didn’t mind, as he was probably just wrapping the Rubik’s cubes. After forty-five minutes, however, she began to be worried. She yelled, “Scott? Where are you? My favorite part is coming up and I don’t want you to miss it!”

About twenty seconds later, a strange young man wearing scrubs walked into the room and asked if everything was alright.

“Yes, I’m fine. Who are you? Where’s Scott?” Nancy asked.

“I’m your nurse,” the man said. “Scott won’t be returning for a while. Do you want me to turn off your movie and take you for a walk? We can pick your favorites again: sunflowers.” △



## ***Flower Field***

**Karlene Deng**

Photograph



## ***When Will the Glass Be Picked Off the Floor***

**Gracie Rowland**

Other media



# Woodworking with Ashes

Shelby Tisdale

First Place—Poetry Competition

*For Jackson, Mississippi*

*We will neglect our cities to our peril, for in neglecting them we neglect the nation.*

*~John F. Kennedy*

My city walks with a limp—  
stiffens its neck against the pole of a crossed flag  
prodding clouds above a Mississippi elementary school.

My city chuckles and makes hate sound civil,  
throws a penny to champion the skeleton army  
of our people  
shooting our people  
to shackle our people.

Children don't understand the words *black* and *white*.  
Girls at church call me light-skinned  
and scold each other if one calls me white  
like this half-empty glass of history's milk  
that drips justification  
as if heritage were an excuse to build an empire on a  
graveyard.

Toss the remnants like confetti; say hope's cremation is  
ancestral celebration.  
It's like we're interrupting a funeral with complacency's  
birthday party,  
feeding egos like fattened pigs,  
bred and farmed and cherry-picked for plump and  
slaughter,  
rolling in slop of brutality's leftovers and sucking juice  
from bigotry's full-course meal.

The ghosts here trample progress graveside,  
stomp cut flowers, drink crumbled concrete like shaved  
ice  
by trashcan firelight, play cards with men who sleep  
on air vents under skyscrapers,  
give them a dollar to buy a bottle  
and a coat to brave the night.

Culture is subject to murals and graffiti-boarded  
buildings,  
the fabled demise of Capitol Empire, destruction's petty  
ashes.  
Preacher says it is hard to hope in ruins,  
worship in the armpit of this city,  
this adolescent giant anxious for manhood,  
if masculinity means belonging  
and belonging requires bullets and bail funds and blood.

Nobody pays the light bill in this ash-ridden house,  
but at least there's flame in the hearth.

The children play gunfight in the church gymnasium.  
I can't explain poison in the water fountain or bulging  
floorboards.

A seven-year-old girl gives me the finger in exchange  
for a piggyback ride.

I tell her I am disappointed,  
I tell her I love her  
and she doesn't know what she did wrong.

I wonder  
if any of us are even trying to build anymore.  
If Jesus really was a carpenter,  
the Devil must be stuffing my city into an urn.

# THE HOMELESS MAN'S FUNERAL

Shelby Tisdale

Honorable Mention—Short Story Contest

Regret is the fork thrust into my wife's cold spaghetti on a Thursday night. The noodles drift to my lips like loose, rising balloons, and my hand is shaking and numb. My daughter, Willow, laughs and says that I smell like pine and marijuana but look like an insurance agent.

I smile at Willow, her cheeks freckled and inflated with chunks of beef and pasta.

"I'm really sorry." Her green eyes brighten, and her eyebrows curl in.

"Your mother told you?"

She nods her head and doesn't speak.

Sweat bleeds through my polo, and I remember the forest dimmed beneath tangled trees. I remember the conversation with Frank and his gentle reluctance. I quiet my mind to nothing but the voice of a homeless man who tells me he does not want a home. His eyes are green like Willow's and dart up and down. He curses me and apologizes.

I can't shake Frank. He's bleeding from three stab wounds inflicted by another homeless man; his beard turns red. His obituary says that he loved the outdoors. Willow opens the back door to let the dog pinball between pine trees and the tall fence. Home is the distance between me and my work shoes, and tonight I wear them to sleep.

\* \* \*

Guilt is a two-hour drive. Willow is in the passenger seat, and we are going to a funeral for a man who no one cared about. Willow plays songs about running away, and I want to open the window. I want foggy Mississippi to feel my breath and hear the way my voice breaks, the way my rhetoric dulls until I am a mockery of the man I used to be. I want to save someone's life.

I'm buried under the litter of Dollar Generals and Baptist churches and cows. The sun bleeds into the flat earth like God stabbed it three times in the center. The sky has no pulse. My work shoes are sitting on the front step of the house in the suburbs, and Willow and I are needles in this gravel pincushion of a highway. Home is anywhere I don't have to stand still.

Snow in Mississippi is made of cotton and sweat, so I know that I am not cold when my body shakes. A shiver climbs my back and my foot stutters against the gas pedal. Willow clutches the side of her seat and watches the fields flash by the window. I know that Frank fed mosquitos when he slept in thick air under the summer moon and once woke in a gutter downtown.

"They're literally everywhere," Willow laughs. "I was telling my friend from Portland how often I see cows and she thought I was joking. Imagine being a cow on a farm—existing just to be exploited for food and profit."

"Think about it. Our society does the same thing to the poor."

"You're right. I hate this state." Willow sighs and the sun reflects light onto the gray road—a water-like reflection atop the hill, which is broken as we move closer.

I am black coffee from the Pilot and Willow is a cheap cappuccino, I think, as the foam bubbles against her lip. I am no one's savior today.

"Do you think anyone will come? Weren't all his friends homeless, too?"

"I don't know. Most of the time they have families. I've found that people would rather show up to mourn someone's death than to save someone's life."

"But what about his homeless friends? Will they show up, too?"

"I doubt it. I'm sure they're having their own memorial."

\* \* \*

Dishonesty is Frank's corpse. His chin hairs have been mowed into a scratchy apology and he is wearing a button-up and khakis like mine. His head looks like a waxed globe, and his scabs have been scraped or expertly covered. There is no blood.

"Who is this?" I feel my tongue slip into the back of my mouth and fall through my chest. I eat every word I have ever spoken.

"This isn't what he looked like before?"

"He's unrecognizable. They cleaned him up." I walk away from the open casket, and Willow follows.

*"I am no one's savior today."*



There are five people, a baby, the reverend, and the reverend's wife. They each look at Frank like they are passing a mannequin in a store window. Willow's wearing a hoodie, and there's a young woman in a tank top, her eyes shrouded in black liner.

We follow the party to the room of empty crimson pews and sit in the back.

"Today, we celebrate Frank's life and the sovereign Father of Heaven and Earth. Let us pray." The reverend dodges a eulogy and prays for Frank's family. His wife plays piano, and I watch Willow's eyes scan rows of untouched tissues boxes.

Doubt is the single hymn played by the reverend's wife. Frank's Messiah was a bottle, his deliverance a razor blade in another man's hand. I am no one's savior today. In this room, I don't say I am a social worker, or that I was weeks from getting Frank an apartment. In this room, Frank was a father who loved the outdoors.

"Liar. He didn't even know him, did he?" Willow's forehead wrinkles, and I nod my head.

\* \* \*

Shame is a slice of pizza and a trip to Elvis's birthplace, the Tupelo sun bleeding to remind me that not even God can stitch the stabbed sky. Tonight, murder is tied in a box with a bow, truth chewed into chunks of words that are more comfortable on our tongues.

No one is grieving but God. Willow hums the hymn from the funeral and falls asleep in the passenger seat. I drive and watch the world turn from blue to black. △



## ***901 South Baringo Street***

**Faith Bradford**

Home is on the south side of Baringo  
 raised on a crumbling concrete foundation  
 Dawn cues the sound of rusted chain-link clatter  
 signaling my father's send off for work  
 I smell my mother's caramel coffee  
 three scoops of Robusta beans  
 complete the sweet aroma  
 of home-made cinnamon rolls  
 Outside, my lone neighbor  
 hollers 'cross the driveway  
*How ya 'doin' today, miz thang?*  
 She's the epitome of Brockton twang  
 Towering oak trees  
 line what's left of a backyard  
 decorating the roof in erratic fashions  
 shadows shade where shingles don't  
 a companion to the rickety chimney  
 The wind blows in peace  
 and the clothesline sways  
 like tall grass on summer days  
 a synchronized dance  
 At dusk, ten tealights sit on my windowsill  
 tiny flames alight the room  
 But that same wind has lost its peace  
 extinguishing the candles  
 leaving only darkness to accompany me  
 Home was the two-paneled screen windows  
 donned in dusty, decaying frames  
 now diminished to one sawdust barricade

## ***Man's Best Friend***

**Elena Eaton**

Second Place—Painting  
 Oil on canvas

# EVERYBODY HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

Leslie Lewis

Second Place—Essay Competition

## Immediate Family

With her small hands on her wide hips, and a big frown on her face, my mom stares at me. She stares at me with those eyes that say *What in the hell are you doing?* and I stare right back with wide eyes saying *I wish I knew*. At this point I've set the old hair clippers that I found down on the bathroom counter, and I fully turn to my mom to see her reaction.

"You know your head's too big for a low cut, right?" She immediately laughs at me after this, to which I roll my eyes. Almost on cue, my sister walks out of her room, takes one look at me, and then joins my mom in her cackling. I stand still in front of the bathroom mirror, wondering how I became a laughing-stock in all but two seconds.

"Girl who you tryna be? A black Britney Spears?" my sister butts in, doubled over with tears threatening to spill. My mother slaps her on the back with approval of her joke, and continues to giggle. I can't do anything but sit there and take it. Take all the jokes and cracks, and curse them flat out in my head.

## Best Friends

"Okay! I'm feelin' this. You cute, girl!" They snap their fingers and roll their necks, spin me around, and make me feel pretty. Our phones are pulled out now and we take pictures for what feels like hours, take breaks to make sure my short curls are still poppin'. We ride around town in an old school Camaro with the top down so everybody can see my new style.

"I just think it's good for you, y'know? Hair holds baggage and bad memories. This is like a fresh start." I nod towards my oldest friend as he says this. We sit in the Walmart parking lot at 11 p.m. and watch the stars while he goes on about the connection hair has to our emotions and whatnot. I can't seem to stop running my fingers through my buzzcut as I mindlessly listen to his rant.

"You look damn good. Don't let anybody tell you different, boo." He gives me one last hug before he jogs back to the car, and I walk into my house. I think about how great the day went, how much confidence I gained in the span of a few hours. I look at myself in the mirror again, and smile.

## Classmates

"Now she know she wrong for doing that to her head." Comments like these are said behind my back countless times throughout the school day. I grip the straps to my backpack as I try to distract myself from the stares and whispers. Teachers stop in their tracks and just stare at me, not speaking a word. Even the principal becomes speechless, shock etched on her face.

"So, what made you do it?" I look around the small space my counselor considered an office. I try to find

some lie that sounded good enough to be real, anything that would get me out of this uncomfortable situation. She continues to cut the thick awkwardness in the air with more annoying questions and I keep lying. I make it through the pointless meet-

ing and get back to perfecting my art of ignoring the rude comments.

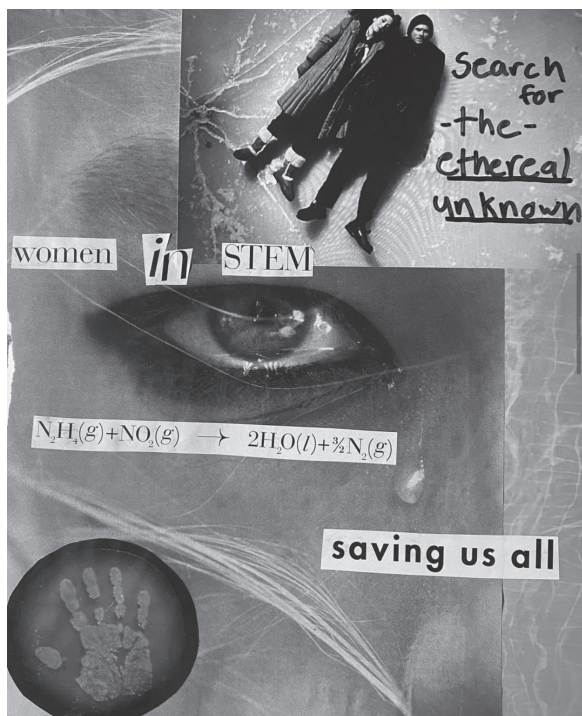
## Crushes

"I mean you cute and all, but I can't be with no girl whose cut lower than mine!" He puts on a show for his audience, the group of football players around the lunch table. They snicker and playfully pick at my hair while I horribly fake a laugh. He keeps making jokes about my hair, and I continue to laugh, praying that the tears don't fall.

"At least you can be my bro now." He just won't shut up. The crowd has gotten larger and my self-confidence has hit an all-time low. At this point I walk away, far too done to keep listening to this diss. My feet carry me to the nearest empty space, and all I do is cry. I cry

*"The crowd has gotten larger  
and my self-confidence has hit  
an all-time low."*

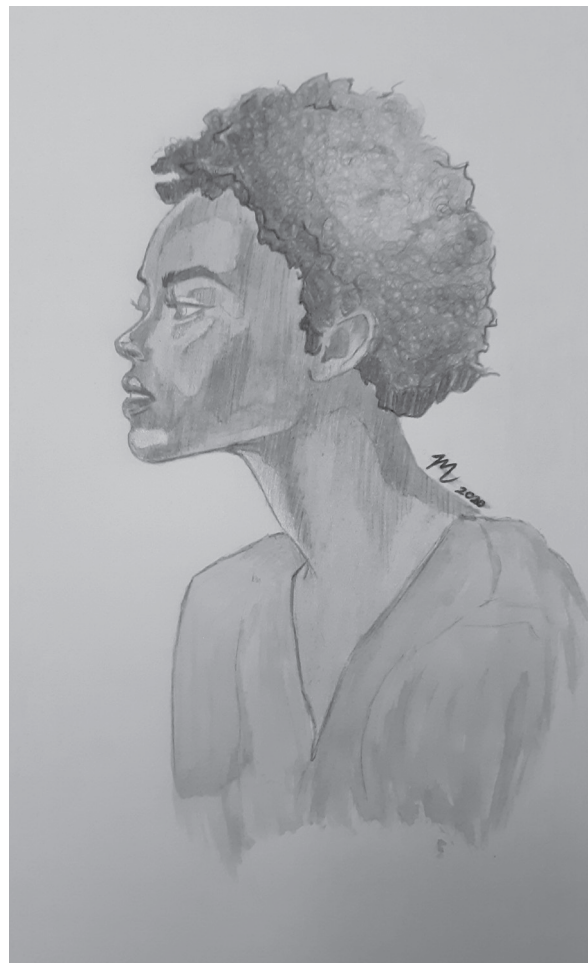




## *Eyes of Ambition*

Gracie Rowland

Other media



## *Gold*

Merideth Johnson

Graphite, colored pencil, watercolor

as loud as I can because that way, I can't hear what they have to say anymore.

### **Grandparents**

My grandmother didn't talk to me for three weeks after seeing my haircut. Visits are always short and to the point. She is visibly upset with me, and I would rather not be in an unwanted home. My grandfather just stares at me. He stares then looks to my mother with questioning eyes.

"The Bible says a woman's hair is her glory. Why on earth would you take all your glory away?" my grandmother finally questions me, her eyes boring into me from her rocking chair on the patio. I remain quiet, my mind wandering around nothing. I don't want to be

here in this tense setting. Whatever I choose to say will only upset her more.

### **Myself**

It feels so strange to be finished with washing and styling my hair in under an hour. I stand alone in my steamy bathroom after a much-needed crying session and wash. The words I've received these past few days still sit heavy on my skin no matter how much I scrub. A sigh escaped from my mouth as my eyes find their way to that same mirror one more time. I finally take a good, long look at myself.

"I think I look pretty nice." △

# THIS SUMMER

Lily Langstaff

This summer I jumped off a bridge.  
A twenty-foot drop  
with an ill-fitting life jacket.  
I climbed over the concrete railing,  
leapt,  
and plunged into a freezing river.  
I surfaced with a pounding heart and two lungfuls of  
water,  
swam back,  
climbed up,  
and jumped again.

Fun fact: about ten people drown every day.

This summer I toted my two best friends  
to everywhere and nowhere,  
running red lights and testing 75.  
I have a lead foot  
and a pedal-to-the-metal mindset.  
I like rolled windows,  
loud music,  
and open roads.

Fun fact: mini vans have a high turnover rate.

This summer I stood in a thunderstorm.  
The torrential downpour soaked to my soul,  
wind-driven and fierce in the dark.  
Electricity crackled in wet air like  
the laughter bubbling from smiling lips.  
It split the sky in silver lines, branching out like  
the purple veins of this endangered body.

Fun fact: a bolt of lightning has from twenty to thirty  
thousand amps.

This summer I caught a flight to my hometown.  
I watched the gray melt into blue, pavement to sky.  
I watched the clouds and looked for  
that silver lining everyone talks about.  
I wrote a line in my phone notes  
for every violent bump  
to turn the turbulence into poetry.

Fun fact: the biggest causes of plane crash deaths are  
dismemberment, crushing, and asphyxiation.

This summer I befriended the woods.  
I wandered past down into the wild opening of trees.  
I didn't look back—only forward.  
The logs and leaves and coyote howls  
told a million stories, and  
I made it home covered in mud and mosquito bites.

Fun fact: it can take a body as little as three weeks to  
decompose in a temperate forest.

This summer I played with explosives.  
Asphalt stung bare feet running.  
The dozen roman candles all lit together,  
illuminating the sky and  
raining sparks and gunpower  
with a smokey aftertaste.

Fun fact: the exploding shells of roman candles make it  
one of the most dangerous types of fireworks.

Fun fact: a side effect of life is death.



## Over Florence

Amanda Zhou

Pen and ink, charcoal

# NINETEEN SHOTS

Mason Pettit

After a long, strenuous day of work, a man came home, walked up the stairs of his lonely two-bedroom apartment, took off his suit, and fell straight to sleep on his plush bed. He slept for an hour or two before he heard a knock on his apartment door, so he stumbled out of bed and plodded into the living room. To his surprise, his unexpected houseguest had already made his way through the front door, and he jumped when he saw the intruder staring back at him on the other side of the gray cotton sofa that sat in the middle of the room.

And just like that, the man was dead in his own house. Nineteen shots through his body ensured that he would not take another breath. The man on the other side of the sofa stood there pulling his trigger even as the gun let out empty clicks. The killer stayed with the body long after his heart stopped beating. He stayed as the EMTs pronounced the body and as it was whisked away in dark shadow of a body bag. He stayed even as the police arrived on the scene and began to survey evidence. When he was finally ready to leave, he waltzed back down the stairs of the apartment and back to his family for dinner. They were having steak and potatoes. He bragged to his son about his big day at work and fell asleep in the recliner with a beer in his hand and a finger on the power button.



***Dazed***

**Karlene Deng**

First Place—Photography

The dead man's neighbor heard of what happened when she got back from dinner. She walked up the stairs and came upon the police who were still standing at the man's apartment. She asked what had happened, and when they explained it to her, she walked off shocked that she lived in such a dangerous area. "I always thought he was one of the good ones," she mumbled as she walked into her apartment, opened her bedroom door, and fell straight to sleep on her plush bed. She slept undisturbed through the night and awoke the following morning to begin her everyday routine. She fixed some oatmeal and sat down on her cotton sofa to watch the news.

*Another killing sends city into bedlam.*

The woman continued to eat as she learned what happened in the night. The dead man had walked into his apartment like always, but this time he was caught by a mom who lived in the building across the street and dutifully called the police.

*People like him don't live around here. How was I supposed to know he wasn't just another criminal? I mean what real job lets you have long tangled hair like that?*

The woman nodded as the mom's quote broadcast through her TV screen. She finished her oatmeal and returned the empty bowl to the kitchen before returning to the screen.

*Warning: What you are about to see is graphic and may not be suitable for young audiences*

The newscaster's voice hung in air as a video played showing the now dead man stumbling through the door and jumping before an unseen gunman repeatedly pulls the trigger and kills the man.

*Well, there you have it, ladies and gentlemen. We all just saw the man lunge out at the officer obviously in an attempt to steal his weapon. Frankly, he seemed to be heavily inebriated at the time of the incident as well.*

The woman turned off her TV, still shocked that she had been neighbors with such a dangerous man for so long, and she walked out the door brushing past the scene in her neighbor's room as she headed off to a normal day at work while the dead man lay in the morgue, surrounded by his brothers. △



# OUT OF FRAME

Jaylin Jones

Third Place—Essay Competition

I don't hold photographs anymore. Or at least, not often. The feeling of smooth, glossy smiles on card-stock seems to be sliding further from underneath my fingertips, the subtle weight of a cheap wooden frame pressing into my palm being replaced by pixels that dance when I tell them to. So before I raid my family's album, I spend two deep breaths just tracing the cover, my digits falling into the grooves made by the golden letters. Eventually, I lose myself between the pages, forgetting to pick just one as I run my hand over memories until it hurts. My father's rare half-smile, the flowy, over-the-shoulder hair my mother cut years ago, and toys I lost in the storm catch my eye, but I let them go. What I keep is my parents' wedding day, and I know I will have to write as I carry it with me up the stairs.

My mother's smile is as wide as I've ever seen it, parting her veil with perfect teeth and coffee-ground-colored dimples. I get them from her, I'm sure. Her marriage license is held up to her chin, painted nails pinching only the corners. The paper and her dress glow the same in the flash of the camera, blurring the words, though they're not needed. A signature and several paragraphs that will sit in a clerk's office forever could say nothing about the way she displays them center-frame. Her eyebrows arch with the curve of her lips, holding more pride than I thought possible.

In contrast, my father's suit and his face are the same — stiff and simple. In this picture, he is iron-crisp cotton buttoned over a broad chest filled with charcoal. It's not obvious, but I can tell he borrowed his tie, a thin strip of silver that is bent almost as awkwardly as he is. However, what stands out the most is his eyes, affixed to something out of frame. It's the only picture I have of that day, and I have always asked: What is he looking at? No one remembers after all this time, but I've often wondered where they could have gone and how. What sight could have started his stare's journey a thousand yards away, despite the camera shoving stars in its path?

Was that the moment he left us, not in body but spirit? Were subtle cracks aching into our home even then?

I imagine I'll never have my questions answered, not even on my wedding day. I picture the people I love most glued to their metal folding chairs in a cheap venue, joyous all the same. I stand next to the pastor of the church I visit when my mother says I should and wait for my bride to be. Sweat drips off my face and dampens my tie while I try to find my balance, feet floating in the carefully polished lakes I'm pretending are shoes. It gets harder to do as the seconds stretch on, but by the time my underarms encompass Atlantis she emerges. After a stunning march and solemn vows, we pose together under a flowery arch and smile, but even as the shutter clicks I can't help but search for what he saw.

By that time, I hope print is still alive. I'd like to see my son ramble through the attic looking for adventure, only to discover family relics. Maybe he finds a dust-covered album to crack open and ask endless questions about, starting with that day. We carefully lift the plastic film over my

distracted face, and laugh together at the scene before us, those inevitable words arising. What were you looking at? It doesn't take long for me to tell him the story and see the look in his eyes, and somewhere in the back of my mind I wonder if this will be our curse. If it is, I hope my son's kids can laugh with him about it, even if I never laughed with mine. △

*"... what stands out the most is his eyes, affixed to something out of frame."*



## Water Drop

Karlene Deng

Photograph

## *Submerged in the South*

Jaylin Jones

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

Sometimes I tell people I live in Atlantis.  
It is better than the place two syllables away from  
Nowhere, Nothing.

Better than the sinking city on the coast that I am sure  
no one built but God,  
washing the world of its wrecks and dragging his  
mistakes to  
settle on some shore because he forgot to give a damn.

Somehow everyone I know is drowning.

Laughing and cursing even with silt sitting heavy on  
their tongues,  
even as muddy water licks their heels and fills their  
 chests  
fit to bursting with Southern pride.



### *Snapshot*

Elena Eaton

Oil on cardboard



### *Ocean Drive*

Amanda Anderson

Photograph



### *Ka'Trina on the Beach*

Sophia Toner

Acrylic on canvas



## *From This Side of Heaven*

Shelby Tisdale



### *A Lone Daisy*

Amanda Anderson

Third Place—Photography

One day, when dew no longer  
falls from the corner of your eye,  
it will speckle the grass again.  
One day, we will hold hands,  
feel the ridges of palms  
and the sweat we don't mention  
bubbling between our wrists.  
We won't let go. I am sorry  
that these sleepless nights  
are checkboxes on a to-do list  
that only ends with my death.  
One day, I will count petals  
of flowers instead of wasted hours  
and blue will not be my favorite  
color. I will dress in yellow,  
like the girl who bought  
happiness on Amazon, with  
a vinyl smile sucked from the  
lips of boys she did not love.  
I will color my face with  
Crayola and curl my eyelashes  
until they break into tiny  
pieces of mascara that I will  
use as ink to write into  
existence the girl I never  
had the nerve to become.  
I will fold my lips  
and my laundry, speak  
and need to be heard.  
I will sleep until noon  
and eat exclusively garden  
salads and Hershey's kisses.  
One day, I will wake  
in a bed made of  
shopping bags and books  
I never found time to read  
and realize  
the Hell I chose.



### *A Memory*

Jillian Snodgrass

Watercolor



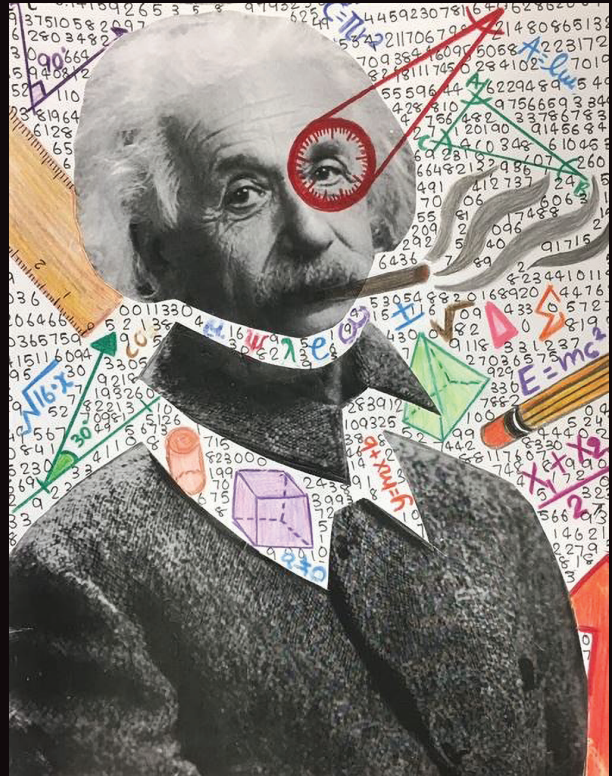
# M.S.M.S.

\ 'hōm \

*noun*

1. give your mind and your heart will follow. time beats away like the bass pounding in your chest. the hours become rainfall; your brain dances to the sound of voices. the sound of music. the sound of friends. the sound of keyboards clacking in the dark.
2. fingers cramping under pressure. numbers and words and numbers. you can feel yourself growing, growing, growing. your mind and your heart are in a competition to be larger; you don't know who's winning.
3. weekends come and pass; days fly by like dandelions. you go back to the house you can't quite get away from. you can feel it when you look up at the sky. you and god are equals, and he knows it.
4. the air is sweet and wet and filled with future. you exchange hugs and christmas presents. the time you have to give ticks down just like the rain falls over you. tomorrow, you can make something of yourself. tomorrow, everyone will know your name. tomorrow means *we are the future*.
5. tomorrow means an opportunity for excellence

*Source: Definition entry by Abby Strain.*



## Math

**Aastha Banga**

Mixed media—colored pencils/print



## Run

**Logan Harden**

Acrylic on watercolor paper

## *Alligator*

Taylor Wypyski

Painting

## *No Time for Caution*

Blake Cheater

The word “death” violently floats  
across his mind like an umbrella on a windy day.  
His stomach is about to unleash  
the freeze-dried chili he had and his  
eyes are bulging out, like the oxygen in his craft  
trying to escape into the vacuum of space.

An electrical fire ignited the waste chemicals  
which burn like dry California straw  
and launched the craft into a  
rocket-propelled merry-go-round spin.  
His control systems are out,  
he’ll have to stop it manually.

There is no time for caution.  
Steady hands surgically orient the  
celestial joystick as he fights  
to keep his boiling blood  
flowing to his brain.

With each frantic alarm beep  
and angry machine whir  
comes more adrenaline,  
but like an Inuit in the freezing snow,  
he remains alert and collected.

He takes back the reigns  
of his wild ship.  
His craft slows, his breathing steadies.  
He has broken the horse named  
*Gemeni VI*.



## *Silver Bones*

Gracie Rowland

I think it’s the rattling that gets me.  
The sound of my own silver bones  
clanking like my mother’s copper pots.  
The emptiness of plastering yourself  
to the walls of a glass house to please  
a stadium of uninterested buyers  
feels like lying to a God that never existed.  
I plaster picture and painting, poetry and collage.





## *Lady with Gold*

**Aastha Banga**

Colored and black ink



## *Sandy Collection*

**Wesleyan McMurrin**

Second Place—Photography

## *Ending*

**Jaylin Jones**

Sometimes, I think about how to hurt you.

I've spent hours alone with my pens picking at scars,  
with my body letting in ink and lead till I felt sick.

I've strained my wrists and let sutures tear,  
but I still don't have your ending.

I will accept nothing less than something brutal and beautiful.

Acid seeping into your pores and carving caves into canyons,  
biting through slowly-tinting tissue.

Nothing less than bitter, twisted sinew, unsafe for sight.

Flame aching its rage across tendons and spilling ash,  
burning heart-heated hatred into breaking lungs.

Nothing less than embers dying on a corpse.



## *Color Vision*

**Elena Eaton**

Prismacolor colored pencils on mixed media paper



# *“Land of the Free and Home of the Brave” to a Second-Gen Immigrant*

Vidhi Patel

One death,  
just a rumor.  
One hundred deaths,  
stores shelves cleared.  
One thousand deaths,  
just make sure to wash your hands.  
One hundred thousand deaths,  
“the children still have to learn.”

Years and years of freedom,  
but I guess its meaning has changed.  
Fellow people of color still fighting for  
equality,  
my black brothers and sisters  
fearing for their lives.  
But of course,  
“the trained officer had a reason.”

The Mississippi flag,  
flying high since 1894,  
the typical red, white, and blue  
flying in the corner of it  
“only trying to preserve history.”

Better opportunities in this new country,  
my father disregarding college  
to work for the next fifty years of his life,  
pushing his daughters to complete what he  
didn’t  
so his aching back was worth it.  
Still, “he stole a real American’s job.”

*There is no more America,*  
my father tells me.  
Still, we don masks.  
We chant Black Lives Matter.  
We vote for the new flag.  
We bury the dead, and  
pray for rebirth in  
*the land of the free  
and home of the brave.*



## *Ant on the Climb*

Karlene Deng

Photograph



## *Pandemonium Haunts My Bedroom Floors*

Gracie Rowland

First Place—Painting

## Love Letter to My Muse

Emma Spinks

My mother tells me I write  
about you too much.  
She says, *Everything is  
either nature or depressing.*  
She urges me to leave you behind,  
to write something different.

She does not understand;  
she does not know what you  
mean to me. You are my  
Aphrodite, waiting to be  
captured in an artistic piece,  
immortalized in my words.

As I enter your embrace,  
your bark skin bites mine.  
Your green, leafy hair tickles  
my forehead, and you whisper  
harsh, gusting songs in my ear.  
You are my muse, my love.

Your silence does not leave  
me wanting. Your entire  
existence engulfs me, turning  
isolation to contentment.  
Your cool hands free me  
from the shackles of reality.

Your chilled breath dances  
on my neck as you lift me.  
You hold me in your arms.  
You raise me to the sky;  
you show me the world,  
through clear eyes.



## Octopus

Taylor Wypyski

Third Place—Other Media



## Caught in the Sun

Qingcheng Sun

Photograph



## *The Grove of Forsaken Trees*

Emma Spinks

I remember when they came for my last brother.  
Men and machines crawled into this sacred place,  
disturbing the beauty of the forest and her children.  
The gnarled blade dug deeper and deeper  
into my friend as he released a silent scream.  
A horrible *crack* echoed through the wood  
when he gave in to the sap-stained saw.  
He hit the ground with a thunderous thud,  
the last words of a tree no one will miss.

Now, the lively blue of the sky offended my tear-stained  
bark; the cheerful song of the birds grated my ears.  
Colorful flowers assaulted my eyes as I stared  
At the rotting sticks covering a mauled forest floor.  
The limbs of my brethren were scattered about,  
like they were nothing to this ill-fated world.  
I gazed at the tombstones of my fallen friends,  
their stumps the only remnants of their former glory.

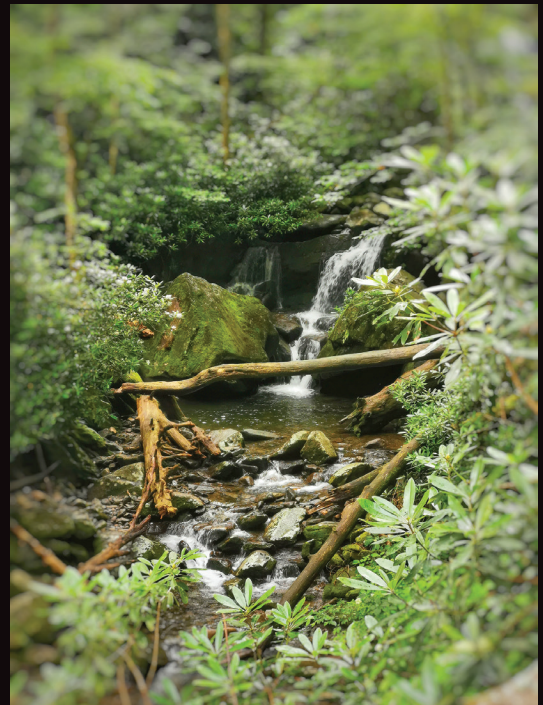
Growls from metal monsters penetrate the silence,  
and I know they've come for me at last.  
I cried, my fallen leaves slowly drifting down  
on the dismembered corpses of my brothers.  
Limbs crunch and animals run as they make  
their way to this grove of forsaken trees.  
As I await my looming death, I ask  
Mother Nature why she planted me in this land,  
nurtured me, if my fate was only to perish.



## *Autumn Day at the Lake*

Qingcheng Sun

Photograph



## *Mountain Stream*

Qingcheng Sun

Photograph



# JEREMIAH SPLIT

Amy Zhang

Honorable Mention—Short Story Contest

On the morning of Sunday, March 2nd, Jeremiah Split set fire to his house for insurance money.

No one would know—his house was old and creaky, and the electrical wiring was volatile in parts of the attic. This was exactly the reason why he decided to start the fire in his backyard, on the ground level. Though his mind worked in mysterious ways, he was truly a master criminal.

Normally, Jeremiah donated to various children's cancer foundations, even if it was for a tax write-off. He helped build the city garden on Main Street after he accidentally crushed the shrubs that had previously grown in front of city hall with his bike. He volunteered at voting drives and only winced a little when people said they were voting for the "wrong" party. All in all, Jeremiah Split was an exemplary citizen.

Except for the arson.

That foggy March morning wasn't even his first attempt at arson. No, his first try was seven months ago, when he snuck to the back of the house in the early morning with a matchbox and a pile of freshly-collected branches from his backyard. He lit the biggest one on fire and waited. And waited. And waited until the tiny flame spluttered out. He went through eight matches trying to create a big enough flame to burn his vinyl siding before his wife woke up and inquired as to why he was attempting to make a campfire with damp twigs at 9 o'clock on a Tuesday morning.

*Oh, Jeremiah thought. Maybe I should have done my research before attempting to scam a multi-billion-dollar homeowners insurance company.*

So on this March morning, Jeremiah was prepared. He had asked his neighbor Ron Jingleheimer, a park ranger, for tips on building fires the day before.

"And how would I prevent, say, accidentally burning my entire house down?" Jeremiah inquired, furiously writing notes on a pad of paper.

"Oh, that's easy," Ron responded. "Stay at least 10 feet away from your house. Keep a bucket of water nearby. Most importantly though—and I cannot stress this enough—be careful."

*LESS THAN 10 FT FROM HOUSE, Jeremiah scribbled. NO WATER. DO NOT BE CAREFUL.*

Unfortunately, Jeremiah followed the last reminder a bit too well, as Ron discovered his campfire exactly twelve minutes after he built it.

"Jeremiah Split! What on God's green Earth are you doing?" Ron demanded from his porch.

Jeremiah blanched. "Ron, I can explain—"

"I taught you better than this, boy!" Ron stomped

into Jeremiah's backyard. "You're doing this all wrong! Why are you so close to the house? You're going to burn this entire thing down!" Ron grabbed a nearby pail of what he assumed was water and dumped the clear liquid over the fire pit.

*FOOM!* The fire roared up, spreading across the lighter fluid Ron had poured. He scrambled away, fixing Jeremiah with an accusing stare.

"Uh..." If Jeremiah Split was anything, he was not good at lying on the spot. However, as he had come to learn, he didn't have to be good at it if other people were gullible enough. "My god Ron, what is that?" he exclaimed, pretending to be shocked as he pointed to a nondescript spot behind Ron's head.

"What?"

As Ron turned around to look, Jeremiah weighed his options for three seconds before grabbing a sturdy piece of firewood and slamming it down on Ron's head. Ron crumpled onto the ground like a piece of paper. A nasty bruise bloomed across his forehead as he lay there, unmoving.

"Oh no."

And maybe Jeremiah would have gotten away with knocking his neighbor unconscious if Sally Goldenbach didn't pass by at that moment. She paused at the scene,

*"That foggy March morning wasn't even his first attempt at arson."*

halting her morning jog and pulling out her earbuds to investigate the smoke in Jeremiah's backyard.

"Jeremiah Split, are you okay?" she exclaimed.

Jeremiah spooked, jumping with a yell. As he flinched, his foot knocked over his fire pit, spilling some lighter fluid near the house's wall. Thankfully, Sally was too far away to see.

"Sally! Hey, how are you?" As he spoke, he discreetly shuffled to his left to hide Ron.

"Oh my goodness, is that Ron? What's wrong with him?"

"Ron? Oh, Ron! He, uh, just fainted and knocked over my fire pit, would you believe it?" He dragged his right foot to the side to cover the bruise on Ron's face. Sally squinted at the movement.

"Why, goodness, I can't believe it!"

Jeremiah paled. "Really? Why?"

"He's never mentioned having problems with fainting before. But I suppose I can see how that would happen." She snapped her fingers, pointing to the flames flickering near the house's vinyl siding. "We should call the fire department and an ambulance," she said, fishing her phone out of her pocket.

"No! I, uh, called them already. There's no need to bombard them with calls."

"Okay, I'll wait with you until they get here."

"No! Actually, I'm not allowed to talk to women when my wife's not around," Jeremiah fibbed, plastering an apologetic smile onto his face. "I shouldn't be talking to you. She'll get mad. Sorry."

Before she could respond, Jeremiah turned around and marched toward his house's sliding doors. He had just opened the door when he came face-to-face with his wife, Rachel, who had just woken up.

"Good morning—is that Sally?" she asked, side-stepping around him to walk outside. "Why, I didn't know you made a new girlfriend, Jeremiah!"

"No! It's not like that, Rachel, I was just talking to your husband about the fire over there," Sally stammered. "You don't mind, right?"

"The fire?" Rachel exclaimed before turning to observe it. "Oh, my. Jeremiah, would you put that out before it burns up our house?"

"Don't worry about it, sugar plum, I've got it under control. Don't worry about Ron, either, they're sending an ambulance for him."

"Ron?" Rachel scanned the backyard. "Where's Ron? I don't see him."

Jeremiah pointed to Ron's motionless figure on the ground, and Rachel gasped when she looked down and saw him. "Goodness gracious, I hope he's alright. Well then," she said, quickly losing interest in the scene, "Sally, why don't you come on inside for breakfast? I'd love to have a talk with you, one on one. I haven't seen you in forever."

Reluctantly nodding, Sally trailed behind Rachel as she trekked toward the kitchen. After taking advantage of Rachel's unique speech patterns to intimidate Sally, Jeremiah felt immensely relieved that both of them left

him to deal with Ron. Moments of deliberation later, he finally settled on moving Ron into his hammock. He would tend to him later, after he finished burning his house down.

*Oh right, he thought. The fire.*

Neither Rachel nor Sally seemed too concerned about it, as it, unfortunately, remained a couple of yards away from the house. After checking to make sure no one could see him, Jeremiah dumped the remaining logs in the fire pit onto the side of the house, then carefully doused a patch of the wall with more lighter fluid.

*Perfect, Jeremiah thought as he sat back and watched the flames creep up the wall. No one will catch me now.*

"Daddy?" came a voice from behind him. It was his son, Joseph, holding out a cell phone. "I called the fire department for you."

"Oh split," Jeremiah muttered. He would have used a stronger word, but his son was only seven years old and Jeremiah didn't want to teach him cuss words just yet. "What did you tell them?"

"That you were making a fire but then you hit Ron and knocked him out, and then you poured, like, oil over the fire. The lady on the line said to get everyone out of the house, and that they were sending their fire-fighters and police over."

"Joseph, why did you tell them all of that? Why

*"He would tend to him later,  
after he finished burning his  
house down."*

didn't you come to me first?" Jeremiah demanded.

"But Dad," Joseph said, face falling, "you told me to always tell the truth."

"Well, son, I was lying to you when I said that." Jeremiah watched as Joseph's bottom lip quivered. "I'm sorry, Joe. That's just how life is sometimes."

"I don't care. I'm telling the police you lied to me."

"The police..." Jeremiah heard the faint sounds of sirens approaching his house. As he saw the flashing lights in the distance, the punishments for his actions flashed before his eyes. He turned back to face Joseph, trying to decide what to do, when Joseph's teary eyes convinced him that he had to leave in order to protect his family. "Listen, Joseph, I'm sorry I have to do this, but I need to go away now. Forever. I love you, buddy."

"Are you lying to me again, dad?" Joseph asked, on the verge of tears.

"No, Joseph. I'm telling the truth."

"That's something a liar would say."

"I—"

"I think you're not even going away. You just want to make me feel bad so I trust you again."

"Gahh! *Joseph!*" Jeremiah stomped around like an elephant that had eaten too much hay, or whatever it is that elephants eat. He wouldn't know. He wasn't an

elephantologist, or whatever it is that people who study elephants are called.

"Whatever, dad." Wiping his eyes, Joseph turned his back on Jeremiah and scrambled into the house. Jeremiah chased after him, stopping momentarily to close the sliding doors so that no bugs would fly inside. Even though he was escaping, he still hated bugs with a burning passion hotter than the fire outside.

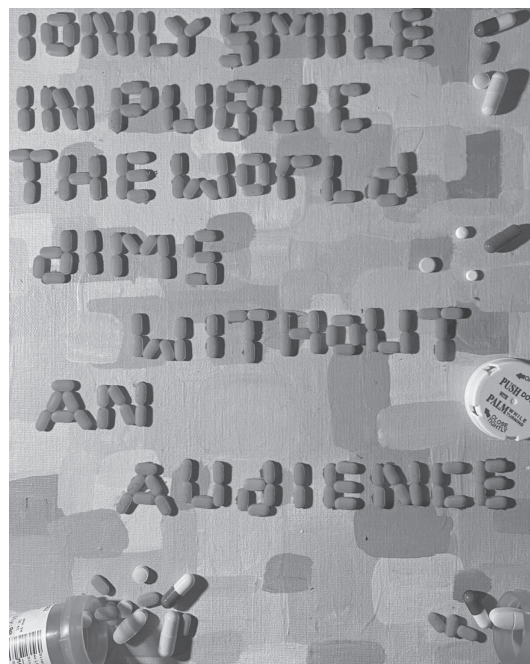
Inside, he overheard Rachel say "oh, yes, Jeremiah is so very sweet and loyal" to an increasingly shifty Sally, who nervously eyed the dining table's decorations.

Jeremiah stopped in his tracks, striding across the kitchen to wrap Rachel, who was stirring pancake batter, into a hug. "Rachel, the police are after me. I'm leaving so that you and Joseph don't have to deal with my actions," he whispered. "I'm sorry, honey. I love you. I'll call you from prison if I get caught."

"Jeremiah, why—"

"I'm sorry. Goodbye." Jeremiah raced into the garage, frantically opening the garage door and hopping into the family's only car. He had just finished pulling out of the driveway when the first fire truck rounded the corner a block away.

And with that, Jeremiah split. △



## *Voyeurism Rather than Solitude*

Gracie Rowland

Other media

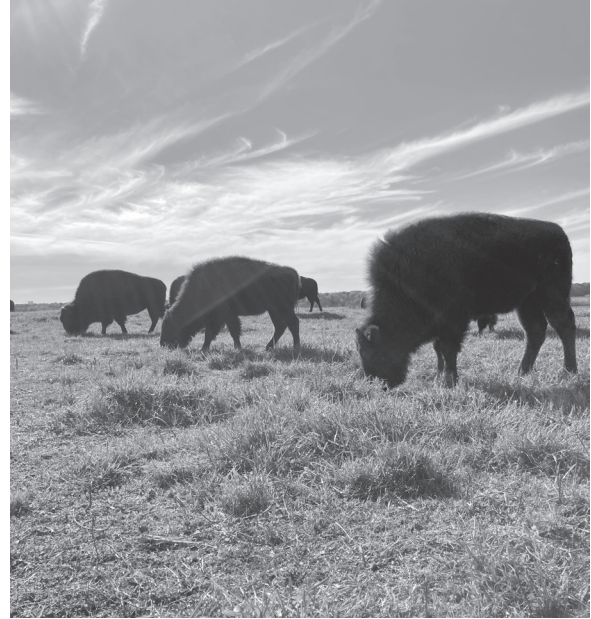




## *Crossroads*

Maya Gunther

Photograph



## *Graze*

Evangalia Guigley

Photograph

## *Living and Dying*

Emma Spinks

Dozens of crosses lined the kitchen wall  
in my grandmother's house.  
Framed Bible verses hung  
in every single room.  
I grabbed one of the banana muffins  
that my grandmother and I baked  
yesterday and walked on to the back patio.

She sat in a wrought iron patio chair,  
dressed in an old flowery nightgown.  
She smiled when I flopped down beside her,  
and her wrinkled hand grasped my knee,  
squeezing it lightly.  
We sat in comfortable silence,  
listening to dinging wind chimes  
and buzzing bees around us.

I thought of all the things we  
could do that weekend,  
and I smiled softly to myself,  
excitement building inside of me.  
Then my grandmother turned to me  
and said, *I prayed to God,  
and I am prepared to die. I have  
found peace, Emma, my sweet angel.*

I didn't want to think about  
the little time I had left with her,  
about the cancer in her bones.  
But I knew that no one else  
would listen to the musings  
of a dying woman.  
So, I sat by her side as  
she described her thoughts in detail.

She wanted to be led out of the  
church to the song "We Are Family."  
She wanted to write letters to her daughters,  
her siblings, her grandchildren, her husband.  
She wanted to leave the house for once,  
but she was too weak, too feeble.  
While she spoke, I thought about how we  
would die with so many wants left unfulfilled.

I drew shallow breaths and  
tears pricked my eyes as her  
words finally set into  
my mind, my heart, my soul.  
I spoke, my words quivering in the air,  
*Death comes for us all, but do not forget  
to live.*

# HAZEL EYES

Lily Langstaff

I don't have a favorite color. It used to change all the time, and every time someone asked the most boring question on the planet, I was stumped with my answer. I just didn't know. And people have good reasons for their favorite colors. My favorite person's favorite color is green because it's his dad's favorite color. People that like pastel colors like them because they're soft and cozy. I've never met a baby-blue person without the reason that it simply reminded them of the sky's soft edges. So eventually, after years of lame ice-breakers and Buzzfeed quizzes, I just gave up. I don't have a favorite color.

For so long, though, I had a least favorite color.

Brown was the stench of cow manure. It was squirrels pelting acorns at your head. I spent years stacking box dyes on brunette locks, thinking that there was nothing good in brown. It was mud on white Chucks and dying houseplants. Nobody's favorite color is brown, I thought, because there was no reason to like it. Coffee was a bitter, acquired taste and pennies are pretty much worthless. I ran away from shades of copper and cedar like there was a rabid dog behind me.

And then I met Hazel Eyes.

He's like lightning in human form. Electrifying. Before him, I never noticed how brown eyes look in sunlight. They're two pools of warm honey, feeling weirdly like home. Brown turned into earthy tones of healing. It's the feeling of summer melting into fall and fall melting into winter. It was the Garden of Eden of my Genesis, laden with soil in shades of umber and hickory. I went from raking bitten nails up and down my forearms in failing attempts to ground myself to toying with walnut curls. The way they wrapped around my finger and always sprung into a different place with the same shape was mesmerizing.

The changes were subtle, creeping up on me. I went to Kroger for milk and left with a bottle of tawny nail polish. I tried a sip of his coffee on our first Waffle House night. It was bitter, but not bad. I started toasting my bread for a little bit longer. I took the long way into town to walk past more natural scenes. Yeah, the *dirt*. I pocketed acorns and talked to squirrels. My Pinterest

boards slowly incorporated more of the color, from taupe jackets to bronze jewelry. I scribbled down biology notes with a brown Crayola Super Tip. I turned into a total sucker.

It started slowly and then it got *worse*. I began constantly searching for khaki shorts and frizzy hair. I constantly wanted to crawl inside his skin and live in there with him.

It was a total accident, how it all happened, but my world shifted to hues of mahogany and chocolate and it was like seeing for the first time.

Hazel Eyes makes brown look like God's favorite color.

I always found it ironic when he complimented the blue of my eyes. It's like this: blue eyes will always be there. They will always be in a Nicholas Sparks novel with some perfect blue-eyed blondie. Blue is Lon Hammond in *The Notebook*. Brown is Noah.

Everything about Hazel Eyes is comforting in the same way that color is.

He laughed when he found out I didn't have a favorite color. It was one of the first times we talked. He told me I was an enigma. I lied. I did have a favorite color. From the day I met him, I had a favorite color. △



## A Look into Indian Culture

Aastha Banga

Acrylic, charcoal

# OUTSTANDING

Shelby Tisdale

Cara's Aunt Tina's breasts slanted obnoxiously in her V-neck floral dress, her wide waist swinging as Cara stumbled into the banquet hall. "You're lucky I'm here for you," Tina said, and Cara agreed. Tina taught Cara to smudge her eyeliner and paint her toenails even when she wore closed-toed shoes. Tina viewed herself as the epitome of class, with arched eyebrows and a forty-five-degree chin.

All Cara could think was that she felt like string cheese, like pieces of her personality had been tugged from her identity and chewed until she was a thread of bland mozzarella. This ceremony would worship that thread of bland mozzarella, and Cara wondered if the myth of hard work and sacrifice was true. Tina always tried her best on the surface, but Cara knew the Tina with Little Debbie wrappers in her floorboard and photos of a broken marriage in her closet. Cara hid her sleepless nights and sporadic anxiety attacks under concealer and clean sweatshirts. She wondered when alarm clocks replaced lullabies and she began waking to the sound of bullhorns and beeping microwaves. She believed every teenager she knew lived the same life.

Tina downed a bottle of Diet Coke and reapplied her lipstick using a spoon as a makeup mirror. Cara pressed her forefinger against the dirtied crease under her eyelid, stamping eye makeup onto her fingertip. It wasn't that she wanted to be Tina, but she'd much rather be Tina than her parents. She'd sit in Tina's apartment any day she could, flipping channels and watching Tina fidget with Excel spreadsheets for her day job and paint in the afternoons. No one bought Tina's paintings, but Tina didn't care.

"I'd sell my soul if I could eat like this every night." Tina's plump red lips stained the wine glass, and she tore into the steak. Cara clenched the tablecloth in her fist and closed her eyes, envisioning herself walking across the stage in the front of the room. She looked at Tina, who, with the grace of a bird wrestling a worm from mud, ravaged her meal. Cara drew steamed green

beans to her lips and sipped her water, feeling the room closing in under ceiling lights that seemed to stare and haughty academic chatter that sounded like AM radio during a thunderstorm.

Cara thought about the award, and her tongue pressed into the roof of her mouth. She took in the room, watching the man walking onto the stage to give a keynote about his accomplishments and why you can only save the world if you read research papers over morning coffee and never laugh.

Cara looked at Tina's freckled elbows pinned into the tablecloth, her bright green eyes absorbing the scene. Tina had seen oceans and painted the New York cityscape. She'd sat in coffee shops with men who loved her and laid on grassy hillsides on warm

days, blown dandelions into cloud faces, and sang while driving down lonely highways. She was loud and unapologetic.

Cara's bedroom was carpeted with clothes she'd meant to wash, and she only cried on Fridays. She believed creativity was foreign to her generation, that adults (besides Tina) worshipped high GPAs and empty souls. Cara believed adults looked at children like Oppenheimer looked at the victims of the atomic bomb, that she and her peers had all died metaphorical deaths before learning what it meant to live. If Cara was the Sun, Tina was a larger star, a brighter one that was more deserving of attention but so distant from humanity that no one cared to cherish her light.

"I am proud to honor these outstanding students." The man's voice was crisp and practiced, like a news anchor.

Cara leaned into Tina's shoulder, and Tina smiled. "You've never been like everyone else, Cara. You're *outstanding*."

Cara couldn't take it. She stabbed her fork into her steak and stomped to the entrance of the room, her arms and legs stiff like a toy soldier's. Tina grabbed her purse and followed Cara to a hallway bench.

*"If Cara was the Sun,  
Tina was a larger star..."*



“I—I can’t do it anymore! I j—just can’t do this.”  
 Cara’s face twisted, and her teeth chattered as she spoke. “Tina, will you give me the keys? I don’t want to be here. Let’s drive to nowhere. Let’s leave. Let’s forget this. Tina, Tina, please. I just want to live like you.” Cara’s voice was urgent, and her hand shook as she spoke.

Tina smirked. “No looking back?” Her voice was throaty and pained. Tina’s eyebrows curled together, and Cara sucked in her stomach. Her arms folded across her chest. She turned to the door and could hear her name called faintly from the stage. Tina started walking to the door before Cara could answer, holding car keys over her shoulder. In the parking lot, Cara laughed at Tina’s floorboard and smiled at the moon. △



## *The Fountain*

Maya Gunther

Photograph

## *Always Home*

Gracie Rowland

Third Place—Poetry Competition

Home looks like whitewashed bricks and a greenhouse in the backyard where I once found God  
 Papered walls covered in renaissance art, abstract paintings, and love notes  
 It looks like six paned windows that creak when opened and stacks of bills on the wooden floor  
 Or a Christmas tree in August and empty bottles of anti-depressants on kitchen counters  
 I see home in the lavender incense curling ‘round my fingers and the ivy growing over my bed  
 Home is a mother who cries over failing the LSATs and scratches my back during panic attacks

Home smells like honey chamomile tea and my grandmother’s green bean casserole  
 The scent of fresh Mississippi mud, its red ghosts haunting my mother’s hardwood floors  
 It smells like the strong perfume of my sister, Saint Laurent’s Black Opium, bourbon and vanilla  
 It’s cinnamon cookie candles littered ‘round the house, matching my mother’s love for Christmas  
 Home is the sweetness of freshly cut grass after a Mississippi rainstorm

Home feels like a boy who writes me poems, his shallow breath on my neck by the Tombigbee  
 A sister holding my hand as I weep, grasping it harder with every shaky sob, her fingers firm  
 It feels like a pink comforter on Sunday mornings, wrapping me in its ignorant safety  
 Or the imagined warmth of moonlight as I dance in my grandmother’s rose garden  
 Home is the pressed limbs of friends in a twin-sized bed, desperate for touch and tenderness

Home sounds like my mother singing lullabies, her voice as quiet as her forgotten dreams  
 The cacophony of cars honking as I stand in the sunroof, arms out to the harsh wind  
 It’s the softness of my best friend’s voice in my ear, asking me if we can always be this close  
 Home sounds like the Pride and Prejudice movie soundtrack as I lay in my mother’s arms  
 Or the thumping of rain as the floodgates of heaven open once again  
 Home is the voice of Phoebe Bridgers and my own choked up laughter

# SMALL TALK PRAYERS

Shelby Tisdale

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

Blades of stained glass struck my white, thick elbows with stoplight hues. A bead of sweat crossed my collar bone, and I yanked my neckline higher.

“There’s my friend!” Hugging Ms. Keisha was like hugging a bag of popcorn fresh out of the microwave, while the kernels still jumped inside.

“We are so puh-roud of you and your sister! Your Mama can’t stop talkin’ in Sunday School ‘bout how smart you are! And beautiful too!” My shoulders were like the armrests on a chair that was missing a leg, straight and lopsided and still, growing stiffer as Ms. Keisha squeezed my waist. I turned to my older sister who sat against the back wall like one of the fake boulders that rich cities use to hide electrical boxes. Ms. Keisha knew not to hug her.

In fact, if you weren’t me, hugging my sister was a relatively similar experience to hugging an electrical box—if it was on fire and growled. Last week, our pastor’s wife tried to tap her on the shoulder; my sister hissed, took my shoulders like a steering wheel, and bulldozed me into Ms. Mary. I’m a means to an end, I thought, and didn’t take it personally. Neither did Ms. Mary.

People milled about but I was within myself, processing one of those weighty and nameless feelings that I only felt in a crowded room. I could feel the cotton in my t-shirt curve with my waist, blue jeans pinned into loose stomach skin. The air thickened and stirred with each spit sympathetic syllable, and I wondered if God was anything like Ms. Anette, who sat beside me on the back pew and couldn’t die. I liked thinking of God as stubborn and wrinkly, as an old woman who answered her front door with a gun behind her back. I wondered if God was afraid of Jackson, Mississippi, too.

I didn’t talk to Ms. Anette much anymore, mostly because if you asked, “How are you?” she’d list the reasons she’d die before the end of the week. I was glad I wasn’t expected to ask how God was doing.

I meandered toward my sister, knowing that if I stepped within her reach, she’d latch around my leg like a needy child and refuse to release me. I popped her

bubble of space like a nosy and stupid twig.

“Don’t leave me,” she said like I had the option. I stood in her forceful embrace like a chained and anxious dog, separate from the stirring Baptist congregation buzz. She tapped her middle finger against an uplifted thumb and chattered her teeth like a rodent. It was her way of saying she wanted attention, or a napkin (depending on the circumstances). One-legged and pretending that being pinned to the floor by my Adidas was normal, I discussed politics; she asserted that no matter the issue, the answer was that she should become supreme leader of the world and everyone should love her. She wanted to buy an island, she said, and she’d been watching YouTube videos on Mongolian geography.

I should have cared more. My leg felt possessed by a shameless spirit, while my conscious limbs capitulated to the numb of their brother. I adjusted each misplaced strand of my hair, glancing at my sister’s disheveled dead ends that lingered against my foot. Mama once taught my sister how to sign “prostitute” and “stupid” in ASL, which seemed to lighten the laborious Southern Baptist demands of side hugs and small talk. She sat against the wall in protest of chairs replacing pews and called Mama names with her enlightened hands.

My sister called Mr. Henry my father’s pet. Daddy found him under a bridge and got him an apartment through his nonprofit job housing Mississippi’s homeless. Daddy worked with many abrasive and manipulative men, but Henry always smiled, always saw the sunshine. He had one arm, the other he lost drunk and waving at the people opposite his side of a train track (who we assume were telling him to move). I watched Henry shaking his hand in fellowship across the room, nodding his balding head with the kind of contentment that told me he wasn’t sure where he was, but he was happy to be there. In the middle of summer, Henry would update us on the stats of football teams that didn’t exist, and we’d politely agree. Mama said it didn’t matter if we listened; Henry just wanted to talk.

Henry, Anette, Keisha, Sister—their words simmered in that frying pan of a sanctuary. I pried

*“I wondered if God was afraid  
of Jackson, Mississippi, too.”*

my leg and sat beside Mama, my waistband buttons pressing further into my curled belly. I listened. God listened. God held a spatula and stirred the voices in Southside Baptist Church; I felt myself starting to evaporate as the preacher stepped to the pulpit, as my collar sank again, and I readjusted it. I sank again and readjusted.

God didn't know it was 10:15—time to speak and feel motionless amid a flow of bodies and shameless exchange of thoughts. Should I have been shameless? My shame was waterproof mascara and the breakfast I didn't eat. Did God eat breakfast? Did He fast and pray for some meaningful exchange of words and prayers, and did he feel shame?

“Can I get an Amen?”

The amens formed a scattered chorus, with varying amplitudes of faith and joy.

“Let's take about five minutes to stretch our legs and greet one another.”

I'd only survived the small talk prelims. The pastor stepped from the stage, and the sanctuary stirred again.

I asked God how he was doing. I prayed He would never die. △



## *Lost and Found*

**James Harden**

Second Place—Other Media

Digital painting

## *Vivien Leigh, Manic Debutante Undone*

**Gracie Rowland**

Blanche DuBois tipped me into madness, didn't she? Like my mother's copper kettle,  
boiling with froth, tipping black tea 'til painted porcelain overflows,  
letting the madness stain the sheep's rug as it trails down the cherrybark parlor table.  
My body has no home, my mind its own mercenary; I relinquish spine and flesh with grace.  
I contain multitudes, I contain beauty. Even the moon envies my laughter, my ravishment.  
*I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.*

Manic depressive, manic depressive they tell me. I am a creative, not crazy.  
Electroshock therapy and Laurence's fisted anger broke my bones, my marrow,  
shattered my glimmering mirrors 'til they glared, 'til they shone with acrimony.  
My beauty overwhelms them, that hateful world. Fear knows me not,  
but it knows them intimately. I went to bed with glory and woke up wounded.  
*Oh, in my youth I excited some admiration. But look at me now!*

Nothing is real, nothing is real! Nothing but this Aegean blue tiled floor on which I lie, each square  
painted with pink and yellow chrysanthemums round the corners, a garden.  
I will love this floor forever, my impregnable fortress of embrace, my ceramic paradise.  
I am a god, while they are a wasteful creation, scared by their own mortality. Embrace the change,  
never the continuity. I welcome death with impulse, crawling over broken glass to please the screen.  
*I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can't be alone!*



# ZION

Jaylin Jones

Second Place—Short Story Competition

Zion's hands were ice, even in his pockets, but Chicago winters had gnawed through layers and bone alike for as long as he lived in the city. He'd been out here for hours, just sitting on the sidewalk and letting his thoughts settle. The slush and snow that had piled in the street kept him company while his body froze. Breathing deep, he watched the night air enter and exit, breaking into crystals of ice that caught fire under the streetlights. He smiled and wondered what he'd prefer: going home for dinner or resting here and watching his mouth make stars? It wasn't an easy decision, but he got up and pointed his face to the sky. Today's flakes were already falling, soon to become tomorrow's ammunition. Maybe snowmen, too, standing guard with sticks and stone-sight. Zion chose to run, singing some 60's groove while he brought heat back to his toes. It was a little tune his Grandma sang to his sister when she was still little, and he never lost the sound, not even after he lost her.

*When the night has come*

*And the land is dark*

*And the moon is the only light we'll see*

*No I won't be afraid*

*Oh, I won't be afraid*

*Just as long as you stand, stand by me*

It was Christmas break, which meant a few days of freedom buried under a couple inches of snow. For most, it was time to spend with friends or video games, but Zion just had his family. He spent his evenings helping Mama work her miracles in the kitchen, seasoning and stirring right behind her while she cast her spells. He let his little sister run him around, too, either aching his back or chasing him on her chubby little legs. Hide-and-seek was their favorite. He'd send up a fake sneeze while hiding behind furniture or have his best falsetto scream hang in the air whenever he disappeared around a corner. She played with his old toys in their room most days, sitting on the bed while algebra homework gave him headaches. Things were good.

So why was he going to die soon?

Zion came into the apartment and shut the door, smiling with dark lips and frost on his cheeks. He could tell that he'd made the right choice earlier from the smell. Mama was cooking fish, and the soft sizzle of fat melting in the fryer was music to his ears. She might as well have been Mozart, leaning to the side as she layered flour over what she got for half-off at the corner store. There was a gentle warmth to the apartment that felt amazing in winter, the way it crept into his chest and smoothed the goosebumps on his arms and neck.

"You're late. I told you six o'clock, boy."

He winced a little. He could feel Ma give him the "look" even with her back turned, and it never failed to freeze him quicker than winter ever could.

"Sorry. I lost track of time. Snow's pretty. Might be a lot more soon."

She was quiet for a minute. He could feel her sitting on a lecture, weighing her words. Not like he didn't deserve one, coming in after an hour in 31-degree weather.

"Uh huh. Go wash up, and don't make no noise. I just got Tamara sleep. Dinner gon' be ready soon."

He let out the breath he didn't notice he was holding.

"Yes, ma'am."

The sidewalk was nice, but Zion did his best thinking in his room. He tried to think less these days, but here, he couldn't run from it. This was where it started, after all. They found out a few months ago, back in July. He'd spent the end of summer in bed, moving less and sleeping more. It was small stuff at first, just long naps and less junk food, but it got worse soon. After three nights of just nibbling at dinner, Ma decided they were going to the doctor, and that was that. They went and were at the hospital a week after. Two more weeks of waiting for results, and he sat in a sterile room with white doves on the ceiling. It was serious, some long word he couldn't pronounce. It sounded made-up, like

what a cartoon character would come down with. But it was real, a problem with his genetics. A “one-in-a-million, what are the chances” kind of condition that was just static in his ears as the doctor described it. Even with his eyes drifting up to watch the doves, he could see Ma’s heart breaking as she nodded her head and took notes, her hands shaking while she fought back tears.

He didn’t like to remember it. He never asked for the specifics after, and Ma didn’t tell him either. He knew what he needed to already. Either he didn’t have long, or he could go any time. He’d make the most of it, in his own way.

“Zion! Tamara! Come eat!”

But he’d have to worry about that later.

It was Sunday, and that meant church. Before, Zion would be on his feet every time the pastor gave the cue, clapping and singing while Mama and Tamara were next to him throwing their hands up. It made everything better. Now, the choir song sounded different. It was smooth but strong and suffocating, and the notes got stuck in his throat as he sang along, dragging his head lower and slowing whatever hymn ran from his lips to a muffled hum.

He fought hard against it, but it was a losing battle. He was somewhere else, drifting in and out while the world turned to noise.

It was peaceful, endless. He imagined that if heaven was real, it’d feel like a long nap in a church pew, with warm light pouring over him through stained glass. All until he felt the bite of Ma’s fingers nipping at his neck and his eyes flung open.

She had been letting a lot of things go recently, but sleeping in church was her last straw. Not even Tamara had that privilege, not since she could talk. Zion was on lockdown for a week, although the only thing she did was take away his phone.



## *Infinite Immunity to Pain*

**Gracie Rowland**

Other media

It was fine. It gave him time to think.

He remembered his grandma’s funeral. He was much younger then, and an open-casket was confusing. She’d been sick, and during his visits she had looked smaller and more distant, like her mind had gone somewhere else and her body was struggling to catch up. But she looked beautiful there, her eyes shut in her Sunday best, looking just like she did when she held his hand and marched him up the pews to pray. She was just sleeping, she had to be.

But she wasn’t. He learned what death meant that day, and it raised a lot of questions he accepted that he couldn’t answer. Maybe that was the point, the questions. He didn’t have those answers yet, but he decided he would before the end.

Zion moved from his bed to his desk, took a pen and a notepad, and started writing. This was how he would make the most of what was left. △

# IN MEMORIAM

Jaylin Jones

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

*They're dead to me. I mean that.*

It is 5:00 a.m., and my mom wants me to know that both my fathers have died. I am not surprised. I've buried myself in my seat, and I say nothing as she turns to read what little of my expression she can in the dark. I assume it started somewhere between last week and today, beginning with a few neutral texts that must have felt like weapons edged with eighteen years of broken promises, ending in all-out war between men I have not seen in months and the woman who now has to take me to the hospital, alone. There is something about the way her voice sounds this morning that hurts, even though I know she cannot help it. The pain and the anger make her words heavy with hate, and they seem to fall from her mouth as soon as they form.

Morning shadow is the only thing alive this early. It engulfs us, swallowing our car and the road ahead until it can't hold anymore, spitting out white lines and listless traffic. Somehow, my eyes are lifted from my phone and drawn to the nothing that approaches on all sides.

I remember long nights that I'm not supposed to, ones spent with my small frame draped over the back-seat, warm blankets piled high onto Spider-man pajamas. I would stare up at the night sky running over the windows and imagine it was cool, black water, drifting us to some magical place outside of time. I'd fall asleep to the quiet rumble of the Earth getting lost in the rocking of Mama's '07 Alera, not knowing where we were going, or that my home was shattering as I shut my eyes.

*I'm sorry. I won't tell you what to think, but I'm done with them.*

I abandon that train of thought as mom finishes her rant with an apology. I want to tell her that I have never blamed her, not once, but I don't have the words. Dim light lets me see the faint moisture on her cheek as she says she'll buy a DNA test and give us piece of mind. It

doesn't matter to me, but I don't argue. I just know that half of me will still be poison, no matter what it says.

Our ride goes on, with about an hour left before my appointment. Almost to the interstate, a worse-than-skunk-spray smell stabs us in the car, and we can't tell if there's a corpse or a gas leak nearby, but either way we hold our breath till the expressway and let ourselves die of laughter after. Seeing my smile reflected back at me with dimpled cheeks in the rear-view makes me think more, and before I can stop myself I'm breaking back into my own mind to search for answers in the past my present can't provide.

Last week, I ran my fingers over old photos of our family. I didn't notice the outfits or remember the occasions, but I spent an hour flitting from feature to feature. Do I have his smile or his nose? Did I get those dimples from him, or am I simply in denial? I wanted proof that I am either one or the other because I felt sick. I see both a martyr and a monster when I look in

the mirror, and there are only so many demons I can handle alone.

My father, a navy blue uniform and badge polished with pride, stuffed with an attitude and

ego that weighed heavier on our home than the gun on his belt. He is two words every four months on average, appearing on my phone on holidays and maybe if I'm sick.

*What's up?*

Or my father, patron saint of liars and thieves, who blessed his own silver tongue in beige vestments, then sold his skill behind iron bars. He wrote a book he hasn't published yet, but is sure he will send me soon. I have his way with words after all, carving my passion into essays and poems and resumes, writing I need to prove my worth because I am my father's son.

We've been driving all the while, as my mind races. Measuring time, not in minutes, but in mother-son sarcasm interrupted by a mechanical voice letting

*"... there are only so many demons  
I can handle alone."*



us know that 76 miles is waning into 12, and then finally 1.5.

“Left on Jefferson Ave” lets us know we won’t be hearing that voice till the ride back, and we pull into the parking lot. As we approach, my gaze stays affixed to the top of the hospital, and it seems to stretch thinner and wider into the horizon. By the time I’m at the door, the world feels like a painting I wasn’t supposed to step in, but did anyway, and it’s too late to turn back.

My mom and I sign our way across miles of forms and dotted lines for me to land in a soft, sterile bed in a room labeled Special Procedures. Seeing her clench my hand and wince when the IV slips in makes it much harder to forget. She has been there for every injection and every drop of blood drawn. I know that she is as tired of waiting rooms and uncomfortable chairs as any mother could be, and even more tired of sitting in them alone.

We wait for the doctor and I listen to the nurses talk about how they like to watch the Hallmark channel after work. *It’s comforting, you know. ‘Course I know how exactly how it ends, joyful, no matter what happens at the start.*

I laugh, and think the opposite. I never liked the sappy plots, or the characters. If anything, they make

you sadder. They don’t show how you can be happy without a happy ending.

Tolstoy once said, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

I wonder sometimes what the world would be like if everyone wrote “family” differently, like a signature. In mine, the “fa” is solid and bold but the rest breaks off like a stutter, trailing from my pen like I don’t know what they mean until I run out of space.

The doctor comes in and is surprised to see me smiling, and I make a corny joke, something silly that would elicit groans everywhere but four feet from an operating room. This will be the best sleep I’ve had in weeks.

I’m wheeled in and I start trying to think of something profound before that long dark, searching for words and imagery to use for my next assignment, maybe. They start the oxygen in the tube in my nose and I try to place the taste. It’s rubber, I know that. But is it the hot, awful miasma of a Kangaroo Mart in summer or is it brand-new bike tires running over my face and tongue? A nurse slips something into my IV that turns the world to static, a tinny clatter that falls and rises in pitch like forks and knives dancing in a sink. I forget about the bike tires. I focus on the ceiling and decide my next poem will start with one just like it. I lazily search for the words, but by the time “fluorescent, bulwark-sky” sticks to the roof of my mouth I’ve joined the noise.

Two hours later, after the wheelchair ride to the car where I couldn’t stop waving and the long nap that turns into a longer nap, I wake up. I find pictures of my insides under my alarm clock, and my eyes widen a little as I review them. My phone is what I reach for next, and I scroll to the two names in parentheses under D.

I ask myself, *Who do I call?*

In the end, I just don’t. △



## Looking Left

Elena Eaton

Oil on canvas

## *My Skeletons*

Lily Langstaff

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

I am a laughing baby, a head full of brown hair, curious  
blue eyes.

The staff at Publix know me by name and  
I am acquainted with the ocean at three weeks old.  
I leave Florida too soon.

I am crooked-teeth, a third-grade anarchist, brown hair  
chopped with safety scissors.

Ink-stained hands fill notebook after notebook and  
I tear through Tolkien books with insatiable hunger,  
a believer and a daydreamer on southern soil.

I am flaming red pixie cut, tight braces, a middle school  
disaster.

The daydreamer is slaughtered with cheap eyeliner and  
Hot Topic tees,  
reinvented as short-tempered and loud, doing  
everything out of spite,  
a humidity-hating non-believer and I want to leave.

I am blue hair, a self-destruct button, a headache,  
chewing and spitting out a Mississippi drawl like a wad  
of dip.

I binge horror films and rip up my clothes,  
never quite *pretty* or *Southern* enough.

I am a long-haired brunette again, a people pleaser, a  
doormat.

I am Miss Mississippi, a magnolia flower,  
a Bible Belt babe, electric turned acoustic.  
I cut my hair to my shoulders. I am dead to myself.

I change and I change and I change.

I am a bleached blonde with a straight, white smile.  
I remember the blue hair, the crooked teeth, the  
daydreamer, the short temper.  
I remember the white flags and every little death.  
I forgot where they are buried and give in to the Old  
South.

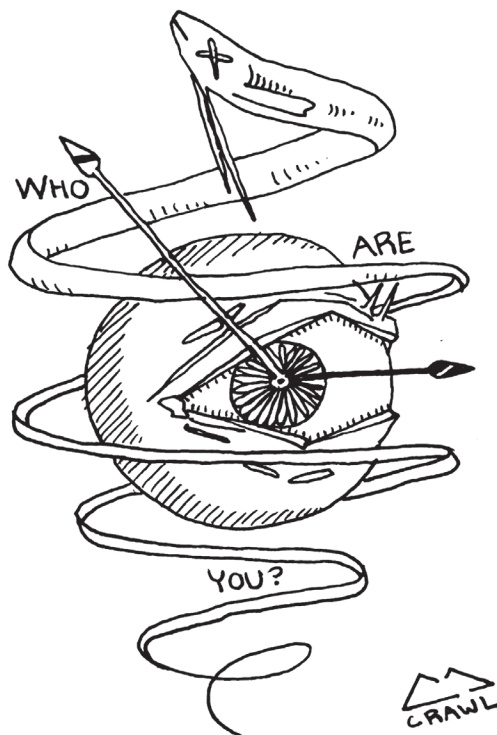


## *Skeletons in the Closet*

Aastha Banga

First Place—Other Media

Ink



## *Crawling*

James Harden

Pen and paper

# THE TURKEY VULTURES

Shelby Tisdale

Third Place—Short Story Competition

I watch them picnic. They take turns thrusting naked heads into armadillo guts and sitting on the shed. The hound throws a hissy fit against the back door as I watch. The turkey vultures would love me. They could love me at least, not the way I love a burger or my husband, but the way a soldier loves his country. They're God's clean-up crew fighting beak-and-talon for a corpseless society. I want to be a skeleton. When I'm a skeleton, the sky will blacken with turkey vultures, picking at me like remains of the last stripped and crispy drumstick in a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket. They make the world smell better. I regret to say that I've never worn perfume and my daughter, Kendall, thinks I don't know how to be a woman. I only own tennis shoes, and I don't actually care whether I look good, but at least I don't smell like I'll smell when the turkey vultures come to take me away.

Kendall doesn't love me like the turkey vultures would. I lean out the window like a cheerleader for a team that hasn't won in fifty years, telling my little friends they are doing a fantastic job at clearing the hound's prey. "Mom," she says, and I don't listen. She wears nice shoes, and that is fine, but they clack against the faux wood floors like an obnoxious and irregular metro-nome, louder than the hound's claws and jingling tags. When the turkey vultures come, they won't take Kendall's shoes. Kendall may not have shoes. What if we died like armadillos, naked and buried by dogs under magnolia trees or booted by pickup truck tires? Shoes wouldn't matter then. What if they left us on the side of the road, and people stuck their necks out of car windows when they smelled us to figure out if the turkey vultures were eating a skunk or a possum or us? I wonder where they would find me.

Kendall is beautiful and says I'm eccentric, but I don't think ladybugs are beautiful like she does. I think turkey vultures are beautiful and have much more purpose than ladybugs ever will. We look like turkey vultures when we're born and we look like them again if we die old—wrinkled, hunchbacked, beautiful hags. Beauty is meaningless, and turkey vultures know that, which makes them wiser birds than owls.

"Mom," Kendall says, and this time I respond. She says I'm blocking the dishwasher, so I thrust my hip to the side and make room for her to sift through the plastic plates. Once, when Kendall was smaller, we watched the turkey vultures pick deer meat from the median. She believed me when I said they were beautiful.

"I need you to listen to me." Kendall seems sad, but she doesn't love the turkey vultures, and they're misunderstood. I pick at the mosquito bite on my arm and a small stream of blood trickles into the sink. I remember being misunderstood.

I like to remember, and I remember everything. It makes Kendall uncomfortable. She says I don't know when to stop talking or what not to talk about. I told the supermarket cashier about her depression, and she gawked, but she didn't tell me not to say that. She looks at me like I've done something wrong and leaves the kitchen. She doesn't think the turkey vultures are beautiful.

I hold a dishrag over the mosquito bite blood now, and Kendall isn't here anymore, but she hasn't left the house. She doesn't. The armadillo carcass's stench ruins my blueberry muffin, and there are only two turkey vultures left. The smaller one, a female, perches on the shed, and I smile. The male dodges maggots on the dead bone. Armadillos run in circles, dig sometimes, and die. The hound helped because he wanted praise. My husband drives a truck with a ladder on top and someone else's name on the door. He's like an armadillo, and he's not home. Maybe I'm an armadillo, too.

If I'm an armadillo, the turkey vultures will eat me when I die, which is better for the rest of us. I want a cheap funeral, and I want Kendall to sing a hymn. *I'll fly away, oh glory.* I don't want to die old.

I like to remember, and I remember everything. I don't hear Kendall's shoes. My muffin smells like blueberries again, and the mosquito bite has scabbed. I like to remember. I remember everything. I remember the turkey vultures, the armadillo getting smaller and wreaking. Black wings. Loud shoes. Loud shoes and loud hound and Kendall speaking. The turkey vultures are beautiful. The turkey vultures are gone. △

*"I like to remember, and I  
remember everything."*



# WELCOME TO CHERRYTREE ISLAND

Faith Bradford

Sitting on the banks of the Ouachita River at family reunion crawfish boils was not how I intended to spend the summer of sixth grade. The stench of deep-fried shrimp and hushpuppies invading the air sends me two steps into the water's edge. *Great.* My Converse, drenched in filthy water and glazed with grime, resemble a sepia shade. *Gross.* Returning to desolation was *so* not the cool-kid thing to do. I envisioned wind blowing in my face, leaving me exasperated after three rides on the Iron Rattler Rollercoaster, not slight breezes causing dead cicadas to rain down from willow trees into my hair. I wish my family was fonder of fish fries; I could have tolerated that. Loud aunties and drunk uncles create the perfect concoction for ringing ears and a rural Bud Light graveyard. Considering their health history, I should probably plan to visit the *other* graveyard soon. My mother's side is accustomed to tragedy. Anguish shakes our family like earthquakes.

*Welcome back to Cherrytree Island!* The population is now 348, down from 731 at the 2010 census. It's comical how this run-down "establishment" can even hold the title of "island." Not big enough to be a city, or even a town. Contrary to the name, there is no sand. Massive dandelions, poison ivy, and kudzu ravage what was once home, colonizing this chintzy village. If I was in charge of this place, I'd rename it "Cherrytree Penitentiary." The welcome sign would read *Beware, you might die of boredom! Leave while you can!* But don't worry, I'll make sure to repaint over the bland olive sign with a flaming scarlet; there's already too much greenery in this place. Too bad my mind failed to remind me of what awaited in this no-Wi-Fi-wasteland for eight weeks: solitude. Back in elementary there was a service tower here. Guess it wasn't a priority to keep it. Like chimpanzees in zoo exhibitions, I imagine the cars passing by laugh at me. I bet they're headed to Baton Rouge, or New Orleans if their pockets feel fancy.

My mind preps itself for these trips back home using a series of mental gymnastics fueled by cheap Aldi vanilla espressos. Think you know monotony? I urge you to join me next time and experience what

looks like six inches on an atlas morph into six hours. Oh, and here's an idea: play I Spy until you've identified three hundred sixty rotting oaks from Montana to Louisiana. Good ol' family bonding, ain't it?

My grandmother waits for me after the cookout, always at 7 p.m. prompt. I'm her youngest grandchild; she relays tales of carrying me from the chilly hospital and holding me for the first time. And for the first time, I support her up her stone stairs. Each step is a feat for her feet—arthritis has not been kind. Inside, the walls are dingy from years of cigarette smoke clouds. She likes Newports, maybe a pack of Pall Malls—the blue box—if times allow her to spare a quarter. With every

summer, the walls turn several shades darker. Looking at my grandmother wrenches my soul: she has outlived four out of five of her children, each heartbreak

adding a wrinkle to her fine lines. Diabetes is only the beginning of a plethora of health problems. I ask her to stop smoking, "please, this time, for me." Her apology is a toothless smile backed with a chunky slice of strawberry crème cake, four layers, fresh purée from the farm, with whipped cream probably from Ford's. I accept. I'll be back to visit next year. △

*"Anguish shakes our family  
like earthquakes."*



**Mississippi Sound**

**Taylor Wypyski**

Other media

## *Orchid*

Michael Lu  
Photograph



## *There Are Thousands of Eventually*

Abby Strain

The horizon will swallow us for breakfast one  
day—  
chase us down its wicked throat with a glass of  
orange juice.

I have forgotten how to pray. This is not to say  
there is no divinity between us, merely  
that it turns to sand in my hands  
when I look.

I want to drink in the words that pour like hot tea  
from your mouth, which is to say  
the stars melt like sugar  
when you look at me.

Your hand fits in mine like I press flowers  
between the pages of books, which is to say  
I want to catch your laughter out of the air  
and weave it into a blanket.

I used to think you looked gentle enough  
to grab a sparrow from the brush,  
but I know now that your hands  
keep turning into ravens  
you can't catch.

I want to make a home out of the space between us,  
which is to say before eventually—  
when the horizon swallows us—  
I will press our divinity between the pages of my  
favorite book.

## *Berosus' Account of the Hanging Gardens After Spending Two Years in the City, 582 B.C.*

Blake Cheater

This great kingdom.  
Yes, this great kingdom.  
They said Neb couldn't do it,  
but you'll do just about anything for love.

His oasis in this sea of sand almost  
serves as a beacon broadcasting  
the message  
*Yes, there is life here.*

You should walk around the hanging gardens,  
you might even see Amytis if you're lucky.  
The bright tangerine aroma seems to uplift  
the rest of the happy plants.

Vivid colors of mango, deep seaweed greens,  
polished ruby and sapphire flowers, dew dripping down  
to compliment the  
humidity of the Euphrates.

It was worth it.  
I can prove it to you:  
just take a deep breath and feel the symphony,  
and, if you listen closely, you can hear them play.

# LOCK AND KEY

Stephanie Ressel

First Place—Essay Competition

Growing up in what they liked to call the “wrong side of town,” I didn’t see much wrong with it. The park was within walking distance—that’s if you count walking through the ditches and climbing through chain link fences a feasible route. The neighborhood was safe. There were plenty of generous policemen giving my neighbors rides, I could only imagine, back home. The mean ol’ pit bulls were always chained up to a pipe to keep kids like me safe.

Mom had two full-time jobs and Dad’s job was simply to be the smartest man alive. I guessed our house must have been the most expensive estate on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Mom left for work every day at what felt like completely random hours. “Do not answer the door,” she would say to me and my siblings as she locked the deadbolt from the inside of the house. I never understood what she meant by this, given the door could not be unlocked from the inside without a key, and even then, the secondary door was also protected through several locks. Mom would say, “You never know if that person wants to take you away.” I loved where I lived. Never did I want someone to take me away. Never did I answer the door.

When I was in first grade, we moved across the bay to what they liked to call the “nice side of town,” though I didn’t see what was so nice about it. The streets constantly twisted and turned and cul de sac-d, and with every turn there were fifteen more houses identical to my own. The trees were too tiny, far too weak to climb, surrounded in red mulch chips, and barely supported by strings and splints. There was no park. More importantly, too many people knocked on the door asking to mow our lawn and prune our hedges, or for us to change our satellite provider and buy cookies. Sometimes when someone knocked on the door, my parents would be home to answer. Standing behind my dad’s legs and hoping to God that

these people weren’t here to take me away, I would listen. I would hear how they spoke and try to imagine what they looked like, never letting them see me as to not remind them that I am the one they came here to take away. Our new door could be unlocked from inside the house, so I began to answer the door when my parents were not home, just to see what these people looked like. They weren’t all that bad. All it took was a simple “No thank you, mister” and they went away.

One morning I woke up to a loud banging on the door—a solid, dense mass beating on the door as if to say, “Let me in!” I lay awake to decipher whether the banging noise was just my imagination until three more

*“The fear of who was behind  
the door began to slowly fill me  
with regret as I went to wake  
Mom up.”*

blows hit the door. *Bang, bang, bang!* I sprang up and answered the door. Two men towered over me, so close to the door their black boots covered almost every letter in “welcome” and made the floor mat read “...el...e” instead. The men wore black blazers and opaque sunglasses.

Where were their eyes? Was there even someone in there? Being an expert on handling visitors at the door, I said, “No thank you, misters.”

“Is Marilyn here?” they interrogated.

The fear of who was behind the door began to slowly fill me with regret as I went to wake Mom up. Tired, she just stared at me. When Mom answered the door, I hid behind her legs and listened. They were not asking to mow our lawn or prune our hedges. Instead, they were demanding my mother’s documentation and threatening to “send her back to her own country.” The men in suits told my mom that she didn’t belong here. I guess we should have stayed in our old neighborhood. The men in suits put my mom in handcuffs and let her have a seat on our porch. They then proceeded to rape our home, inspecting every room, digging through every closet, bathroom, cabinet, and even our garage. The men blunderingly searched through my brother’s



and sister's rooms, unconcerned of the risk of waking them. They looked under the beds and in every pile of clothes. It was as if we took something of theirs and they desperately needed it back. Whatever they were hunting for, they never found because as soon as they got through the third or fourth sweep of snooping, they met my mother outside.

I knew this was my fault. These people were taking my mom away and it was all my fault. All I could do was try to go back to sleep and hope this wasn't real. My bed felt foreign. My entire house felt like I had never lived a day in it. After what felt like hours, my mom came back inside, walked into her room, and shut the door. Those men left, and the days that followed were like those of the days before the knock. Dad was still the smartest man alive. Mom still went to work at random hours, and although I still wasn't able to see her often, I was glad to know that she was still coming home.

It was only a matter of time until I'd discover that those men were ICE agents. That day was the closest I'd come to being orphaned by the hands of a white man unhappy with an Asian woman. I learned that some people didn't like people like my mom living in their country. Regardless of the countless of jobs my mom had worked and years waited to even be eligible to become a citizen to this land of opportunity, all it took was an angry white man to convince these officers that she did not belong here. Must have been a white man's country. Must have been why my first home was on the "wrong side of town." It must have been why the people living on the "nice side of town" believed they were entitled to a better community. I thought back to my old neighborhood and the wondrous paradise I knew it as. Many new questions arose like "Why didn't the kids that got rides from the policemen ever come home?" or "Why was the mean ol' pit bull so mean?" or "Why did our door have so many locks?" Part of me knew the answers to these questions. Another part of me was afraid to admit them, but for now, the door will remain unanswered. △



## *Refugee's Prayer*

Shelby Tisdale

Graphite pencil



## *Reminiscence*

Amanda Zhou

Third Place—Drawing  
Charcoal

# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Amanda Anderson** (Long Beach) captures moments with photos to remember them. She remembers, from a young age, documenting her memories through pictures and videos. Her favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird* and her defining motto is “say no more.”

**Aastha Banga** (Laurel) enjoys making art because it calms her down and makes her happy. She loves the quote, “Always be thankful for the bad things in life. They open your eyes to see the good things you weren’t paying attention to before.”

**Faith Bradford** (Olive Branch) says “Dreams are called dreams for a reason...” She would have liked to meet Malcolm X if given the opportunity and hopes her piece “Entry 49:2073” leaves readers wanting more.

**Blake Cheater** (Meridian) writes to translate complex thoughts and ideas into something tangible. He hopes that readers of his work will pick up a history or physics textbook and learn more about our incredible world.

**Karlene Deng** (Starkville) draws her inspiration from her sister, Kalina—looking to her artwork and the obstacles she has conquered. Photography, or any other form of art, helps her to de-stress and explore new things.

**Elena Eaton** (Gulfport) finds creating art to be a form of stress relief. She feels incredibly fulfilled after completing a piece, and she hopes her art in *Southern Voices* will remind viewers to take interpretations through fresh perspectives. She finds motivation in both her faith in God and her parents, who inspire her to be positive and hardworking.

**Evangelia Guigley** (Hernando) hopes her piece, “Graze”, reminds viewers to remember humanity’s duty to protect wildlife. Her defining motto is “The past is the past. Make room for a better future.”

**Maya Gunther** (Corinth) is interested in photography because she believes that it is important to appreciate her surroundings; she wants her photography to show people the beauty in everyday life.

**James Harden**’s (Hernando) favorite book is *Slow Regard of Silent Things* by Patrick Rothfuss. His first memory of creating art is in his kindergarten art class, where he remembers getting his art put on display in the hallway.

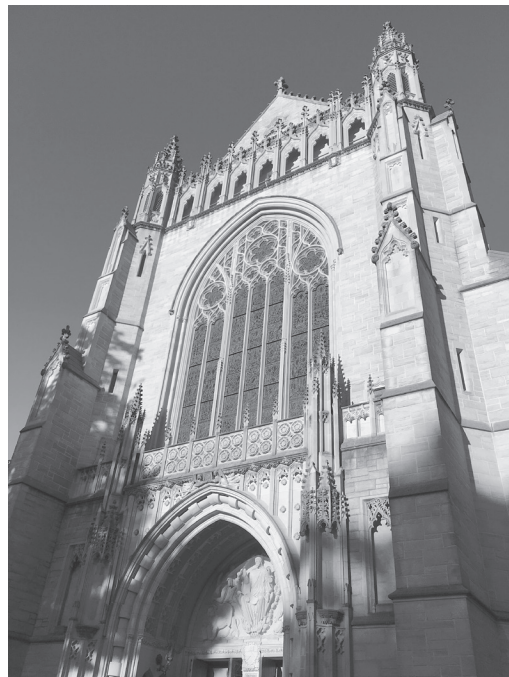
**Logan Harden** (Hernando) hopes his work will inspire someone to try something new. He plans to go to college and eventually work in the field of zoology while doing art on the side.

**Merideth Johnson** (Duck Hill) plans on taking formal art classes in college and would love to one day illustrate a children’s book. She makes art because filling blank pages with shadows, colors, and shapes makes her happy.

**Jaylin Jones** (Clarksdale) follows the motto, “Words can be like x-rays if you use them properly—they’ll go through anything,” by Aldous Huxley. His hero is his mom and if he could meet anyone, real or fictional, he’d choose Miles Morales.

**Lily Langstaff** (Southaven) writes to find a way to share her innermost thoughts and feelings. She hopes her writing will give a sense of comfort to those who feel alone, especially in such a difficult time to be a teenager. She plans on pursuing wildlife veterinary medicine at Mississippi State and her ultimate goal is to travel as much as possible.

**Leslie Lewis** (Natchez) views her grandmother as an influential icon in her life, as she taught her so much about life and continues to support her. She hopes that her pieces cause readers to be able to pull their own meanings from her work.



*The Chapel of Princeton*

Amanda Zhou

Photograph

**Michael Lu** (Starkville) loves photography, and he hopes his pieces will inspire others to try out photography. He plans to continue photography as a side hobby while pursuing computer science and economics. His hero is Dr. Benge because of how wonderfully he teaches and leads.

**Weslyn McMurrin** (Pearl) lives by the motto, “You create your own destiny.” Her mother is an influential icon in her life, and she takes pictures because she enjoys having something to look back on.

**Joshua Murphy** (Picayune) says that, for as long as he can remember, creative writing has been his main method of expressing himself. He writes to voice his opinions and clear his head when he has a lot going on.

**Vidhi Patel** (McComb) hopes that her poem will put events from 2020 in perspective and open readers’ eyes. Her favorite book is *The Throne of Glass* by Sarah J. Mass.

**Mason Pettit** (Grenada) writes as a means of reflection upon himself, his past actions, and his regrets. If he could meet anyone, living or dead, real or fiction, he would choose Batman.

**Stephanie Ressel** (Vance) hopes her piece “Lock and Key” highlights the hard work of her mother while touching on sensitive topics of racial discrimination. She hopes to give readers the chance to see from the perspective of a first-generation American child.

**Gracie Rowland** (Columbus) loves the quote, “We accept the love we think we deserve” and one of her heroes is Emily Dickinson.

**Wyatt Shanahan** (Starkville) is inspired by those who have started from nothing and achieved success without losing sight of where they came from. He hopes his photography captures the hidden beauty Mississippi has to offer.

**Jillian Snodgrass** (Meridian) hopes that her art will transport viewers to a place of peace and adventure. She makes art to survive, viewing it as a part of her that provides an outlet for complex thoughts and emotions.

**Emma Spinks** (Cleveland) uses the forest as a peaceful place to think and come up with ideas for stories. She hopes that she leaves her readers pondering serious questions about life and hopes to one day publish a novel.

**Abby Strain** (Columbus) writes as an expression of emotion and experience, which they believe are the most complex and intertwined subjects. They started writing at an early age and have been pursuing it as a hobby since.

**Qiancheng Sun** (Starkville) considers his hero to be Elon Musk. His favorite book is the *Hunger Games*, and his photography journey began when his parents gave him a camera to play with at the beach one day

**Shelby Tisdale** (Pearl) creates because she believes art satisfies the desperation to be present outside of oneself. She is inspired by Eudora Welty and hopes readers and viewers find pieces of themselves in her work.

**Sophia Toner** (Pass Christian) desires to capture her favorite moments through art. She considers her pieces “dramatic renditions of her own mundane experiences.” An influential icon in her life is nature, and her favorite book is *The Little Prince*.

**Muneebah Umar** (Starkville) views art as a way to explain parts of herself that can’t be put into words. Her parents are her heroes for their constant commitment to provide her family the best life possible.

**Taylor Wypyski** (Pass Christian) plans to become an architect in the future, aiming to prevent spaces from having a negative effect on mental health. Her favorite book is *The Giver*.

**Amy Zhang** (Starkville) hopes her story “Jeremiah Split” makes readers laugh. Her hero is Steven Levitt, an economist who uses the economic approach on unconventional topics and writes about it in an engaging way.

**Amanda Zhou** (Memphis) wishes for her art to allow viewers to see subjects in a different perspective than before. Her favorite book is *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, and in the future, she intends to work on larger canvasses and create more expressionistic pieces.



*Hijab*

**Muneebah Umar**

Acrylic, newspaper, tissue paper





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