

SOUTHERN VOICES 2022

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Judges Poetry

Jack B. Bedell is Professor of English and Coordinator of Creative Writing at Southeastern Louisiana University where he also edits Louisiana Literature and directs the Louisiana Literature Press. His latest collections are *Color All Maps New* (Mercer University Press, 2021), *Rock Garden* (Daily Drunk Press, 2021), and *No Brother, This Storm* (Mercer University Press, 2018). His work has appeared in the *Southern Review, HAD, Bracken, The Fourth River, Terrain.org, Grist, Sugar House, Shenandoah, Pidgeonholes,* and other journals. Bedell is the recipient of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Individual Achievement in the Humanities Award and the Governor's Award for Artistic Achievement. He was appointed by Governor John Bel Edwards to serve as Louisiana Poet Laureate, 2017–2019.

Creative Nonfiction

Exodus Oktavia Brownlow is a Blackhawk, MS native. She is a graduate of Mississippi Valley State University with a BA in English, and Mississippi University for Women with an MFA in Creative Writing. Exodus has been published or has forthcoming work with *Electric Lit, West Branch, Denver Quarterly, F(r)iction* and more. She has been nominated for Best of The Net, Best MicroFiction, Best Small Fictions and a Pushcart Prize. Her piece "Chicken-Girls and Chicken-Ladies and All the Possibility of Pillowcases" will be included in Best MicroFiction 2022. Her debut fiction chapbook—*Look at All The Little Hurts of These Newly-Broken Lives and The Bittersweet, Sweet and Bitter Loves*—is set for publication with Ethel Zine and Press in April 2023.

Fiction

Becky Hagenston is the author of four award-winning story collections: *The Age of Discovery and Other Stories* (winner of The Journal's Non/ Fiction Prize), *Scavengers* (winner of the Permafrost Prize), *Strange Weather* (winner of the Spokane Prize), and *A Gram of Mars* (winner of the Mary McCarthy Prize). Her work has appeared in *Ploughshares, The Southern Review, New England Review, The Oxford American*, and many other journals. Her stories have also been chosen for a Pushcart Prize and twice for an O. Henry Award. She has received residencies to Ucross and to Yaddo, and she is a professor of English at Mississippi State University.

Art

Erik Studdard earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with an emphasis in photography from Mississippi University for Women in 2004. His photography and design work have appeared in national publications. Before joining The W as a graphic artist, he worked for a private air travel company directing national marketing campaigns. Erik is married to Katie Studdard, and they have a daughter Elyse, who is three. For fun, Erik enjoys toy photography, and he has appeared on several podcasts to discuss Batman, lighting, and other aspects of photography.

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The Word of the Lord

Jay Snodgrass

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

With Brother Schultz's droning, preacherly voice slowly fading into the background of my mind, the growing picture of my New York City neighborhood taking its place became crisper and more defined. Tenement fire escapes zigzag skyward, cracks in the sidewalk make hopscotch for the local kids, my mother waters the banana plants on the iron landing outside our window. I could almost believe I was back there again...

"Jacob. *Jacob!*" Grandma's sharp whisper woke me from my reverie. Nails on a chalkboard. I winced.

"Yeah, Grandma? What is it?"

"Don't you 'Yeah, Grandma' me! You say 'Yes ma'am' right now, you hear?"

"Yes ma'am. What's the matter?"

"Don't you play dumb, boy. You're fallin' asleep in church again, Jacob, an' I won't have it."

"I expect the Lord doesn't care too much," I replied with a grin.

"Well how're you gonna know what the Lord do an' don't care about if you're asleepin' while he's talkin'?" Grandma retorted.

"If the Lord wanted me awake, I figure He'd'a woken me up himself."

It was getting awful hot in the tiny church. Every one of the twelve doublehung windows was open as wide as could be, but the chance of a breeze that didn't feel like the little paper fans stuck in between the hymnals on the backs of the pews were no match for the brutal Mississippi weather. A mosquito buzzed annoyingly close to my left ear. I had noticed none of this when wrapped up in my New York daydream, and I longed to return to it, but it was slipping away from my mind, just like the minnows that slipped through my fingers when I tried to catch them bare-handed in the creek behind Grandma and Grandpa's house. I tugged at the tie around my neck.

Satan breathing down my neck was slim to none, and

"The Word of the Lord," came Brother Schultz's voice.

"Thanks be to God," the parish responded.

Lately I hadn't been thanking God for much.

Momma and Daddy had decided I needed to "rediscover my roots" and "connect with my relatives," so they shipped me back to the Mississippi Delta to live with Grandma and Grandpa for the summer.

"Try to understand them," Momma had said.
"They're your family too, all those folks down in Cleveland."

I didn't see the

family resemblance.

missed my friends-

Aaron and Esperanza,

Luis and Katie. I even

missed my whiney

baby sister Grace. I

wanted to wander the

streets of New York

trapped in the middle

of nowhere in a house

with them, not be

I was miserable. I

Over the Garden Wall

Audrey Paige Robinson

Photography

that still didn't have air conditioning. I may have been born here, but we moved when I was three. This isn't my home; I don't come from any place but New York.

When we got home from church, Grandpa and I sat on the screen porch with our shirts off and tall glasses of lemonade in hand, the only way to cool off unless you felt like taking a swim in the muddy creek.

"Why doesn't this place make me feel like I'm home again?" I asked.

"Well, that's quite a question, all sudden-like," he replied, eyebrows raised. "I reckon you gotta figure that out yourself, but maybe I can help just a little." He and I pulled on fresh shirts, and in a moment, we were bouncing down the road in his beat-up 1962 C-10, headed for the Mississippi River.

And twenty minutes later, there it was, stretching across the horizon: a vast expanse of brownish green water, hundreds of yards wide. Beyond it, Arkansas.

My breath caught in my throat. I had seen big rivers before—the Hudson, the East—but this was different. The sun caught the tips of the waves, a million fairies dancing on the water. Mystical.

"You know your great-great grandpa was a ferryman? Took people back and forth across the river to McGehee. I think he's got a name on a ferrymen's memorial somewhere 'round here," Grandpa rambled.

We took some backroads and parked the C-10 under a magnolia near the bank. Slowly, I climbed out. The sight of the river had stirred something in me. I began to stumble towards it, hesitantly at first, then faster and faster, ripping off my shoes and socks as I ran, until I was sprinting into the shallow water at the edge.

"Grandpa, I'm gettin' it! I think I'm gettin' it now!" Grandpa just stood by the truck and smiled his big, sideways smile.

My feet sank into the mud. Mud that my ancestors could have stood in. What would that old ferryman think of his great-great grandson, come all the way back from the big city just to stand where he stood?

"Jesus," I whispered, a whole prayer contained in that one word. \triangle

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

Mississippi's Great Flood

Emma Spinks

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

The rain pelted the tin roof of the trailer, and I felt the dark waters rising up from the canal.

I could feel it creeping up the banks, swallowing up the small vines and grasses. I smelled its cold, muddy water slowly overtaking the forest. My heart thudded into the mattress. I knew that if it got higher, it would take our trailer. I would be fast asleep in my bed as our raggedy trailer sank to the bottom with the alligators and bass.

It was a completely irrational belief to think that the canal could possibly reach our trailer and overtake it. Even more crazy was thinking that I could drown without knowing.

But I believed that the river could take me, mercilessly.

The Yazoo River destroyed the Mississippi Delta every summer, without fail.

She drove the deer out of their home and forced the raccoons to shelter in the trees. The river's children swam in and out of the towering oaks and cypresses, slipping gracefully through the thorns. Farmers lost their crops to her mighty waters before she destroyed their homes. When she receded, we had nothing left.

One summer, she was particularly cruel. The entire

forest was covered in murky water, full of unknown dangers. One of the older men at the camp reflected on her, sipping his beer at ten in the morning.

"The river's got its wet and dry periods." He finished the can. "We're in a wet period. It'll probably flood three times this year."

My dad and his friend didn't let the river stop them from exploring the deep swamp. He packed up a tin can of a boat with a cooler full of food and drinks. He made sure I wore sunscreen and bug spray, and he took my book away from me.

"You're not bringing a book along."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He shrugged, "Wherever we can."

We loaded into the ranger and pulled the boat to a ramp off the levee. He and his friend talked to one another as I sat in the back of the ranger. Mosquitos hounded me even though my arms dripped from the bug spray. A soft breeze blew my sweat soaked hair from my face. I felt thoroughly miserable and alone.

We set the boat in the water and pushed our way into the swamp. I sat at the front of the boat as my dad and his friend swapped the duty of manning the boat motor. Despite the unhappiness I felt on the drive over, I couldn't help but find the flooded swamp held its own kind of beauty.

The sun shone through bright, summer green leaves, casting shadows onto the water. I let my fingertips grace the surface of the water as we made our way down covered trails. I watched the water bugs hopping. A great blue heron soared up from the water, through the tall trees.

We ended up coming out of the forest into Greasy

Lake. My dad cranked the motor to full throttle, and I felt the freedom that only the forest could give me. I closed my eyes, letting its wild spirit fill my lungs. I inhaled peace and set free of my fear. The river wouldn't take me away while I slept soundly in my bed. She was not cruel or merciless. The river was Lady Justice, blind to everything but the truth.

The tiny, rickety boat was my own metal ark, and I was Noah. I didn't have two of every animal, but I



Autumn
Qiancheng Sun
Photography

held on to the tranquility, freedom, and wildness of the swamp.

This was our Great Flood.

Did Noah find it beautiful when he stood on the deck of his magnificent ark? I imagined it would be impossible for him not to find something heavenly in the churning of the waters. The ripples and waves were mesmerizing, alluding to some hidden beauty underneath that we could never know.

Soon after that trip, the river took too much. We couldn't go back for a while, and we waited patiently for our olive leaf.

When the river receded that fall, the stench of dying plants overwhelmed the forest. Decaying fish lay on the ground or stuck in fences. Stinking mud clung to my boots when I walked down the ruined trails. My dad cleared away the dried carcass of a doe, her child still inside of her.

The swamp I'd loved so much, understood so well that summer, was gone. I looked at the river, and I cursed her for her cold-heartedness. She was not just, only cruel. She stole from the land, and she did not

care. I cursed her quietly for flowing slowly without a care, lapping softly at the roughened banks. Her churning whispered a soft apology, but she was not sorry for the flood.

Only for the pain it caused.

- - -

We drove back down as soon as we could that next summer. The river had not raised her waters again, perhaps deciding that she delivered enough damage last year.

I rode through the somewhat dry swamp, smelling the growth of new, healthy plants. The frogs and bugs hummed a loud song to the melody of the swaying tree branches. I watched the smaller birds glide through the air, picturesque against a bright blue sky full of fluffy clouds. I stopped in the road, admiring the swamp, when I heard the rustle of branches. I looked ahead to see a young, strong buck racing through the woods. That same wild spirit, that same peace filled me again. The river did not destroy everything.

It simply breathed new life into the swamp. \triangle



Transfixed
Logan Harden
Acrylic

A Small Mountain of Grief

Annemarie Coatney

There's a rather odd-looking mound in the back pasture of my family's home. A rounded landmark on an otherwise flat plane of earth, it looks like some haphazard mistake in the design of the landscape that has yet to be smoothed away. Throw in the fact that there is absolutely no living thing growing on it, in a place where something is growing on everything, and it seems even more strange. If I were superstitious, or even poetic, I'd tell you that the reason nothing grows on the little mountain is that Mother Nature is respecting the dead. I suppose the tiny romantic in my heart might even believe that a little. But the real reason nothing is growing on that small hill is that the earth is still too freshly overturned from the burial of my childhood friend.

He was born on the Grizzly Ranch in Park County, Wyoming, and named Pea Eye after a character from the movie *Lonesome Dove*. Having rusty, sorrel-colored fur; a white blaze on his forehead; two white stockings and a sock; and a white, heart-shaped patch of fur on his left hind leg, he was rather beautiful in his youth. Pictures of such a vibrant and healthy horse come into sharp contrast with my last images of him. A faded and patchy coat, the visible outline of ribs, and a head that seemed to perpetually sag towards the ground marked the passage of his thirty years on Earth. I suppose I should be grateful I got that long, but reason is the oil to sadness's water.

In the last five years of Pea Eye's life, I felt as if I heard my dad say, "He's not going to make it through the winter" every year. After having been wrong four times already, I no longer believed it to be true, even after my dad marked the spot of his burial. This decision to lay him to rest not ten feet from the corral where my dad had first taught me to trot did not include me—or rather, I did not include myself.

The day of the burial was set—again without my interjection—three weeks from the decision. It arrived in days. With it came my best human friend and her mother, the latter of which would serve as the vet. A hole had already been dug in the predesignated place and after my dad haltered Pea Eye and I haltered Junior, the horse who served as Pea Eye's only real day-to-day companion, we led them towards it. Seeing Pea Eye walk up to what would soon be his grave was the first

moment that I truly knew this would be the winter he didn't make it through.

The next series of events I heard as much as saw. The vet, like one of the Fates snipping a mortal's life thread, injected the lethal dose. After a few minutes, he began to sway and stumble. I moved Junior and myself out of the way. My dad and the vet guided his fall to the ground instead of into his coffin. The sound of his body hitting the ground told me they had succeeded. I turned around in time to see my dad take his hand off Pea Eye's neck, which had just finally gone still. He gestured for me to come over and say goodbye, but all of me that moved were my eyelids as they closed and the tears that still leaked through. I heard a snipping noise as my dad cut off parts of Pea Eye's tail. It would be the only part of him I'd ever see again.

I don't remember what happened between then and when I led Junior back to his stall. I don't remember when Pea Eye was laid into his grave and the little mountain was formed over his body. What I do remember is seeing my dad in front of the house and hugging him, though really, we were hugging each other. I don't think there's ever been another moment in my life where I've felt such a deep emotional understanding of another person. It was several minutes before we walked back inside, both with significantly more tears shed.

I bypassed the kitchen and folded myself into a chair by the living room window where I would later observe the oddity of the little mound. The food laid out in the last room had interested me little, but what I saw out of the window made me wish I had taken more notice.

Junior, having been let out of his stall, was running to-and-fro in the pasture, frantically searching for his friend. What little composure I'd gathered from my walk through the house dissipated in an instant. Having neither the strength nor the ability to communicate to him that Pea Eye was gone, I curled myself tighter in my seat and felt another little crack in my heart. It would be several more minutes before Junior stopped searching and I stopped crying.

When I had walked through and past the kitchen, I had not turned on the lights. But when I gathered the fortitude to unfurl myself from the chair and walked back in, I found that someone else had. They now illuminated my best friend, who had been next to me as Pea Eye stumbled and fell to stillness; my mom, who was putting the finishing touches on what I now realized was a collection of comfort foods; and my dad, who had just minutes before let me know I wasn't alone. \triangle

Watching the Storm Pass By

Amelia Pope

My favorite season is summer.

Not for the weeds blooming flowers on the side of the road

or for the lightning bugs dancing all night but for the thunderstorms.

When I was little, my grandpa taught me to count between the booms and the flashes of light, divide by five and I would always know where the

I could never keep count.

storm was.

I always got lost staring at the dark clouds or wondering where the lightning had struck,

and before I knew it the storm was gone,

leaving behind cool air, moist grass, and myself sitting on a bench—

where I would sit for hours thinking about all the lighting I had saw.

Where did it strike?

Was anyone hurt?

What if that was us in the middle of the storm?

But soon my worries would be calmed by the weatherman on the 5 o'clock news,

who would use big words like *doppler radar* and *cold front*—

to tell us the bad weather was gone for the week. So, I would wait until the next storm to practice counting in between the flashes and booms, and then dividing by five.



As the Snow Falls
Alex Wallace
Second Place, Photography

Homecoming

Audrey Paige Robinson

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

The snow-covered Brooklyn streets were littered with the footprints of strangers who had come and gone. The wind was harsh and dry, pulling the air out of the lungs of the pedestrians. Eloise ran alongside her twin sister, leaving the schoolyard. Typically, the young girls were told to hurry home since Brooklyn was not the safest place for twelve-year-olds. This morning, though, their mother had given them each \$3 to grab a hot chocolate on the way back to the apartment.

"Slow down, Evie!" Eloise yelled from behind. "Mom said you have to wait for me."

"Learn to breathe better, Ellie," Evelyn teased as she came to a stop and turned to wait for her panting sister. As she came to a halt, Eloise took out her inhaler and gave it a pump.

For a moment, everything was perfect. It was just the two of them: Evelyn and Eloise, Evie and Ellie, the twins, or whatever you wanted to call them. They were together and they were happy.

"Okay," Ellie stated after catching her breath. "I'm ready! Tag, you're it!"

And the pair blasted down the street. Eloise shot past her sister, raced down the sidewalk, and zig-zagged through pedestrians. She could hear Evelyn giggling close behind her and knew she was going to be caught. Eloise spotted an empty crosswalk, took a sharp turn to the right, and sprinted across the street.

"Hey!" Evie yelled.

Eloise turned around to see her twin following her across the road. Then, there was a brilliant streak of yellow and black. Sudden screaming followed by the most deafening silence.

- - -

Eloise sat straight up in her bed, sweating and shaking. *Shit.* She thought as she clutched the damp sheets around her. *Every damn time I close my eyes these days*. She could feel her heart beating three times its average speed.

She dragged her hand across the bedside table. Eloise heard her glasses hit the floor, but that wasn't what she wanted. Her hand grasped a pill bottle, and she brought it close to her face to read the label. She looked at three different bottles till she found the

Prozac and threw the green pill down her throat without bothering to take a sip of water. Next, she grabbed her inhaler, puffed it, and laid her head back down on the pillow. Eloise stared at the ceiling and focused on her breathing until she felt like she wasn't about to die.

Finally, she rolled off the bed and grabbed her glasses from under the table. Eloise unplugged her phone and took in all the details of her home screen.

5:12 a.m. December 18, 2018. Reminders: Take medicine, visit mom, do whatever Evie would do, don't die, happy 15 years as an only child.

She let out a sigh as she read the last three reminders. *Kind of hard to act like Evie and not die.* Eloise wondered if Evelyn would be okay with her making jokes like that. *It's not like she'll ever know about them,* Eloise rationalized as she forced her feet to lift her out of bed and carry her to the kitchen.

She began absentmindedly fixing herself a mug of hot chocolate before she got ready for the day, though she hated it. She poured the drink and put in precisely fifteen marshmallows, and started towards the window. New Jersey was a lot quieter than New York, and she thought she was finally beginning to find it charming rather than depressing. Eloise knew that Evelyn always loved the countryside, and she was glad that she could spend her twenties somewhere that would've made Evie so happy.

Slowly, she began her morning routine. Eloise showered, trying to wash the ever-present nightmare from her mind and body as if forgetting the dream would mean that the actual event never happened. When she finally got out, she was still dirty with the memories of her sister's death. She slipped into a black romper, combat boots, and a huge winter jacket. Eloise threw on a simple face of makeup and drew her hair back out of her face to keep it secure against the winter winds. On her way out the door, she grabbed her keys and inhaler, cursing herself for not cranking the car beforehand to let it get warm.

The car's leather seats were cold enough that the frost seemed to creep through her jacket and into her soul. Ellie couldn't seem to get warm despite the seat warmers and heaters on full the entire drive to the

nursing home.

She felt her breathing get sharp and rapid, and she knew it would be in her best interest to reach over to her purse and get out her inhaler, but she didn't want to divert her eyes from the icy road—plus she was just stubborn. Ellie could hear her mother's voice in her ears telling her to use the inhaler when she first started to lose her breath rather than trying to see how long she could last without it.

With that thought, she forced her hand off the wheel and turned to look in her purse to find that small container. Suddenly, she saw a quick movement in the road out of her peripheral vision, and Ellie slammed on her breaks. The tires lost traction, and her car spun around in a semicircle shape, leaving the thing she had swerved to avoid hitting and herself face to face.

Her heartbeat was in her throat, and she thought she was dead. Slowly, the movement came back into her body, and her hand brought the inhaler to her mouth for a single pump, and then dead silence. It was just a plastic bag. A piece of litter that could have crashed her car and finished what fate had started fifteen years ago. Ellie knew she was lucky no other vehicles were traveling this road at 6:30 a.m., yet a part of her was disappointed.

Eloise softly pressed the pedal until she felt the car meet the road below it and began to slowly turn the car back around. She rode in petrified silence until

she pulled into the Golden Acres Nursing Home.

Their mother never recovered after Evelyn's accident. Ellie had to grow up quickly, learning how to take care of herself as her father spent most of his time at work, and her mother couldn't seem to look Eloise in the eye. The woman spiraled into a pit of denial that she seemed unable to escape. Her mother drifted further and further away until she was a shell of the woman that raised the lighthearted twins. After Ellie went off to college at seventeen, her father divorced her mother, leaving the two of them in New York to fend for themselves. It was then that Ellie decided to transfer to a smaller school in New

Jersey and send her mom to a caregiving facility at the age of fifty-five. Since then, the two of them have visited weekly as the only remaining members of the family of four.

She parked the car as close as she could to the main entrance to try to avoid the cold, but she was still shivering when she entered the building. Ellie went through the usual process of signing in.

"Good morning, Eloise," Savannah, the receptionist, said brightly. "You're here awfully early."

"Morning, Sav," she replied. "It's been a rough morning, I'm sure Mom isn't doing too well either, so I thought I'd come by to see if I can put a better spin on the day."

"Of course."

"So, am I right?"

"Pardon?"

"I'm right, Mom isn't doing well."

"I..." Savannah hesitated. "I suppose so. She couldn't even recall her personal assistant's name this morning, so just be patient with her."

"I know," Eloise reminded her. She took one of the holiday mints that sat beside Savannah's nameplate, made her way to room number 38, and took a deep breath to prepare herself for the conversation ahead. She pushed open the door.

"Hey, Mom," Ellie said, trying to put some joy behind her voice.

"Evelyn!" Her mother cried as she sat up in her bed to look at her daughter. Despite her preparation for this moment, Eloise's heart still dropped. She took her mother's wrinkled hand and sat in the chair beside her.

"No, mom. It's me, Eloise. Evelyn..." she swallowed. "Evie died when we were kids. Remember?"

"No." Her mother's voice was hollow but certain. "You're wrong."

Eloise's eyes widened a bit in shock. Her mother never remembered Evelyn's death but always accepted it once Ellie reminded her.

"What do you mean?"



Caught in Columbus
Mira Patel

Third Place, Photography

"Evelyn didn't die. You're mistaken."

"No, I'm not, mom. I'm Eloise, her twin sister."

"That's impossible, Evie. Eloise died."

Ellie felt her heart sink even deeper into the ground, as if gravity had somehow increased the pull of her body towards the linoleum floors.

"Mom, please, don't do this." She could feel water starting to well up in her eyes despite herself. "I'm Eloise. I'm your daughter. I had a twin sister, Evelyn, who died when we were twelve. We were running home from school when—" Her voice caught on the emotion building up inside her.

"I remember," her mother said with a sad look.

"The twins were running home when, despite my warnings, Ellie left her inhaler at home."

"That's not what-"

"Quiet, now, Evelyn. She had an asthma attack, and no one knew how to help her without her inhaler, so by the time the paramedics got there, it was too late. I remember. You're my only daughter now."

Eloise sat in stunned silence at the false story her mother had conceived about what had happened fifteen years ago. She kept her breathing steady as she wiped tears from her eyes.

"Do you not know who I am?" Eloise asked, touching her mother's face and looking her in the eyes.

"Of course I do. You're my brave Evie. You wear dark clothes and hate girl toys. You love silence, the outdoors, and hot chocolate. I know who you are."

Eloise stared at her mother for what felt like years as she processed her words. Finally interrupting the quiet, Ellie said, "you're right."

"I know I am," her mother confirmed. "Now run along; I want to get to dinner soon."

It was 7:12 a.m.

Eloise stood up and dropped her mother's hand.

"You're right," she said again, starting to laugh. "I *am* Evelyn. I tried so hard to remember her that I..." she trailed off. "I have to go."

Eloise raced out the door of the nursing home before Savannah could ask her how her visit went. She ran to her car, where she took off her black jacket and pulled on a bright pink cardigan that had been in her backseat for years. Evelyn hated pink, but Eloise didn't. She put the car in drive and drove towards the city where she was raised.

Eloise began to laugh; she laughed until her eyes welled up with tears and her tears became sobs. She felt

emotion in a way she hadn't in years. The kind of feelings that make you want to scream and fight and tear down the buildings around you. Eloise felt like her tears could finally flood the streets of Brooklyn and wipe the roads clean of her sister's blood.

Eloise couldn't remember crying once in the past fifteen years. As a kid, Evelyn had never shed a tear. Ellie began to unpack every decision she had made since her twin had died, realizing that she had never lived for herself; instead, she made herself into the person that Evelyn would never get to be. Fifteen years ago, she didn't die, but a part of her did. The part of her that was more than just Evelyn's twin.

Eloise drove until she saw the New York City skyline on the horizon. It was time to come home. \triangle

I Was Robbed

Emma Spinks

Such a cold December night when you stole my first kiss.

We'd been out with my friends, running through the arches of twinkling Christmas lights around downtown. You walked me to the car, and you held me close. Giggling in your arms, I had no idea why you decided to lick your lips. I figured they were chapped.

Then, that magical moment preached about in books and movies and songs happened.

Sparks were supposed to fly, and I was supposed to be left speechless, breathless even. Everything in the world was supposed to right itself the moment our lips met. I felt nothing.

Your forehead rammed into mine when you bent down. Your lips, so paper-thin, disappeared between mine. Somehow, you managed to slam your teeth into mine even though it was a tongueless kiss, to my relief. And when you pulled away, your eyes twinkled with that un-understandable male pride.

And those twinkling eyes and giddy smile have kept me from confessing to you that you are the worst kisser of my entire life.

I Have Severe Depression, But That Is Okay Because I Am a Man

Jordan Isbell

I love to hide all the kitchen knives in the cabinet and wash their sins away as I tell the little kids on Avenue St. that the scars on my right arm came from a fight with wolves with 3-inch teeth instead of a utensil that a mother uses to chop tomatoes.

I love to hear my mom remind me that showing tears means you show weakness, and that you cannot cry over all of your problems, all while my wife asks for the third time today why I act like a robot when I fail to show the slightest sign of emotion and why I stared at our son's contorted leg and told him to get up and walk it off.

I love to watch my dad grab a box of tissue and dart past my brother to console my sister sitting beside him because the blood that leaked from his nose on to the floor did not and could not matter more than the single tear that crept from her eye.

I love to wear my mask publicly and even when I'm indoors because no longer do I have to worry about my frown accusing me of being an android who needs to express their feelings more, and my smile labeling me as an untrustworthy con artist with a sinister plot underneath.

I love to hear my grandma tell me I'm such a handsome man, a thought I believe in before I come out of the bathroom remembering that my arms are too small, my beard isn't long enough, my abs are a 4-pack and not an 8-pack, my jaw isn't chiseled enough, my legs aren't strong enough, I'm not strong enough.

I love to share this pain with others and listen to the distant voices tell me they are here for me, all while the voices in my head grow louder in laughter, as they know they are the only ones who will ever remind me of how much I'm worth, and will continue to convince me to open the cabinet again.



Sunday Blues
Taylor Paige Wypyski
Mixed Media, Drawing

Where Do You Come From?

Vidhi Patel

Third Place—Essay Competition

I come from the son of a man who farmed all his life. A man who worked in fields filled with sun and sweat. Orange mangoes taunting him from treetops—fruit that wasn't for him. His fruit instead was his respect, his money, his job. He was able to farm and come back to his wife. Their son was a man who wanted better. More than being in fields all day, working the same cycle. He wanted to be educated. He wanted to aid the people in medicine and health rather than provide them food.

I am the niece of a man who stayed behind in India while his brother moved across the world. I am the niece of a man who inherited all his family's land because of birthright and had no choice but to manage—a man who had his future planned out from birth. A man who connected with his niece while over 8,000 miles away, even though he was never able to see her. A man who built his own home for his family, designed completely by him.

I am the niece of a farmer, who had the skills of a carpenter. I am the girl who took Construction Technology instead of Health Science because it seemed "fun." A girl who ended up enjoying it, going

as far as competing at a state level. And while I enjoyed the art of building and designing, I had to keep it to the side—like my uncle, I had other callings. For now, I will continue to have a rigorous education, and maybe one day I will be able to flourish my skills in carpentry

and build a house of my own.

I come from the granddaughter of a man who wanted adventure. A man who sailed six months to Africa because he saw it being better than his farmland in India. A man who loved the new continent but came back—because family is always first. His daughter—engaged at fourteen—a maid, a cleaner, a cook, or as they would call it, a good wife.

I am the daughter of a woman whose marriage solidified her place in America. A woman who whose role shifted from "wife" to housewife whenever her countries changed. A woman who did not know any English when she moved away, yet she was able learn for the future of her kids she had to bear. A woman who was taught to do anything for family, even if it meant giving up her dreams—a pressure she passed down to her kids.

One day, my children will be able to say that they come from a woman who knows her roots. A woman who understands them, acknowledges them, yet is not afraid to expand them into other fields. A woman who will hold on to her culture, but will not let cultural stan-

dards hold her, nor will she allow them to lead her life. A woman who loves her family but will not sacrifice herself for the sole reason of "family." A woman who is a mother, a daughter, a niece, a granddaughter, and most importantly: a woman of her own. \triangle



Young Blossom
Emily Gambill

Photography

Where There's a Will and Testament, There's a Way

Chloe Dobbins

Second Place—Short Story Competition

Allegra Lansdowne never truly believed her family loved her until she saw her grandfather's last will and testament.

She and her two cousins—Charles and Octavia, children of her father's elder brother and younger sister, respectively—were gathered in the office of the Lansdowne family attorney as he read them the conditions of their inheritance.

"Your grandfather's will is rather peculiar," the ever-exhausted balding man stated monotonously. "You three are the sole beneficiaries. All of your grandfather's assets are to be divided equally among the three of you . . ."

Charles far too blatantly tried to mask his excitement with a stoic expression as Octavia attempted to conceal her grin in her scarf. Allegra made no effort to resist the smirk growing across her face.

"... given each of you adhere to all the will's other clauses," the underpaid lawyer finished.

Charles once again failed at hiding his thoughts, frowning. "Other clauses?"

"Other clauses, yes. To receive your inheritance, each of you must complete a list of tasks." The attorney ruffled through some of his papers for a moment. "Also, I must make you aware of another clause. Your grandfather made it clear that no one is to know the amount of money he has left you until you receive it."

Allegra mentally rolled her eyes. Her grandfather had been a senile old man. No doubt the Pantalone was sure someone would try and loot his estate if they were aware of how much it was worth. As if anyone in the world could not simply search "Lansdowne fortune" and find out for themselves. She was curious as to what his silly list of tasks would be, however.

Octavia spoke up for the three of them. "Tasks?" she asked incredulously in her ridiculous, posh voice. "What could that old—ahem, Grandfather—possibly want us to do?"

"Well, first you each must attend his funeral," the attorney stated matter-of-factly.

Allegra internally admitted that it was smart of the old man to write that. There was no way she—much less Charles or Octavia—would go to whatever drab funeral the rest of the family planned without being forced.

"Aside from that, it's different for each of you. Charles, you have to break off your engagement with Penelope Carmichael—"

"—thank God," Charles breathed.

The attorney stared at Charles. Allegra kicked his leg under the table, hard, and Charles squeaked.

"I mean, thank God for love we shared until this point! I will forever be grateful for the time we spent together and she shall remain in my heart for the rest of my days!"

The attorney slowly nodded. "Right. After Miss Carmichael is out of the picture, you must secure a marriage with one Delphine Toussaint."

Charles closed his mouth for a second, a momentous occasion, before asking another question. "Like . . . *that* Delphine Toussaint?"

An exasperated sigh. Then, "Yes, *that* Delphine Toussaint."

Octavia met Allegra's gaze with surprise and mild concern. Delphine Toussaint was the heiress of a French luxury cosmetics brand, and she was as stunning as one might imagine the heiress of a French luxury cosmetics brand to be. Charles had once met her at a charity gala and tried to invite her to dinner. The conversation did not go well, ending with Delphine promising to rearrange his innards with a stiletto if he ever spoke to her again.

Allegra could not remember whether her grandfather was at the gala to witness the scene. If he had not attended, he likely would not have known about Charles and Delphine's prior meeting. Despite the interaction being filmed and widely circulated on social media and in tabloids, her grandfather was too distrustful of modern technology to ever turn on the television and see. Even then, the specific choice of Delphine Toussaint was odd, but Allegra supposed it made sense. The Lansdowne fortune came from their jewelry lines. A potential merge between two of the world's most expensive luxury fashion brands could be a good business move.

Nevertheless, Charles was screwed.

The attorney gave no time for Charles to recover, turning his attention to Octavia. "Now, you, Octavia. You must successfully care for Leonardo for the next year."

Charles immediately objected. "You're telling me I have to shack up with a girl who publicly humiliated me and all Octavia has to do is *take care of a cat*?"

Another sigh. "Yes, that is what the will says."

Leonardo was Allegra's grandfather's cat, an old grumpy beast who loved nothing more than to use the Lansdowne grandchildren as his personal scratching post. Allegra didn't know why Charles was complaining. If anything, she thought, he should be glad he wasn't stuck with Leonardo. Allegra still had a scar on her leg from a time she accidentally brushed against the cat with her foot. The feline especially hated Octavia, though—he attacked her immediately whenever given opportunity. Perhaps Leonardo was a good judge of character.



Tim's Senior Portraits

Destiny Van

Photography

Octavia grimaced, but quickly straightened back out when she noticed the attorney looking at her. "Whatever our *dear* grandfather requested in his final moments."

Allegra was certain she heard a "decrepit codger" under her cousin's breath.

"Finally, you, Allegra." The attorney turned to her. "You must find your grandfather's wedding photo album. He wanted it at his funeral. It should be in the mansion's attic somewhere."

Allegra smiled to herself. She knew exactly where it was—she loved to look through it as a little girl. She had a feeling no one had touched it since she last put it down at around ten-years-old.

Charles and Octavia immediately sprang into a chorus of "So unfair!" and "Why does Allegra get it so easy?" but Allegra was not bothered. Neither was the attorney, by the looks of it.

"Now that we're through with that," he stated flatly, "I have a closing argument to write before tomorrow. Get out of my office."

Charles and Octavia, surprised at being treated so harshly, obeyed. Allegra did not move, however.

The attorney groaned. "Did you not hear me?"

"Say, if we only get our inheritance if we complete our tasks, what happens if someone fails?" Allegra asked innocently.

"I suppose the remaining beneficiaries would get their portion of the inheritance, too. The will stated that the inheritance is to be divided equally amongst the beneficiaries, not that everyone gets exactly one third." The attorney started rummaging through his files. "Now, seriously. Leave. I don't have time for this."

Allegra did leave this time, though not after firmly deciding the first thing she did with her inheritance would be to hire a new lawyer. Her soon-to-be *immense* inheritance, seeing as there was no way she was letting her cousins successfully earn their portions.

Of course, the first thing Allegra did was complete her own task. Just as she thought, the dusty album was located in the same corner of the attic she always found it in as a child. Easy enough.

When Allegra and her cousins met at their grandfather's funeral, they immediately updated each other on their progress. Ignoring her cousins' envious glares, she explained how easily she found the photo album.

After Allegra finished, Charles and Octavia recounted their own progress. Shockingly, Delphine had agreed to Charles's request for a second chance. Allegra had a slight suspicion that it was related to the fact that he would obviously be inheriting some of the family fortune. The Toussaints, of course, were outrageously wealthy, but they weren't *Lansdowne* outrageously wealthy.

As for Octavia, life was perfect. Old age had apparently soothed Leonardo's temper, and Octavia had actually grown fond of the feline.

After the funeral, Allegra was left alone with her thoughts. This was going far too well for Charles and Octavia—Allegra hadn't expected them to last even a week. Clearly, this would take intervention on her part.

Ruining Charles's chances was simple. All Allegra had to do was anonymously send photos of him with other women to Delphine. The heiress told Charles exactly what she thought of him in a dramatic, colorful speech, and left the man as quickly as she had agreed to see him. The photos Allegra sent were actually from a few years ago, but she knew Delphine was too rash to look further into the matter.

Keeping Octavia from earning her inheritance was trickier. Eventually, Allegra managed to sneak into her house and kidnap (catnap) Leonardo. Octavia still kept her spare key hidden under her flowerpots, the same place she did in high school. Typical. After pondering

what to do with the hellspawn for a day, Allegra gave Leonardo to a coworker looking for a friend for his other cat. She doubted Leonardo would make a good friend, but her coworker took him anyway.

Allegra's meeting with the attorney was very straightforward. She explained the inheritance situation, and the lawyer agreed that she would have to receive the entire sum her grandfather left behind. She grinned as the attorney opened a file, heart racing as she wondered what the grand total was.

"Miss Lansdowne," the attorney said, "You are now ten dollars richer."

"Excuse me?"

Surely Allegra had misheard. There was no way her extremely wealthy grandfather left her *ten dollars*.

"The total sum he left to you and your cousins is ten dollars. Congratulations." The attorney looked at her blankly.

Allegra's heart stopped as her world shattered around her. She thought she might die right there. All that hard work for *ten dollars*?

Allegra trembled in anger. She was beginning to contemplate how to destroy someone who was already dead when her thoughts were interrupted by the attorney clearing his throat.

"Your grandfather paid for most of my services, but there's a small sum overdue... about ten dollars." \triangle



The Local Bookshop
Audrey Paige Robinson

Photography

Blackwell Library

Vidhi Patel

Once upon a time, not in a little boy, but rather in the hands of a little boy, lay the lives of many. It was a mystery how it got there, but in there it lay. Books were not something found, they were locked away, because in this world they were the most powerful resource that could be given to anyone, even a child.

The kid was no more than eight, evident by his stubby legs hanging off the edge of the sofa he was on. They swung back and forth, kicking the base of the seat as he flipped through the pages of the book.

His eyes widened as he saw the images drawn in the book. He saw a world he wanted to live in. A world with animals and the freedom to walk around. People would go to places like malls and supermarkets. He couldn't believe it. He was in a space foreign to him, but he didn't mind. He could spend his entire life in this room. Never had he seen so much entertainment in one place. The boy decided to try something else. These books were the most interesting thing he had ever seen.

He picked a book with a fish, or so he had been taught in school. The echo of his teacher's voice lingered in his mind. "It swims in water and has no legs but fins and scales." This looked about right. The cover caught his eye with the shiny scales he saw. His teacher never had anything to show him with, but he could tell this was a fish. The title, *The Rainbow Fish*, took him minutes to read, but it seemed interesting enough.

He read about the fish and how others wanted to look like him, and instead of keeping it to himself, he shared with everyone else. The best part—it made him happy. That settled it, he would have to show his teacher this book. The boy smiled to himself as he read on about sharing.

But the boy's head began to hurt, and then his neck twitched. He raised his hand to his neck to stop the burning.

The book dropped from his lap with a loud thud. From behind a glass, the librarians watched with wide eyes, furiously scribbling without looking down, as if they were watching an endangered species in the wild. No child had been given a book in centuries, but they thought it was about time.

"Fail. Take this one out and bring in the next child."

The other robed librarians did not hesitate to go into the room and corner the child. The child screamed, and even as they forcefully dragged him out, he begged them to let him stay.

The librarians wanted to know more, but they did not want the child to know too much. The eldest librarian was soon to be gone, age taking him away. The chosen child would need to be trained; he couldn't leave the world's greatest weapon with someone who would share it.

- - -

The pages of the book were now colored brown with dirt instead of white like when he first saw it. It had been years since he managed to get away from the librarians. They had gone on too long, causing chaos and ruining human nature.

Ever since he was a little boy, he had loved being educated, and when he learned about books, he knew it was not something he could let go.

His knuckles were white as he gripped the book, standing in a landfill no one bothered to go to. He looked around, searching for any clues of where he could have been taken twenty years ago.

He knelt and cracked open the book, the scales on the front a familiar feel. He started reading again, reminiscing how innocent he was once before. It made him angrier; every kid should have been able to have this joy—and keep it.

He turned another page, engrossed in the book's contents. He was so focused that he didn't realize there were two robed men creeping up on him until there was a burlap bag over his head.

They had come to discard more books, but they had found the only person to get away from them. They needed a better way to get rid of the books. They had let him go once before, and he had proved that they couldn't let him go again. So, as the books burned into the air, he was able to join them. \triangle

What a Hunter Hears

Ben Tabor

First Place—Essay Competition

When I was young, everyone was a hunter. Every family member I could name and every one of them that I couldn't expected me to be a wonderful hunter. Every child in my family received a BB gun when they graduated from kindergarten, my younger cousin got a rifle for her eighth birthday, and every member of my family over the age of thirteen had killed a buck. So, when my father said he would take me hunting for the first time for my birthday, I was expected to be overjoyed.

I dreaded the trip for weeks.

If hunting was an artform, my father was the Picasso of blood. He stood a little over six feet tall, with tree trunks for arms and a razor blade for a brain. He was always laughing, sweating, or both. He had a reputation for being the biggest, most respected person in the room and, perhaps most importantly, was a better hunter than most of the family.

That Friday evening, we loaded up his truck and

drove to the camp. The deteriorating camp roads went up and down a series of hills, coating the truck with dust from the peaks and mud from the valleys. We arrived in time for an evening hunt, and I hastily pulled on a camouflage jacket and rough jeans. We drove Dad's ATV for maybe half an hour up a winding and rugged trail.

We rode in relative silence for the first ten minutes or so before letting the crickets be our radio. The trees huddled tightly together like they had something to fear. Slowly, however, the trees thinned out, and we could see past the foliage on both sides. The forest extended far off to the left, and, on our right, an abrupt drop, maybe four stories deep, into a river one hundred and fifty yards wide. The drop was maybe five feet at its farthest from us, and at one point I

could have stuck my hand out over the ledge. It was the most beautifully terrifying sight I'd ever seen.

The trail diverged from the river, instead following a small stream a few feet away and proceeding deeper into the woods. After another few minutes of riding, Dad began to slow the ATV down, and it came to a creeping halt maybe fifty yards from the plot. He meticulously eased down off the ATV, lifted his gun and pack, and motioned for me to do the same. I, with as much stealth as a little boy can muster, clambered off the ATV, hoisted my bag, and after nearly dropping it, slung my rifle over my shoulder.

Despite the leaves crunching beneath our feet, we managed to stealthily approach the shooting house at the closer end of the plot. It was a wooden hut seven feet off the ground that couldn't fit two grown men. Dad and I squeezed ourselves into the shooting house, sat down in the two withered plastic chairs, and waited.

I learned something about my father while we sat

in that little hut and waited for the sun to set. I learned where he practiced his patience. We sat for four hours, trying to breathe slowly and limit the creaking of the house. Dad barely moved during those four hours, simply taking a small sip of water near the beginning. Not long after the sun had begun to set, however, I saw Dad tense slightly, and he slowly motioned towards the back of the plot. I watched as the creature emerged from the thick, damp underbrush, maybe a hundred yards away. Her greybeige coat looked orange in the setting sunlight, and her big black eyes surveyed the field, suspicious of the peas and ryegrass that grew in the open space. She walked out, as quiet as a mouse, onto the edge of the plot. After a moment of waiting, even I could



On Display Logan Harden

Second Place, Fine Art Acrylic and Watercolor hear the soft *chomp, chomp, chomp* of her eating away at the grass.

Dad lowered his head slightly and whispered. He identified her as old, due to her more greyish fur and lack of companions, and as a good size for eating. He told me to creep my rifle out the little screen hole and take her. So, I, silently as possible, eased my rifle out the window, and began to slow my breathing. Shaking uncontrollably, I turned the safety off, bottomed out my breath, and lined up the crosshairs of that rifle with her front quarter. I didn't let my eyes sway from that spot as I eased back my shuttering finger.

I don't remember the bang or jerking upwards during the shot. I don't remember the strength of the rifle's kick. I don't remember the man's words. I barely remember the fury present in his voice as he ripped the gun from my hands and moved me down those steps.

I remember her screams, though. I remember finding her in a hole a dozen feet from the plot, with a

bullet wound in her hindquarters and blood matting her back half. I remember the flies that swarmed the red of her blood and brownish pink of an intestine. I remember a rifle, strangely familiar, being shoved into my hands. I remember that when I raised the rifle, shooting her wasn't a process. There was no breathing or precision. Just another gunshot and another wasted bullet. Dad claims that there was not enough meat left to be worth skinning, and he tossed her in the gut pile for the coyotes.

A few years later, I decided to go hunting again. I felt that same up and down of those dirty hills, was rendered speechless by that same view of the river, and wore those same rough jeans. I was plagued by the same creaking of that old house, and that same memory of her screams. I guess that everyone hears her screams. \triangle



Small Bird
Emily Gambill
Photography

I Used to Build Forts in Fields of Cotton

Audrey Paige Robinson

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

We created freedom where there was none.

My cousin's sticks and stones and my broken bones.

A hidden place to have our own foolish fun.

A place to waste our youth until we are left alone.

My cousin's sticks and stones and my broken bones we must sacrifice for a chance to grow up.

A place to waste our youth until we are left alone.

Drugs and liquor now fill once empty cups.

We must sacrifice for a chance to grow up. Selling every last part of us for a college degree. Drugs and liquor now fill once empty cups. Was losing everything worth feeling free?

Selling every last part of us for a college degree. A hidden place to have our own foolish fun. Was losing everything worth feeling free? We created freedom where there was none.

Time Heals

Hailee Sexton

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

I come from a broken home of tired arguing and slamming doors while I hold pillows that were never thick enough over my small ears. This is as most do, except for those few that were born lucky. I come from parents who loved each other too much, but still not enough. My dad and I watched my mom give up her family for quick highs and wild nights on the old dirty Biloxi Beach filled with floating trash and crushed beer cans and memories wasted and lost. I find myself, now in my adolescence, regretful that I party on that same beach. I feel a twinge in my heart when a picture is taken of me and I see her face in mine.

On a night when I was too young to know what month or day it was, my dad and I found ourselves staring at the rubble she left, and we made promises that night. We interlocked our pinkies, his dramatically larger than mine, and our hot tears hit the cool concrete. The stars twinkled above us, but we took no notice. She left us alone in that old brown house, and the wood vinyl walls still seem to close in on us as we sleep.

"Hailee, sit up," my dad would say as he held the same white bucket with little pictures of orange rubber ducks up to my face. I would sit up, vomit, and fall back to sleep. The coughing never disturbed me as I slept anymore, but my dad laid awake all night, listening intently. This was our routine after three-yearold me was diagnosed with severe asthma. He had memorized the high pitch in my cough, as well as the perturbing gag that followed, which signaled him to come running. He cleaned me off and washed my sheets when he couldn't get there fast enough. He held my long hair in his rough hands as I coughed incessantly and vomited for what seemed like no reason to me at such a young age. He did it all alone, and he built me up into a strong and powerful person, just by trying his best to keep me alive.

"You don't even need my help," my dad would say as I sat in the back of his aged blue truck relentlessly practicing counting from one to one hundred on our way to preschool every morning. As I grew into five-year-old

and six-year-old me, this became our new routine. On the way home, I would recite the alphabet. My head would hit the dirt-speckled window of the truck at each bump in the road, and I would make him promise to help me if I forgot the next number or letter in my recitation. He never needed to. As he continued navigating the twisty roads to the ancient, overarching church building where I attended preschool, I would finally make it to "one hundred" and shriek in excitement. When he walked me in, he would hold my delicate face in his hands and remind me of his pride in me. He would remind me of how smart he believed I was, as all parents do, but I now see in retrospect that he was demonstrating relief rather than praise. He was grateful that he was relatively successful in raising a daughter by himself to be something more than her absent and reckless mother. He signed up to be a loving father and a strong partner in the tumultuous world of parenting, but he was instead forced to stretch himself thin trying to play both parts in the leading roles of my life.

"Get up, Hailee. Our Waffle House table waits for no one," my dad says as he wakes me up on the one Saturday morning a month that I'm able to spend with him. My eyes jolt open, and I see my bedroom. I realize I'm back at home on an extended weekend, and this has become our routine. As adulthood approaches and I develop into eighteen-year-old me, I further recognize these routines we've created throughout my life. Every weekend that I am at home, we make our way to Waffle House for breakfast. However, this time I'm the driver. We order our food—the same exact order—and sit at the table with our arms in the same position. I don't know if he's ever noticed. I catch him up on my chaotic life at school and my current C in AP Calculus I, and he fills me in on the countless work emails and insufferable coworkers.

"Have you heard from your mom?"
He always eventually asks the same question.
"None."

My answer has never changed. △

嫦娥—The Lady in the Moon

Amanda Zhou

First Place—Poetry Competition

She comes home to find everything not lost, but destroyed, to take an elixir.

a bead, smaller than a button, but which sits at the throat for an eternity.

Her husband,

gone to boast around,

again and again.

Always with his arrow,

he brags.

Where is he now?

Where is his piercing arrow, drawn with his mighty strength to come save her?

The words

always say,

He,

comes to save her.

He always boasts of his wife,

her

obsidian hair, cherry-pressed cheeks, pale, porcelain skin—that cracks too easily.

But where is he now?

To slice the dark night into half,

from the sly men who jewel her.

Well, where else would he be,

besides indulged in the wine-infused air

kissed by young girls?

So her throat, too,

kisses the elixir.

And now,

oh, how he comes now-

faster than the speed of his

arrow,

his mighty arrow,

Yet,

his arrow is the one who pecks at her throat.

So what can she do but leave?

To a place where his arrow

his mighty,

bellowing arrow,

won't reach.

To the moon.

And she watches him string his bow

again / again / again.

But his mighty arrow

never reaches the moon.



Fields of Flowers

Audrey Paige Robinson

First Place, Photography

Mississippi

Emma Spinks



Mississippi Morning
Addie White

First Place, Fine Art Gouache



Burning Sky
Alex Wallace
Photography

You hold me back. You give me opportunities. You make me hide half of me. You show me that I can still stay true to my roots even if I hold shame. You disgust me, your people spout hateful things, but maybe I shouldn't blame just you. Your people default to ignorance and hate, and what could you possibly do to stop it? Only they can change as you sit and watch the fighting in either disgust or satisfaction. I do not know how your mind works, and yet you enchant me, your music and culture sing slowly, deliberately, hauntingly in my ears. I want to leave you behind, erase you from my past and forget every memory we ever shared. But I want to stay, I want to stay with you because I know you'd never let me forget. Never let me forget your sweet swamp song: raging rivers and croaking frogs and whispering winds and squelching mud. Never let me forget the gravelly voices rising to the sound of twanging guitars, echoing with the thrum of a pulsating crowd as they all sit together in your hot, sticky, humid heat. Never let me forget the fields tumbling in green waves. Never let me forget the smell and tastes of my home: fried chicken and boiled crawfish and simmering gumbo. And when it's finally time to say goodbye, salt tears will bleed from my eyes into your Muddy Waters, feeding the gators and the fisherman and the blues and into everything that means anything to you.



In Darkness and in Light

Icarus Riggle

Photography



Turtle #2
Taylor Paige Wypyski
Mixed Media



Swinging in the Rain
Audrey Paige Robinson
Photography

A Letter from Ophelia

Vidhi Patel

I am sorry to my brother, that you left me all alone, and came back too late, and visited me in my maddening state.

> I am sorry Hamlet, that your madness has plagued me. Maybe finally, we are the same.

I am sorry to the queen.
I am sorry that I could not become your daughter, and how you witness my suffering mind.

I am sorry to the king, as you will not have rosemary in your memory, and that you will kill more before you die.

> I am sorry to the rest that as ripples of water trickled into my dress, weighing it down, I still floated.

I am sorry that you had to see what you all have done to me.

The Internal Ordeal

Jacob McGee

He sits to compose, word after word, but no.
The air is too cold and the blanket too warm.
He needs to clean the room, or eat.
And with the time short he chooses fixed form.

To add or not to add, a classical quote. Or choose a topic besides nature or death. Out of the sweet bed, onto a seat. And time to finally take a single deep breath.

Should the story be a metaphor for writing? No. A single simple smiling simile with alliteration. And how many times should he repeat? After a minute, he is ready for an hour's vacation.

To sing or not to sing, a singular note.

Or choose a topic besides nature or death.

His affinity to poetry is cold to heat.

And time to finally take a single deep breath.

Is poetry comparable in ease to flash? No.
One word may be essential or insignificant.
Writing may be futile or it may be sweet.
Or as difficult as finding a rhyme to insignificant.



New Growth

Icarus Riggle

Photography



Summer Breeze
Abigail Parker
Paint on Canvas



Home
Audrey Paige Robinson
Photography

Not Exactly

Jay Snodgrass

Yesterday I stood in my bathroom squirting viscous gel onto my fingers from a translucent teal tube,

spreading it into my hair, slicking back each strand. I became a new person, though not exactly.

Yesterday I plucked a slit in my right eyebrow—it's your left if you're facing me, just here. I didn't tell my mother, but that'll be okay. I became a new person, though not exactly.

Yesterday I said 'My name is Jay' to crowded classrooms and auditoriums, watchful eyes on my back staring, wondering.

I became a new person, though not exactly.

Yesterday I learned the French 'iel,' a word that did not exist until someone like me created it

Neutral in a language obsessed with the dichotomy of masculine and feminine. I became a new person, though not exactly.



The Drive Home

Zaria Cooper

Photography



Satire on "The Gay Agenda"

Taylor Paige Wypyski

Painting



Cerberus
Logan Harden
Acrylic

Lullaby for a Long Rest

Jay Snodgrass

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

go down moses where the water don't run tell my weary mother that the deed's been done tried by the creek bed, then in the shed gun cocked and loaded and straight to the head

go down moses in the heat of July tell my father he should say goodbye to the church and the steeple and the center of town you know away in the fields you gotta keep your head down

go down moses to the courthouse door tell them judges i don't care no more ain't all we want just to live and die free? do me a favor, don't tell on me

and if a single person wants to question you tell 'em that the good lord told you what to do they all hide beneath their masks of gold behind their broken testaments and words of old

so go down moses where there's no command do me a favor, can't you give me a hand? there's no way home, it's getting dark the funeral pyre only needs a spark.



Goodnight

Jay Snodgrass

Gouache



Found Things
Logan Harden
Acrylic



Balance Qiancheng Sun Photography

Dear Ex-Wife, the Lovely Lady Who Cheated on Me Multiple Times

Jordan Isbell

Head to the fridge and find the red-topped container behind the several bags of takeout food, open it and take out the toxic landmine I banished, or, as you would like to call it, your chicken alfredo, find Mr. Whiskers (make sure it is your cat and not mines!), feed him a tablespoon of it and step ten feet away (trust me on this), pick up the vomit that I'm sure he projected from his body, wipe it across your forehead (you may need another scoop to cover it all), go in the soon-to-not-be-yours bathroom, look at yourself in the mirror and stare. Keep staring.



My Sister's Cat Taylor Paige Wypyski Paint on Record



Into the Unknown

Zaria Cooper

Photography



Eyebrows #6
Taylor Paige Wypyski

Mixed Media



Eyebrows #2
Taylor Paige Wypyski
Mixed Media

Pieces of You

Amelia Pope

Every morning when I open my closet, I am reminded of you.

If I tried, I could wear a piece of you every day.

The zipper necklace that adorns my collar bone at every recital,

the pink Crocs I use to trudge through puddles during every rainstorm,

the Nike shorts I have worn to bed as the raging heat creeps through the windowsills.

I keep these things close because I can't have you close. I will keep these things until they are threadbare and broken

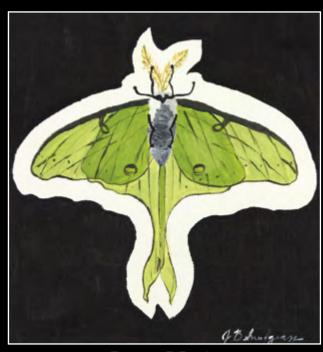
and they can't be used anymore.

Then maybe by that time I will have you near, but until then I wear every piece of you with pride.

Harm Reduction

Cadi Pannell

I am speechless. My mouth has been sewn shut by the hands of someone who didn't care enough to hear what I had to say. Your hands weave in and out of my sight as the thread weaves in and out of my lips. The black thread you've used as my leash is finally being used for something other than keeping me close to you. I cry as the needle pokes into my skin. My upper and lower lips are covered in large dots of blood. It's dripping below my mouth onto my white shirt. I gasp for my final breath as the stitches begin to close. The thread is tied into a knot at the end. I look into the mirror and see a monster. I have now become someone I swore I'd never be because of you.



Luna Moth
Jay Snodgrass
Acrylic

The New Student

Jordan Isbell

Second Place—Essay Competition

"I'm the champion! You both are rotten eggs now!"

I exclaimed my victory to my siblings as I barged in the living room eager to show off my new reputation as the fastest in the family. Throwing my backpack on the dusty chair, I leapt on the couch that greeted me with a suffocating hug and grabbed the T.V. remote from the cushions. My brother and sister lethargically entered the house seconds later and immediately collapsed on the edges of the furniture, bending over and grabbing at their chests to catch their breath.

"At—at least I'm—I'm second," my brother declared, raising his fist in a false-victory manner.

"You cheated," my sister accused, glaring at me as she regained her composure. "You just took off without telling anyone. You can't do that."

I turned up the volume to drown out their embarrassing excuses. "Always be prepared," I advised. "Plus, we did this a week ago, so it's not like it was the first time this happened. You're just mad you were last."

"That's not fair. You didn't even win the right way. You pushed me and Jeffery out the way and just took off."

"I'm just glad I'm second," my brother reiterated.

As they bickered over the race, I focused on catching up to the newest episodes of *Adventure Time*. Although it was enjoyable watching Finn slay another beast for the thousandth time, the sounds of demons falling were soon overshadowed by the sudden smell of grease infused in meat. It was too familiar, and I knew exactly who was in there and what was being served.

"Oh yeah, hamburgers and fries," I exclaimed as I darted towards the kitchen grabbing my first plate. At the stove was where my mother always worked her magic, and today was no different; she had her greasestained apron on, and her amber-colored bandana elegantly wrapped around her head to trap the sweat I'm sure she produced a gallon of. The patties sizzled and filled the air with a thick aroma that built a recipe for deliciousness.

"My day was fine, thank you so much for asking," Mom joked, flipping a patty with her famous spatula.

"Oh, shoot, I'm sorry, Mom. How was your day?" I asked as I made my way towards the fridge.

"It was alright," she replied. "Your dad just got out of work, and he should be in the back room somewhere. I've been here though getting all this food ready for y'all. What about you? How's fourth grade treating you?"

"It was great," I exclaimed. "I met some really cool teachers, and I think they like me. Ms. Cousins is my favorite already! She teaches English, and she said she knows me because her mom used to teach me in the third grade. I think I'm her favorite too." I grabbed a slice of cheese and measured it to make sure it was the longest one before placing in on my plate.

"I wouldn't say that you're the *favorite*, but I'm glad you're liking your teachers." Mom heard the fridge door slam and briefly turned around. "You're already fixing a plate? You can't wait for your brother and sister to show up?"

"They're in there arguing over who's the bigger loser," I retorted, examining the pickle jar to find the largest one. "They can smell it just how I did. If they want a burger, they would've shown up by now."

Mom continued to treat the patties. "You better not be getting all the food either, Jordan. Leave some for them too. If you don't want to wait on these burgers on the stove, there are some in the microwave that you can get."

I raced to the microwave and opened it to grab the juiciest patty. "Nice," I said.

"Anything else happen in school?"

"Not much really. It was really a quick day and—wait!" I slammed the microwave door shut and raised a finger. "I forgot. Kelsey got suspended already on the first day."

Mom laughed. "Kelsey? The one who always come here every weekend? What did he do to get suspended?"

"Yeah, that's him. And he got into a fight with the new student during the lunch period. It was right when it began and it went by so fast that I forgot it even happened. It was pretty funny, though. Kelsey slammed him over the table and dumped his lunch all over him. People had to grab him off of the person, and it took them a good three minutes." I found the softest buns

and went to grab the ketchup.

"Jesus, what did he do to Kelsey?" my mom questioned, raising her eyebrows. "When he's over here, he seems so nice and innocent. Who started the fight?"

"I know, right? I was surprised, too, but the other guy actually started it. It was over something pretty dumb. Me and Kelsey were sitting at the table with some other people, and the guy came over with his lunch, so we asked him if he wanted to sit with us. He ended up saying no, and Kelsey just jumped at him and started fighting him. It came out of nowhere, really."

Mom, still fixing on the burgers, lowered her eyebrows. "So, he got in a fight with the new student because he said he didn't want to sit with y'all?" Her voice changed from the light-hearted mother to the stern parent.

"Yeah, sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"Are you sure that's how it happened? That's not how a fight that violent starts."

"Well, that what it looked like. He probably got mad at what he said."

"And what did he say?"

"Well...am I allowed to say it?"

Mom stopped flipping the patties and turned to stare at me. "You know what? Sure." She turned off the stove and folded her arms while leaning against it.

"Just to be clear, you said you're okay with it."
"That's what I said."

"Ok, he said, 'I don't want to sit with you n*****s."

Mom took a moment to think, before stating, "So it sounds like Kelsey fought him because he called him the n-word."

"Which is why I said it was a dumb fight," I replied. I poured the ketchup on the top bun before smushing both pieces of bread between the meat. I made way to the oven to grab the fries, but Mom was still standing in front of it. "Excuse me, Mom."

She didn't move.

"Black or white?"

White or black, I thought. What is she talking about?

"I'm confused," I answered back, trying to peek through the oven to make sure the fries were in there.

"Was he black?" my mom retorted, still guarding the wedges. "Or was he white?"

Does it really matter? I thought.

"White," I finally responded. "He used to go to another school. He's not even from around here, actually." I tried to grab the oven's ledge, but Mom kneed down and stood face to face with me.

"Jordan," she began, this time with a concern in her tone. "Do you know why he was mad at him?"

"Not really. I mean, maybe he was mad about him not wanting to sit with us."

Before I could say anything else, Mom grabbed my head and spoke to me softly.

"Jordan. Are you telling me you didn't find that to be racist?"

"Racist? No, it's not like he said he hates black people. I mean it's just a word, right?"

Mom stood up and took off her apron. I had never seen her act this way before. She left the kitchen and went into her room. She didn't come back out.

My brother soon ran in the kitchen.

"Aha, I'm the first one now!" △



Heart in the Road
Icarus Riggle

Photography

The Ocean Always Sang Me to Sleep

Audrey Paige Robinson

Third Place—Poetry Competition

I grew up with the sound of waves and ocean breezes. Their whispers hit my nursery window, over and over again.

Listen, learn, lose.

"It's not that scary," my father reassured me. I was barely six.

The lake looked calm from the dock; I had no reason to be scared.

Listen to him.

The smooth surface of the water shattered on my impact.

That which was once calm erupted into chaos. I could barely stay afloat.

I began to sink. Down. Down. Till my toes felt the mud.

Finally, a hand grabbed my small shoulders, pulling me back up.

You better learn soon.

The tides mocked me.

"Just trust your instincts," my sixth swimming instructor told me

I knew better than to listen to that. My instincts told me to run.

You have to learn eventually.

I took one final gasp of air before plunging myself into the deep.

The chlorine seeped into me until all I could remember was water.

There was no color. Darker. Darker. Darker. Till I was sure that it was over.

Then, the hands. Another stranger saving me because I couldn't save myself.

You're going to lose.

The pool filters prepared for my demise.

"You have to give up at some point," I said to myself. I was barely 23.

The sea was violent and uninviting; I knew it was as good a time as ever.

Lose now while you're already ahead.

The salt sprayed my face as the tsunami swallowed me whole.

There was a sense of calm to it all. Returning to my roots.

I breathed out. Deeper. Deeper. Until there was no air left in my lungs.

There was no salvation. No arms pulling me back up. *You've lost*.

The ocean welcomed me back.



Sunkissed Waters
Alex Wallace

Photography

Brother

Kashama Mehta

"I want it to be a boy," I told my mom as I yawned. I was sitting in the dark on my parents' bed. The door of the bedroom was cracked halfway open, and the soft yellow light coming in from the hallway made me sleepy. I could see the changing table that was beginning to pile up with the baby's things.

"A boy," my mom repeated after me in slight wonderment. In reality, she must have been picturing what it was like to have a boy herself, but six-year-old me thought that I had shocked her with my demand.

I wanted her to know that I knew no one could pick if I was going to get a brother or sister, so I rushed to explain my reasoning. "If it's a boy, then we will have an equal number of boys and girls in the house. Two boys and two girls," I smiled. The idea of an even number was satisfying to me. That was the only reason I wanted a brother.

"Really," my mother replied, as she laughed a little. I took her chuckle as a sign of relief, and I thought

my reasoning had been successful. Looking back, she probably wasn't even paying much attention to me. She was just sitting beside me in the dark, waiting patiently for me to fall asleep, as she thought of the months ahead of her, but I couldn't sleep; I was going to get a sibling.

I pictured myself playing hopscotch outside with a wobbling and animated little toddler running behind me. I pictured myself watching TV with a little creature looking at me, eyes wide open, expecting me to explain what was happening. I pictured myself eating blueberries and laughing at a little companion who was trying to do the same, but instead he had splotches of blue all over his face and clothes. These were my blissful thoughts throughout the following months because the part about getting about getting in to fights with or getting annoyed with a sibling never occurred to me. It's a little ironic how you can be so excited for the arrival of a person who is going to be a permanent addition to your life, a person who is going to take so much time and space from your world, a person you who have not met and do not pick.

I think my mom said something along the lines of, "We have to go" or "I think it's time" to my dad when she came out of the bathroom one night.

I know for sure that I was sitting on the floor of my bedroom, playing with waxy Bendaroos. My grandparents, who had come all the way from India, were sitting with me, and we all looked up at her as

> she said this. I didn't know what was happening, but I got a sense that it had to do with the baby, and my suspicions were confirmed when we all quickly got into the car to go to the hospital. My grandmother had her shawl with her, and she draped it over the both of us. Why did the baby decide to come late at night when it was freezing cold outside? What a silly and nerve-racking decision, I thought to myself. As we rushed to the hospital, I remember my grandparents praying. Of course, I



Mother Nature
Arika Gardner

Painting on Canvas

prayed with them, but it only added to my anxiousness. Everything seemed to happen at lightning speed after we got to the hospital too. I just remember being whisked from one room to the next, and no one would tell me anything. What was the point of all these people, nurses, and doctors, and adults who seemed to actually have a clue? Of course, the baby was coming. It didn't take a genius to figure that out, but I still would have liked to know why my mother was getting needles attached to her when it was clearly not making her feel better. The baby was coming! She needed to be comfortable!

I reached the height of my confusion and anger when I figured out that my dad had called one of our family friends to come pick up my grandparents. That's when my waterworks began. Why did I need to go back home if everything was okay, but no one was explaining anything to me? Like *hello* people, was anyone else here the sister of the baby? I didn't think so. I'm sure that with the amount of crying I was doing to get attention someone probably tried to tell me what was going on at some point, but I didn't listen. I sat on the hospital bed with my mom for what seemed like point two seconds, and I was trying hard not to squish her. She somehow managed to hug me despite all the needles attached to her. In my eyes, we were the only two mentally stable people in the hospital at that moment. I did not want to leave her.

So, I cried some more as my parents' friend, who was like an aunt to me, picked me up and carried me away from my father at the hospital door. She and my grandparents sat with me and tried to settle me into bed after we got home, but I was not going to go down easy. Looking back, I feel sorry for the amount of crying and screaming they had to put up with that night. The only thing that calmed me were my colorful, waxy, and twisty Bendaroos. I made different shapes with them as I realized that I had to go to school the next morning.

My memory serves me little, but I remember trying to compose myself over the course of the next two days because my parents were still in the hospital, and I knew my mother wouldn't want me to give my grandparents a hard time. I remember saying a prayer

for my mom and my little brother before school, and that's when it hit me. I was getting a little brother like I wanted all along. I mean, I already knew this, but at that moment it was all I needed to be excited. I suppose I talked on the phone to my parents while they were still in the hospital, and at some point, we also got the news of my brother being born on January 3rd, but none of that stood out in comparison to seeing him for the first time.

My dad drove us to the hospital that morning. All that anger and confusion from that last time I had been there was coming back again, and I knew it would only go away once I saw him. I hopped out of the car the second we pulled up to the hospital door. That clean hospital smell was soothing, and it assured me that I was in the right place. On our way to the hospital, I picked up on the fact that my brother was born "premature" which roughly translated to "born early." I waited impatiently as we went up the elevator to get to the room where all the babies were. There were several in a room with pale brown wall. All so tiny and precious, some crying, some sleeping, but I didn't pay much attention to these others.

I was so excited and yet so nervous, but with all the babies in the room, I had to stay quiet. Finally, in one of the plastic tubs, there he was. There was my brother, Madhav. I know everyone says this, but he was perfect. He was real, and when I gingerly touched his soft black hair, I felt so ready to take on the responsibility a big sister.

After I had stared at and taken pictures of him to my heart's content, my grandfather and I went down to the hospital gift shop, and we picked out a blue teddy bear just for Madhav. Since he was born prematurely, we were told that he would have to be put into an incubator. My grandfather went back to the room with all the babies, and we put the teddy bear in Madhav's incubator. I knew that I couldn't stay with him all the time, so I hoped that the teddy bear would keep him company in the horrid little box. I touched his soft hair one more time, and my grandfather closed the incubator. My first act as a sister was complete. \triangle

The Street I Used to Live On

Lauren Varner

Patchy grass, faded asphalt, those roads once strolled down. Aching silence interrupted by screaming children and the watchful woof woofs of the dogs. Glaring light through pearly blinds and big windows I used to love. That house with the A-frame and the teal one on the hill. Skipping down the streets in summer, the Sun smiling down on blistering skin. Neighbors that waved for every occasion, and the vast garden on the way to school. Birds that thumped against the coruscating glass, and lancinating vines inviting their pernicious spawn. My house with the shining silver cover that gleamed from the stop sign to the sky, and that oak tree that's gone now. Honeysuckle salutations when Spring awakes from her slumber, and crunchy umber leaves that echo Autumn's song. On that street I used to live on. peace smelled of fresh-cut grass. But it's grown up now, and the branches I would swing through, replaced by the burden of tomorrow.



MSCW Drive

Icarus Riggle

Photography

A Woman's Purpose

Nora Courtney

Your skirt is too short.

Boys won't like that.

You talk too much.

Find a good strong man.

You're not smart enough.

You're distracting the boys.

Slut.

Whore.

Gold-

Digger.

It's her fault anyways.

Weak.

Ditzy.

Feeble

Uncharted Territory

Nora Courtney

Third Place—Short Story Competition

The salty wind whipped through Dannie Pryor's hair as she stood on the bow of the boat, staring off into the horizon. The sun beat down on the back of her neck, but she didn't mind. This was what she loved. She loved the smell of briny salt water, the feeling of the warm wind as it kissed her cheeks, and the sound of the waves as they lapped across the hull of the boat.

Dannie hopped down from the railing and made her way to the cabin where Kit, her brother, waited for her. The cabin was exactly what would be expected. It was a small, cramped space that was barely big enough for two cots, a few storage containers, a small table, and a stove. The room always smelled faintly of mildew and salt, and there was never enough light at nighttime.

Kit sat at the table as he studied over what appeared to be a large map. Dannie and Kit had been going on fishing trips since before they were barely able to talk and waddle around. Their father was a fisherman and always took them with him on his trips. Soon, Dannie and Kit grew accustomed to waking up long before the sun, the smell of burnt coffee and cheap cigarettes, and the cuss words that acted as breaks between every word in a sentence.

When Dannie was thirteen and Kit was sixteen, their father passed away from a heart attack. Since their mother was bedridden with a chronic illness, Dannie and Kit continued their fishing trips without their father to support their mother.

It had been three years, yet Dannie still found herself glancing to her right, expecting to see her father's large frame untangle fishing nets with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. She missed the way his voice boomed as he taught her and Kit how to fish, his dark beard damp with the splashes of ocean spray.

"How deep is the water here?" Dannie asked as she plopped down in the chair across from Kit.

He ran a hand through his short, dirty blonde hair as he answered Dannie without looking up from his map. "Last time I checked the radar it said about 500 feet or so. I'm pretty sure this is the right spot based off Dad's old maps," he replied.

"Good," said Dannie, picking at her nailbeds.

"There better be enough fish out there to fill this entire boat. We need it to make this month's rent."

Kit's brown eyes snapped up, full of agitation and a hint of anger. Usually when Dannie looked into Kit's eyes, she could pretend it was her dad staring back at her, but not when Kit was like this.

"I told you not to worry about it. I'll take care of it," Kit snapped.

"What does it matter? You said this last time, yet we had to take out a loan from the bank. We can't take out anymore loans. If we don't make rent this month, we get kicked out. I think I have every right to be concerned," Dannie replied to her brother harshly.

"You're 16. It's not your job to worry about rent. You should be worrying about school instead. I answered the phone the other day for Mom when the school called. You have got to stop skipping or you're going to have to repeat the grade. If you repeat your junior year, you're never going to get to college and get out of this hellhole," Kit said, his voice rising with each sentence.

"Just because you think it's a hellhole doesn't mean that I do. Plus, I think having a roof over our heads is more important than whether or not I know the difference between a quadratic and cubic function," Dannie snapped and rolled her eyes. "You know what? I'm not having this conversation again." She stood abruptly and stalked out to the deck of the boat.

"Why do we only fight now? What happened? I miss the old Kit," Dannie thought to herself.

She supposed that it has to do with the fact that Kit had to take over the family at the age of 16. When their dad passed, their sick mother became unresponsive. All she did was sit in bed and stare blankly ahead at the TV playing the day's assortment of random soap operas. At nights, she would call the name of her late husband, waiting for him to come back to bed. Once she realized that he was not coming, her sobs filled the house.

Occasionally, their mother was a fraction of who she was before she got sick. Sometimes when Kit and Dannie came in from a long day on the boat, their mother would have prepared dinner, usually chicken pot pie and butter beans. On these nights, Kit and Dannie soaked up the gift of their conscious mother while it lasted, before she fell back into her normal demeanor.

For the remainder of the day, Kit and Dannie did their best to avoid each other, allowing the other to have plenty of space. Soon, the sun began to set, so they both made their way back to the cabin. Dannie grabbed a can of tuna and quickly made sandwiches for the both of them. They ate in silence and made their way to their cots for the night. Dannie read the latest John Grisham novel while Kit started another sketch of a sunrise over the ocean. After a few hours, the siblings fell asleep.

Dannie awoke the next morning to the intense rocking of the boat and noticed that the cot adjacent to her was empty. She looked around until she saw Kit at the table, frantically doing calculations over a map with a compass and GPS sitting right next to him.

"What's going on?" Dannie asked with a yawn and stretch.

"I think we veered off course throughout the night. I'm trying to figure out where we are," Kit answered as he pushed buttons on the GPS.

As if in slow motion, Dannie watched as a giant wave hit the boat, causing the GPS to hit the ground and shatter. Dannie and Kit stared at the broken shards of the GPS in disbelief.

"No," Kit muttered breathlessly.

"It's okay," Kit said to himself more than Dannie, "I can just do the calculations by hand and with the map. I think. Crap. I don't even know where we are."

"Kit, what does this mean?" Dannie asked in shock after watching him struggle with failed calculations for fifteen more minutes. "Well, Dannie this means that we're lost in the middle of the ocean," Kit replied in a hushed, sarcastic tone.

As if in response, the ocean sent another huge wave towards the boat, causing the maps and compass to land in a large tangle on the floor of the mildewed cabin.

Once the two siblings got over their initial shock, they let their survival instincts take over. Dannie took inventory of what preserved food they had left along with clean drinking water while Kit checked on fuel levels for the boat. They had enough drinking water for six days at most and enough fuel for four.

Four days. That's all they had. Dannie sat with her knees pulled to her chest on the deck of the boat. She began to cry as she stared off into the endless, landless horizon.

"Why isn't he here? Why isn't Dad here when I need him most?" Dannie thought to herself. There wasn't a day that went by where she didn't wish she would've paid closer attention to the way her father carried himself, or the way his eyes sparkled as he talked about his successful fishing trips. Right now, she wished she paid more attention when her dad was teaching Kit how to measure the wind, or how to use the tide and stars to their advantage. At least then she would've been a little help. At the moment, though, it seemed as if Kit was just as lost as her.

The days passed slowly. Kit determined that the best idea would be to head northeast and hope they ran into land or another boat. Kit drove the boat

while Dannie fiddled with the radio, hoping to catch a signal. They ate their meals of tuna sandwiches and fried spam in the dim yellow of a singular lightbulb. Every now and then, they would catch a few fish as a way of blowing off steam. The siblings would then go to bed and repeat the same routine the next day.



Overlooking

Audrey Paige Robinson

By the fourth day, they had fallen into a routine of surviving and waiting. Now, in the middle of the fourth day, Dannie looked helplessly at the fuel levels that read "low." The impending doom finally fell onto her shoulders as her hope sank. Kit's plan of heading northeast proved unfruitful, and they seemed more lost than when they started.

Dannie stared at her reflection in the waters. Her unwashed brown hair was thrown into two braids. Her freckled cheeks had become severely sunburned. Her clothes smelled of fish and salt, and she was in desperate need of a bath. But the most distinguishable change in Dannie's appearance were her eyes. Her green eyes, which was her father's favorite feature, were once full of hope and life. But now, as she stared into the endless ocean waters, they were aged, full of despair, and hopeless.

Kit's footsteps creeped behind her as he came to sit beside his little sister. Their voyage hadn't been good on him either. He smelled of stinking fish and teenage boy, and the dark circles under his eyes were impossible to miss. "That's the last of the fuel," Kit said quietly while he ran one of his calloused fingers over his bottom lip.

Dannie turned to look at her older brother and noticed that he had tears in his eyes. The only other time she had caught a glimpse of him crying was the day of their father's passing. He didn't even cry at the funeral.

"What now, Kit?" Dannie asked with a shaky voice, "What now?"

Kit refused to look at Dannie and continued to stare into the horizon. His voice broke as he responded with the three-word phrase that she dreaded most.

"I don't know," Kit said.

In all sixteen years of her life, she had never seen her brother without a plan. Dannie turned to look at the horizon with Kit. Mother Nature seemed to taunt the Pryor siblings with its warm temperatures, sunny weather, and calm waters as they looked forward into the great expansion of nothingness.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Dannie said after a few minutes passed. And with that, she stood and stared at the churning, bottomless waters beneath her. \triangle

Native Indians

Vidhi Patel

My former school's colors were built into itself, the maroon bricks and white poles screaming school spirit.

"The Indians," we called ourselves, yet every history book mentioning Native Americans was ripped, and tattered, and unused.

A cheerleader, I was supposed to be an embodiment of our school's pride. Beaming maroon and white, I was supposed to chant "Go Indians," when I was the only Indian at our school. That dream of the girl who was just starting to fit in when she realized everything about what she was doing was wrong.

I began to correct my history teacher, whenever he would refer to Native Americans as Indians.

It annoyed me to be confused with another ethnicity at times,

but it seemed disrespectful to those who rightly owned the land

the maroon and white home of "The Indians" was built upon.

The House

Emma Spinks

Following the clouds leads you straight to heaven.

At least, that's what I used to think. I was a kid then. I didn't know anything.

The sun set across the field of fluffy clouds. Cotton candy stretched out as far as I could see. I shakily gripped the rails of the rickety front porch. I tried to catch my breath, but the air was so thin up there. We were so far above anything. I couldn't see any planes or birds.

I can't explain it. I couldn't tell you what happened. But somehow, we landed there on a house in the middle of the air. The house looked hastily slapped together. Sheets of rusted metal were drilled together to form some rickety shack. The wind blew through the small crack in the home, sounding like the small, suffocated screams of a thousand women. A rocking chair creaked as it rocked back and forth. Small mountains of dust dotted along the worn, splintering wood.

I watched Patty bend down to smell a potted plant. She smiled softly. "Red tulips. Those are my favor-

ite. Would you like to smell?"

I shuffled awkwardly. "Pats, they're dead."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Her face scrunched in confusion. "Come on, let's go inside!"

She gripped my hand and tugged me inside. Patty's giggles echoed around the house.

The polished hardwood floor pretended that this place was stable. Everywhere I looked, I was confronted with decaying stuffed animals and old baby dolls. A baby blanket draped precariously over an old crib. Children's books with yellowed pages lined shelves around the room. I picked up a dusty, ornate silver frame. A photo of younger Patty and her family rested inside. A man's face had been furiously marked out before the picture was replaced in the frame. Goosebumps slid down my shoulders and gathered on my arms.

Something was wrong there.

The whistling wind grew louder, and I grit my teeth against the horrid sound. Patty ran around, squealing as she found the lost objects of her childhood. Though she was in her mid-forties, Patty was surprisingly swift. I watched her rummage through a battered, rotting toy chest before she cried out in victory. Holding up a crusty stuffed bear, she skipped over to me.

"Isn't this place amazing?" she cried out.

I could feel the eyes on us even before the voice spoke. A man's voice thrummed across the house.

"I've been waiting for you. I saved everything."

Patty smiled gently at the voice, her cakey makeup cracking from the strain. She grabbed my hand before pulling me along. I reluctantly followed her.

She dragged me into a small bedroom. The walls were white with small pink flowers painted on them. A sign spelled out Patty's name in a pretty pink cursive. She squealed and set her teddy bear on the bed. As she threw back the covers, I stifled a gasp at the dried bloodstain in



Haunted House with a Picket Fence

Jay Snodgrass
Graphite

the middle of the sheets. I gently laid a hand on her arm as she rolled in the soft flowery sheets of the bed.

"Patty," I said, "We should leave."

"You're right!" She perked up immediately. "There's still so much more to explore."

She skipped into the kitchen. Patty opened the refrigerator to find all her favorite dishes, sodas, and desserts lining the shelves. A leather recipe book sat on the pale green tile counter. Its pages crinkled under my fingertips as I thumbed through it. I landed on a page titled "GRANNY'S BLOOD PUDDING."

I inhaled sharply as a stark chill descended on the room. The voice was no longer a man speaking. A mix of voices swirled around the kitchen, thrumming with power and darkness.

"We got everything ready for you, Patty."

The coldness seeped through my skin, straight to my bones. The tap dripped loudly and rhythmically, but it was not loud enough to disguise the pattering of feet. The spirit left the room, and I slowly crept to the sink.

Two pristine knives glistened in the light. The soap suds from their washing still remained in the sink, cheerfully popping while sliding down the drain.

This time, a woman's voice called out, shaky but still strong.

"Come see us, Patricia."

I watched Patty walk out of the kitchen in a trance. I don't know what this spirit was that had her hypnotized, but I knew I had to get her out of there. I quickly followed behind her, ready to escape.

Until I saw them.

In the living room, three people lounged on the cushy furniture as a little boy played in the center. An older, heavyset man sat in the recliner. His skin was a waxy yellow, and he gazed at Patty with bloodshot eyes. A dark bottle sat on the table beside him. A shotgun lay in his lap, and he rolled a bright red shell between his fingers.

A young woman that vaguely resembled Patty laughed deliriously at the little boy's antics. She scratched at her arms while shaking violently. Deep, dark circles pulled her face down. Once gleaming red

hair stuck to her head and face, thick with grease.

An older woman wrapped her arm around the younger woman. Her shoulders seemed permanently hunched over, and she moved meekly. An array of bruises mottled her skin: brown, blue, green, yellow, and purple. She smiled softly, careful not to bust an already smashed lip.

The little boy nearly forced me to hurl. Several of his limbs were grotesquely broken, and tire tracks tattooed his skin. His mutilated face smiled gleefully while he pushed his toy car across the rug.

The old man looked at us and spoke, "How do you like the house, Patty?"

"I'm the happiest I've ever been!" Patty clapped her hands together, close to tears.

I watched Patty's mother move to stand behind a large chair that overlooked the living room. A large bullet hole rested in the back of the chair, painting over the hideous floral fabric with black gunpowder and crusted blood. Something dark came over her face as she stared at me.

"Patty," she said. "Why did you bring them here? You weren't supposed to do that."

They all turned to face me. My body seized, and I fought the urge to collapse. The little boy pointed at me, and he turned to speak to Patty.

"Mommy?"

Patty knelt to the ground, "Yes, baby?"

"They shouldn't be here."

The young woman, her sister, spoke shakily. "They're too heavy for the house. You're too heavy for the house, Pats."

"You need to be like us Patty, dear," her mother said gently. "You'll have to be like us."

"I do?" Patty shrunk under the weight of her family. She spoke timidly like what I imagined that little girl in that old photograph sounded like all those years ago.

I was losing her to this mad house.

I grabbed her hand in mine. "Patty, please, we have to go. This place isn't right."

The old man jumped from his chair and loaded his shotgun. My heart thudded to the sound of him cocking

the gun. As he took a step toward me, I realized that the house didn't groan under his weight.

"No," I whispered. "Please, no."

He stepped menacingly toward me and pointed the end of the shotgun at me. I put my hands up, gasping for air and a miracle.

"I'm not letting you hurt my family anymore, David," he growled at me.

"I'm not David!"

"Oh, you think you're funny. You think I'm an old fool. I know it's you, David!"

"It's not David, Daddy!" Patty's mother finally stepped from behind the chair.

The old man rounded on her. "Why do you always defend that son of a bitch, Josie? Look at what he's done to the girls! To you! No, no, no. This ends today."

"Papaw," Patty's sister rasped. "Daddy died a long time ago."

"You're right, Lacy," he smiled. "I should killed him a long time ago."

I backed away, shaking my head. "No, please. I'm not who you think I am. I'm not that man. Patty, tell them I'm not that man!"

"Y'all take care of Pats while I deal with this piece of shit." The man moved closer to me.

"Patty!" I screamed until my lungs were hoarse. "PATTY!"

She merely smiled at me as her sister, son, and mother wrapped her in a hug. I watched her mother draw the knife across Patty's neck. That giant grin permanently glued on her face.

The happiest she'd ever been.

I ran.

I ran across the groaning floorboards, afraid they would give way at any moment. I sprinted through the kitchen, the bedroom, the junk room. I burst through the front door and nearly swan-dived off the front porch. I gained my bearings just as I heard the click of a gun being taken off safety.

I turned around, nearly losing control of my bladder. I shakily stepped away from him until I was half an inch from the edge of the porch.

"Please," I begged. "I'm not that man. I never hurt any of you."

They say that the eyes are the windows to the soul. But when that old man narrowed his black eyes, I knew there was no negotiating.

Nothing good lay behind those eyes.

I watched, shaking, as the man raised the butt end of his shotgun. It came down in slow motion, knocking me out and off the porch.

The old man grumbled and took his gun off fire.

"I was never a good shot anyway." \triangle



The Frozen Sky
Laya Karavadi
Acrylic

The Plight of an Overlooked Scholar

Chloe Dobbins

Honorable Mention—Short Story Competition

Subject: Request

Hello Mr. Ted,

I hope this email finds you well.

I have been an avid viewer of your program for a long time. I find your show quite educational and helpful. Therefore, I humbly request the opportunity to have a "talk" on your show. I've spent countless years researching my field, and I have uncovered a rather large mystery—evidence so irrefutable I could never be ridiculed again. While I understand giving a talk to someone you know little about likely seems daunting, I assure you this for the best. Please, respond when you are able and I can schedule my presentation. I believe that due to your platform's popularity, the best way to communicate my findings is through one of your talks.

Best,

Dr. Max Jones (PHD Ufology) Sent Nov. 3, 2:45 PM

Subject: Request, cont.

Hello Mr. Ted,

I'm sorry to email you so late at night. However, you have yet to respond to my prior email. I understand that you must be a very busy man, but this is a very important matter. The people are so close to being exposed to the truth. As I stated in my last email, I have considered the fact that you likely find it difficult to give a talk to someone who has yet to disclose all their information. Therefore, I will tell you this: my research revolves around the presence of extraterrestrial life in the Earth's hollow center. It has also come to my attention that giants may too be present in that environment, and I have reason to believe the American government is aware of this.

This is all the information I can spare. Surely a man of your higher understanding realizes that anyone could be reading this exchange, so I cannot explain everything. I'm using incognito mode to email you, but the NSA is a very capable organization. I'm confident they could leak my emails if given reason.

Best.

Dr. Max Jones (PHD Ufology) Sent Nov. 5. 3:26 AM

Subject: Reminder

Hello Mr. Ted,

It has been nearly a week since I first emailed you and you have yet to respond. I do not mean to rush you or to force your hand, but I feel the need to remind you that I have to disclose some extremely important information. I've found out more since I last emailed you. I have reason to believe I am in danger. Please allow me to present my research before it is too late. The fate of humanity may be in my hands.

Best,

Dr. Max Jones (PHD Ufology) Sent Nov. 10, 2:16 AM

Subject: IMPORTANT

Mr. Ted,

I am growing desperate.

Last night I was pulled over by a state trooper. The man said I was speeding, but I fear he wanted me for a more sinister reason: his superiors ordered him to nearly arrest me as a warning. The FBI must be on to me. They know I can expose them.

I sensed this and began to run away from the officer. I narrowly escaped.

Mr. Ted, I am begging you. I'm finding it increasingly difficult to sleep from stress. I have spent a decade finding this information, and it may soon all be taken from me. Please. Please, allow me to spread my word. Please.

Dr. Max Jones (PHD Ufology) Sent Nov. 14, 4:55 AM

No Subject

It seems like you are just like the rest.

Mr. Ted, I truly expected something different from you.

So many have shared their stories on your show, but you won't even grace me with a response.

But it doesn't matter now.

I know I have been found out. I saw a chemtrail outside my house last night. They sent a plane to spy on me, but I'm not scared of them anymore. My wellbeing does not matter any longer, only my knowledge. One day, our descendants will recognize my ingenuity, and you and everyone else will be ashamed for never listening to me. I only wish I could live long enough to see the day when humanity realizes my expertise and finally begins to question their surroundings.

All of you will regret never listening to me when I'm discovered.

You may laugh at me now, but I will have the last laugh. I will win the war.

They can't hide anything from me. I've discovered it all.

They'll say it was an accident, but you'll know the truth.

You will all know the truth even if you don't admit it. Signing off now and forever,

Dr. Max Jones (PHD Ufology, Innovator, Explorer, Detective, Expert, Genius)

Sent Nov. 30, 12:00 AM

Unread. △



M.C. (Mountain of Ceremonies)

Eric Franklin

Acrylic on Canvas

Stuck

Rice Guigley

Waiting on the elevator to arrive, Logan and I talk about what we need to do tonight. Logan stresses himself out over a lab report due tonight, and I break an invisible sweat when I remember the torture of physics homework that awaits me. The elevator doors open, and we hop in without a second thought. 5:45 p.m.

Continuing our conversation, our words shift between stress and relief. It is a late Sunday night, and everything is on a path straight up until the elevator rumbles. Growling like a hungry stomach, it suddenly performs a staccato drop before going silent. The conversation falls sour before we turn our attention to the glowing panel of buttons. Praying on false hope, I push the fifth floor. No response.

My voice shakes from my lips, "Do we need to push the emergency button?"

Logan quips, "You can push it. I'll call the front office."

Two devices ring. One is answered by crumbling static, and the other opens to a cheery voice. The speaker from the elevator goes silent. No response.

The front office assures that the W Police are on their way. Logan's phone battery runs low, so we bid our adieus and sit in silence. All we can do is wait. Time passes like broken glass, reflecting multiple possibilities of what doom or paradise could await us.

Logan tries to ease the mood. "You know we could die like this. The elevator could..."

My breath catches in my chest. "Thanks Logan, but I don't want to panic worse than I already am."

Footsteps bang down the hall. Finally, the promise of escape is sooner than not. Unable to detect voices, we can only hear the clanking and scraping of metal. Heavy grunts and grumbles come from above us. Uncertainty chokes the air out of our lungs in the small, shaking elevator. The noises stop only to start up again. The elevator shakes again before the door opens. A bit. It stops after an inch. Someone or something sticks a flashlight through the crack to prevent the door from closing again. Once again, the bliss of ignorance is not so blissful.

Logan and I choose to sit on opposite sides of the elevator, trying our best to balance the weight. We brace

ourselves to land flat in case the worst-case scenario happens. He looks at me again. My phone is broken, but I can still read the time. 6:23 p.m.

Thirty minutes have passed. Logan jokes, "Do you think this will get me an extension on my physics homework?"

"Probably."

A nice, joyful conversation turns into short, snippy small talk behind the metal doors. The noises stop, and they don't start up again. We can make out voices cursing and mumbling. Some guy screams at the elevator that they need to call 911 and get the fire department. The elevator rests silently on the fifth floor as we wait.

Minutes have passed, heavy boots stomp down the hall before stopping and shaking the elevator once more. Different colored hands sneak into the slot under the flashlight to grasp at the door. A crowbar is slammed between them. The end of a hammer appears. Logan and I still sit down and try to calm ourselves.

Logan sighs when he looks at his pants and pulls at his hair. "This would be a terrible outfit to die in. My green hair clashes with my pants!"

I look at my own clothes in hazy panic. Sweatpants and a Wisconsin hoodie. I pull off my shoe and laugh, "I'm wearing my *My Little Pony* socks."

The conversation runs dry. The elevator shakes and rumbles. We can hear people outside talking. Their muffled voices only say something about a pulley.

Distracting ourselves with meaningless words, we come back to reality to see sweaty firefighters standing above us. The elevator never finished the journey to fifth floor. It stopped halfway. A tall ledge stands between us and our escape. Logan nudges me to go first. The firefighter grabs my hand and pulls me out, and Logan follows suit. 6:43 p.m.

We spent almost an hour in the elevator debating the brevity of life. It takes us longer than a few minutes to reconnect ourselves with reality, but we go on as if nothing ever happened. From that night onwards, there was a silent agreement to always take the stairs. Even to the fifth floor. \triangle

Cigarettes on the Rooftop

Hailee Sexton

I stared in the east window of the house as the gunshots filled the air, and I could already see the paycheck filling my bank account. My feet crushed the flowerbed below me as I snuck away, and I ran through the dark, overarching trees to the car. I pulled on the door and threw myself in the seat; adrenaline coursed through my veins like my own personal brand of heroin.

"Drive, Jane! Go!" I yelled, laughing as I yanked my seatbelt and shoved it down next to me until it clicked.

"Did he do it, Adele? Did he kill her?" Jane asked as she jerked the car in drive. The tires screeched, leaving black marks on the road as she drove off. She's been my getaway driver and my best friend since college, and she's the only person I trust with what I do.

"They always do," I said with a smirk. "You know these men worship me."

I opened the glove box and took out my phone. I stared at the screen, not blinking until I saw the notification. The trees flew by the car as we sped down the street, and we heard faint sirens from a few miles over. All I cared about was making it out of that place and crossing a name off my list. I turned and looked behind us, making sure no one was following us. The street behind us was completely dark, so I turned back around and closed my eyes. My chest was rising and falling faster than I could handle, and

I realized how much I needed to catch

my breath.

My phone buzzed with a notification, and my eyes shot back open. It read that \$30,000 was transferred to my account, and I let out a sigh.

"Marcel came through. Thirty G's," I looked over at Jane and announced brightly.

She smiled and turned up the radio, and Ne-Yo was playing. My mind flashed back to Jane and me in college listening to his music and getting ready to go tailgate on a Friday night, and I smiled. We pulled up at the Sprint Mart by my apartment building, the same one we go to every time I finish a job, and we walked inside. The bell chimed on the door, and the cashier looked up.

"Pack of Newports, ladies?"

We smiled at each other and nodded, and Jane placed a ten on the counter. We walked out of the gas station, laughing at one of our hundreds of inside jokes, and got back to the car. The busy streets beside us bustled with nighttime downtown traffic, but we took a shortcut back to my apartment complex.

We climbed the stairs, at this point almost falling over from laughing over some memory from years before, until we got to the very top floor and stumbled out onto the roof. I walked slowly to the edge and looked down, watching people walk on the sidewalks and cars inch forward in backed up traffic. The freezing Detroit air wrapped itself around me, and I felt myself separate from the world below. Jane opened the pack of cigarettes, passed me one, and held the lighter up to it. We sat back and relaxed under the sky and watched the smoke rise, along with our breath that was visible in the cold air. It was silent. The world was quiet for a moment, and then Jane spoke.

"I can't believe all these men will go that far for you," Jane said, almost at a whisper. "I always

> wonder if Patrick would ever fall for your tricks like they do."

> > I dragged my cigarette and shook my head.

"Patrick loves you. You know he does," I reassured her. He's loved her since we were freshmen in college, and we both knew he would do anything for her.

"I don't even know anymore. He's always coming home late, and he doesn't sleep well. He won't even look at me anymore." She paused and took a deep breath. There was something she wasn't telling me. She



Broccoli Logan Harden Acrylic on Canvas

took a hit of her cigarette and sighed, letting the smoke escape. "I just can't get him to talk to me."

She went on, but I really didn't know what to say. Love wasn't exactly in the cards for me due to my profession, so I had no experience to back anything up with.

"I really think it's just a rough patch. At least you have somebody..." I stopped myself and looked at her. I couldn't fault her for the job I have and the life I chose for myself. "I'm sorry. It'll be okay," I said softly, and I grabbed her hand. After we gotten through a few cigarettes, we put the pack away and walked to the door. We hugged, said goodnight, and went our separate ways for the night. I walked sluggishly down the stairs to my apartment on the second floor, and when I opened the door an envelope glided across the floor.

Damn, already? I thought to myself. It was usually another week before I was assigned another job. I picked up the envelope and carefully ripped it open. I pulled out the paper with the name of my next hit, and my heart hit the floor. I felt all the color drain from my face as I read the paper over and over.

Jane Attison. By midnight December 6th.

I could not comprehend the words on the paper. What had she done? Who did she piss off so bad that they would hire a hit on her? And why on God's green earth does it have to be me?

I dropped the paper on the floor and walked to my bedroom, my heart breaking and my face stuck in shock. I went to bed that night and cried until I couldn't breathe. I went to bed knowing I had to kill my best friend before the end of next week. More specifically, I had to seduce her husband, whom I've known for over half my life, and convince him to kill her. If I didn't, it was my own life on the line.

- - -

My bed was strangely cold the next morning. I woke up, and for a fraction of a second, I remembered nothing. But it all came rushing back like a tidal wave in my head.

This is so messed up, I thought as I shoved my face into my cold pillows, which were faintly stained with mascara and tears.

I was being forced to choose between my own life and my best friend. I tossed around in the bed, remembering what Jane had said about Patrick. I felt my mind turning over all the ways I could convince him to kill her, but I kicked myself for even thinking of it. I got out of bed and walked to the mirror. My makeup was smudged from the night before, and I stared at my disheveled appearance. I leaned forward and looked myself in the eyes.

"This is your job. This is your life. Pull yourself together."

I remembered the vow I took when I became a hitwoman for Marcel. You must put your mind and heart aside and do the work. But how the hell was I supposed to be responsible for the death of my best friend? I knew I had to do it if I wanted to save myself. I shivered at the thought of the consequences of not completing a job, and I knew it had to be done.

Jane had work that day. She was a cashier at the hardware store on 8th Street, and I knew she wouldn't be home until late, so I threw on something random but skimpy enough. I threw on my long coat, and I drove to Jane and Patrick's house. As I drove through the backroads of Detroit, I thought of their wedding. I remembered watching Jane walking down the aisle as I stood up next to the altar smiling at her from my place as Maid of Honor. My vision blurred with hot tears, and anger filled my throat.

Why me? I thought, as I steered through the roads to their small blue-painted house I had been to hundreds of times, but it felt like the first time. I spotted Patrick's truck in the driveway as I pulled up, and my heart sank to the floor. Was I really expected to do this?

I knocked on the door, and Patrick cracked it open. He saw me and looked me up and down. I put on a small smile, and he opened the door to let me in.

"Jane isn't here, Adele," Patrick said softly as he walked slowly over to the couch.

"I know."

I took off my coat, revealing the outfit it was entirely too cold for me to be wearing in Detroit in the middle of winter, and hung it up by the door. I could feel Patrick's eyes burning holes through my skin.

He's looking at me, I thought. This is good.

I knew in my heart it wasn't good, but I just kept telling myself I knew what I had to do. I walked over to the couch next to him, and began making small talk, desperate to come up with a believable reason for me to be there.

I kept asking him questions, any questions I could think of.

"How is work going?"

"Good."

"How are your parents?"

"Fine."

"Are you and Jane going anywhere for the holidays?"

"Probably not."

He wouldn't make eye contact with me. We both knew I already knew the answers to all of those questions.

He stared ahead, picking his thumbs.

"You know, don't you?" he finally asked.

"Know what?" I stared at him blankly.

We sat in silence for a few seconds, and he finally looked at me. He looked me in my eyes, and tears began to well in his.

"Jane has been having an affair," he said slowly. "For three years."

My jaw dropped.

That's what she wouldn't tell me, I thought.

I touched Patrick's arm softly. For a moment I forgot why I had even gone over there. I couldn't believe what he was telling me.

"Patrick, I'm so sorry—"

"I hired a hit on her," he blurted.

My eyes widened.

It was him. He hired the hit on his own wife. My best friend.

"Patrick-"

"But I can't go through with it," he said in a whisper, cutting me off.

He reached under a pillow on the couch, and I stood up frantically. He pulled out what I knew was going to be a gun, and I raised my hands in the air, slowly backing into the next room. My eyes scanned every possible exit strategy as he continued walking closer to me. I backed up further until I tripped and fell.

"I'm so sorry, Adele. But, it's your life or my wife's, and I have to save her," he said, tears rolling down his face.

He pointed the gun at me, and I begged him with my eyes not to kill me. I scooted back into a corner and closed my eyes. I accepted my fate. This was it. My ears began to ring, and I saw Jane and me on the roof. I felt her sweet eyes looking into mine, into my soul, like she always does.

The last thing I remember of that day is the hurt in his eyes when he pulled the trigger, and then his own blood pooling around him. \triangle



The Flower and the Serpent

Lisa Yang

Eleanor

Jay Snodgrass

I drive a 2007 Volkswagen Beetle convertible—a cream-colored one with a tan roof. Her name is Eleanor, and I am terrified of crashing her. I'm sure, of course, that most people are afraid of crashing their cars. Only a crazy person would want to crash their car, and most people are not crazy. That said, I think I am afraid of crashing my car a good bit more than you may be of crashing yours, or anyone else is of crashing theirs.

For years Eleanor sat in the carport of beautiful a house designed by my father's friend. The house sits angular and grey among groves of sweetgum and oak trees, and it belongs to Fred Gray. Every Sunday, his wife Gayle drove the car to the Episcopal Church of the Mediator, where the two of us sang in the choir together—I the youngest, at age 11, and she one of the oldest. We shared books and verses, lyrics and laughs, and she became a second grandmother to me. And I admired the hell out of her car, and I told her so.

"I love your car, Miss Gayle!"

"Maybe someday I'll give it to you," she said with a Mona Lisa smile.

"No, no, if you ever want to get rid of it, we'll buy it from you," my dad replied. I smiled and skipped over to my mother's Volvo, thinking the older woman was sweet but nowhere near serious—who in their right mind would promise a car to an eleven-year-old?

When I was fourteen, Miss Gayle died suddenly. I sang at her funeral, or tried to. It's difficult to sing when your throat and nose and eyes are full of salt water, falling, staining the hymnal in your hands. I tried, despite the unavoidable difficulties loving someone brings.

After church the next Sunday, my priest's wife approached me outside the red doors of the sanctuary. "Miss Gayle wants you to have her car." I swayed for a moment, dizzy and in shock, and burst into tears while my messenger comforted me. I was to pick up the car from Mr. Gray when I was old enough to drive it—in a year or so. I hadn't expected to get a car for my sixteenth birthday, much less two years before it. We

just didn't have the money to pay for something that costly the way my dad thought we would three years prior. But here I was, suddenly gifted freedom through Miss Gayle's last will and testament. Freedom that only had 60,000 miles on it after eleven years.

Eleanor now splits her time between the gravel driveway of my home in Meridian, Mississippi, and a paved parking lot at my boarding school in Columbus. Her mileage is in the 70,000 range now. She still has trees around like she did at the Grays', but never directly overhead. I learned that lesson the hard way when black tree sap permanently stained the car's pristine convertible roof after being parked right under some low-hanging branches for two weeks. I cried.

Every now and then I imagine I'm telling Miss Gayle how Eleanor and I are doing. She gets me to and from my favorite places on earth, I say. She has seen me scream the lyrics to my favorite songs with the windows down on Highway 45 North, wind blowing my hair back and my singing devolving into sobs. She's been through Cook Out drive-thrus and sat in Walmart parking lots. She's seen me lose love and find it again. She's gotten me safely through rainstorms and night-time drives. She made it possible for me to get a job. She will take me to college in the fall.

The car is not Miss Gayle's anymore; it is mine. And if I crash, I won't invoke anyone's wrath but my parents', yet I still press the gas pedal gently and keep the carpet free of mud and take care not to park under trees. I make sure my friends know that you can't open the passenger door unless I press the "unlock" button on my key a ridiculous number of times or else you could break the window. I roll the top down when it's unbearably hot and the air conditioning doesn't work. I stick bumper stickers on the trunk door, "Peace Frogs" and "All are Welcome." Anytime someone asks whose car Eleanor is, I respond proudly, and they tell me it makes sense. Eleanor is mine, and I will not crash her. △

The Melanin of My Skin

Everett "CJ" Mason

Second Place—Poetry Competition

Forget skydiving or keeping a bear at bay, try having melanin in America for a day.

My younger self saw better times. My colorful pictures never included a frown: glorious illustrations of skin of all colors rather than the monotone white, black, and brown.

Back then, we did not classify by our melanin, but by our endeavors on the playground. Back then, my friends had not yet been infected by the racist ideas that somehow always get around.

Back then, life was so much better.

A snapshot of blissful disregard for our differences.

Back then, the world was completely fair in my foolish optimism.

How was I supposed to know that my mind was full of ignorance?

Soon enough, my blanket of innocence was yanked from under my feet,

and I was left falling down a pit of realization that quickly plagued me.

At double digits, my family sat me down at the table and talked to me about the unfair circumstances I had to meet.

Even to this day, many years later, I can still remember some of the phrases uttered as I took my place at the seat.

You must work twice as hard just because of the color of your skin.

You can't do the same things as your white peers; I know that's not ideal.

Keep your hands out of your pockets in stores, they will accuse you of stealing.

If you're ever pulled over, place your hands high on the steering wheel.

It is understandably so, though,

because who can guarantee that I make it back home?

Despite how far we have come together and progressed, so many people are still affected by the racism syndrome.

The shackles of my ancestors haunt me like a ghost as I am constantly oppressed by those that I love the most.

Soon enough, I noticed that my beloved state was stuck in a hamster wheel,

constantly running straight back to the past.

Yet it continues to falsify a perpetual motion of advancement,

That has gone absolutely nowhere fast.

George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tamir Rice and many more—

but why would I need to be worried about the police or my neighbors right down the street?

To all the Black lives lost to racial violence, may you all rest in peace.

I see now how my parents must fear for me,

And how they do everything they can to keep me safe and out of the fray

Yet, there might be only one factor

That determines if I make it home alive at the end of the day.

My skin's chemical array.

Contributors' Notes

Annemarie Coatney (Starkville) views her dad as her hero due to his turning an impoverished upbringing into a PhD and a successful career. She aspires to obtain a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering at MSU.

Zaria Cooper (Jackson) lives by the motto "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end." In the future, she plans on becoming a neurosurgeon and motivational speaker, along with obtaining a PhD and conducting research.

Nora Courtney (Wiggins) sees Taylor Swift as an influential icon in her life because she showed her that creative expression has no boundaries. With her work, Nora hopes that readers can forget about the real world for a second.

Chloe Dobbins (Leakesville) lives by the motto "Show, don't tell." She plans on majoring in anthropology in the future with the hopes of one day becoming a professor.

Eric Franklin (Meridian) makes art as an escape from the world at hand. His heroes are the people on the streets of New York, Memphis, DC, and Florida who paint amazing murals that scream their presence.

Emily Gambill (Raymond) views her grandma as an influential icon due to her immense kindness and introduction to gardening. She aspires to be an aquatic veterinarian while continuing to paint and draw.

Arika Gardner (Ruleville) makes art because she loves it. She remembers her first time drawing as being in Head Start where instead of learning how to write her name, she drew a princess on her paper.

Rice Guigley (Hernando) writes to get the silly gremlins out of his head. He draws immense inspiration from Nagito Komaeda and loves the motto, "The past is the past. Make room for a better future"

Logan Harden (Hernando) views Xander Bozeman as an influential person in his life, and he lives by the motto "Worrying is twice the pain."

Jordan Isbell (Okolona) writes to bring attention to subjects that are important and prevalent in society. He aspires to be an NBA analyst and lives by the motto, "You can dig a thousand holes, but you'll never be a hole digger."

Laya Karavadi (Madison) remembers her first paintings as the gifts she painted her parents when she was a kid. If she could meet anyone, it would be Conan Gray because he is such a great musical artist

Everett "CJ" Mason (Lorman) writes to spill out the constant questions and struggles he encounters daily. He plans to pursue a future in robotics engineering and start a nonprofit that brings awareness to mental health in youth.

Jacob McGee (Edwards) writes to express his ideas and emotions and has been interested in writing since he fabricated stories with his brother in daycare. He aims to major in marine biology and minor in pre-law.

Kashama Mehta (Tupelo) began writing as a young child when her mother invented prompts for her. She hopes that her work in *Southern Voices* will immerse readers in a way that helps them slip away from their daily lives and gain fresh perspectives on both the special and the ordinary.

Cadi Pannell (Saltillo) writes because it is creating something beautiful from what can only be seen as chaos. She hopes her readers find something they can relate to—and maybe even cry a little.

Abigail Parker (Corinth) produces art because it is a fun stress reliever. She plans to pursue a medical career to eventually become a surgeon.

Mira Patel (Vicksburg) takes photos to document the places she has been and the paths she has traveled. She follows the quote, "Just because your path is different doesn't mean you are lost."

Vidhi Patel (McComb) writes because it is her favorite way that she can express herself to others. Her future plan is to major in biomedical engineering on a pre-med track.

Amelia Pope (Amory) plans to major in Arabic and international studies and attend law school. She views Taylor Swift as an influential icon and her hero, and if she could meet anyone, she would meet Rory Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*.

Icarus Riggle (Pontotoc) sees Bob Ross as one of his heroes because of his compassion and love for art. He plans to major in either meteorology or ornithology and hopes his photos will help everyone realize that the world around them is beautiful.

Audrey Paige Robinson (Cleveland) writes and makes art to channel her emotions and relieve stress. She aims to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theatre design and technology at the University of Montevallo and pursue a career in the field.

Hailee Sexton (D'Iberville) has always loved writing because of her innate talent for it and draws inspiration from her dad due to his immense support for her. She plans to attend MSU to major in philosophy and minor in cognitive science.

Jay Snodgrass (Meridian) finds their peers to be their heroes due to voicing their opinions on injustice. They write to process their emotions and life experiences and plan to major in architecture while continuing to write.

Emma Spinks (Cleveland) began writing in fifth grade when she linked up with the Delta Arts Alliance who helped her discover her love of the art form. She takes great inspiration from nature in her writing and plans to attend MSU to begin a career in solving environmental issues.

Qiancheng Sun (Starkville) views his grandfather as an icon because of his perseverance. He takes pictures to bring the beauty out of his surroundings and aspires to continue capturing those moments to share with others.

Ben Tabor (D'Iberville) says his first foray into writing was a "four-page mess of a poem with senseless metaphors." He hopes that *Southern Voices* readers will be able to find better paths in their lives after taking cues from all included authors.

Destiny Van (Kosciusko) remembers her first pictures being the ones she took on her Nintendo DS. In the future she plans on going into the dental field and specializing in orthodontics.

Lauren Varner (Raymond) writes because it allows her to be herself. She lives by a quote by Bernard Baruch: "Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind."

Alex Wallace (Olive Branch) got their start in photography with their aunt, who inspired them to express ideas freely. Alex takes photos to capture the beauty of the moment because beauty is always around us, no matter the time of day or the weather outside.

Addie White (Olive Branch) hopes that when people see her piece, they see Mississippi as a place of underappreciated beauty. She makes art to immerse herself in a world of wonder and beauty that is otherwise unachievable.

Taylor Paige Wypyski (Pass Christian) plans on attending Virginia Tech to pursue a degree in Architecture.

Amanda Zhou (Memphis) aims to explore prose and modern writing styles that infuse a second language into poetry. Her favorite book is *The King of Trees* and a major influence is Ocean Vuong.

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