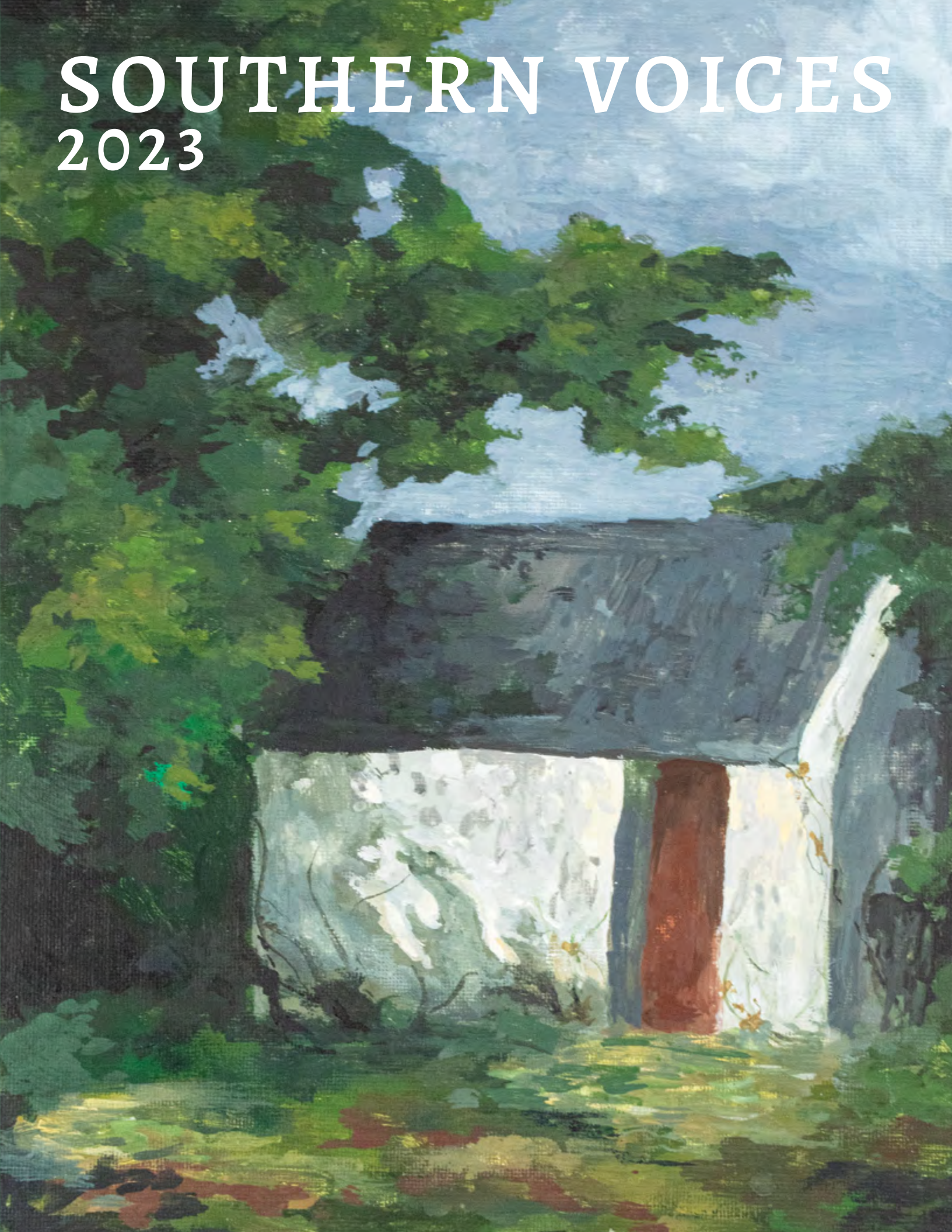


SOUTHERN VOICES

2023



SOUTHERN VOICES 2023

Volume XXXV



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2022–2023

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Poetry

C.T. Salazar is a Latinx poet and librarian from Mississippi. His debut collection *Headless John the Baptist Hitchhiking* (Acre Books 2022) was named a 2023 finalist for the Theodore Roethke Memorial Award. His poems have most recently appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Gulf Coast*, *Denver Quarterly Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *West Branch*, *Hopkins Review* and elsewhere.

Nonfiction

The author of six novels, five books of nonfiction and numerous essays, book reviews, short stories and journalistic articles, **Beverly Lowry** was born in Memphis and grew up in the Mississippi Delta. She has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Institute, the Texas Institute of Letters and the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters and has taught at various colleges and universities, including the University of Houston and George Mason University. Her most recent book, *Deer Creek Drive: A Reckoning of Memory and Murder in the Mississippi Delta*, won the 2022 Willie Morris Award for Southern Nonfiction. She lives in Austin, Texas.

Fiction

Deborah Johnson was born in Missouri but grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. She moved to Mississippi after having lived many years, first in San Francisco and then in Rome, Italy where she worked as a translator, editor of doctoral theses, and a broadcaster at Vatican Radio. Her two novels have appeared on numerous recommended reading lists with *The Secret of Magic* winning the prestigious Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction in 2015 and *The Air Between Us* the Mississippi Library Association Award for Fiction in 2010. Deborah lives in Columbus where she is finishing her latest novel, *Washington and Leigh*, a ghost story about the beginnings of Rock and Roll in 1950's Mississippi. She is an instructor with Stanford University's Online Writing Program.

Art

Shawn Dickey received a B.S. in Biology and a B.F.A. in Printmaking from Mississippi University for Women in 1990 and an M.F.A. in Printmaking from Texas Tech University in 1993. Currently he teaches and serves as chair of the Department of Art and Design at Mississippi University for Women in Columbus, Mississippi. He has exhibited work in over 119 national juried exhibitions and has had three solo shows. His prints can be found in 12 regional/national collections, and he has won 13 awards and purchase prizes. Dickey is a member of The Boston Printmakers, Southern Graphics Printmaking Society, Mid-American Printmaking Council, the Los Angeles Printmakers Society, and The Society of Photographic Education.

Table of Contents

Poetry

Makenzie Brannon

“Get a Taste of Your Own Medicine” 17

“The Side of the Road in Columbus, Mississippi” . . . 8

Elijah Camba

“The Red Eyed Sun” 17

Jayden Cochran

“Airing January 6th” 8

Nora Courtney

“Fruit Trees” 22

“Honors College Essay Draft No. III” 28

“How You’ve Slowly Turned into

One of My Many Hyperfixations” 24

“If I Were to Have Alice’s World of Nonsense” . . . 26

Maryann Dang

“A Stir Fry of Tradition” 45

“Flower Like a Life” 46

“Mortar and Pestle” 25

Chloe Dobbins

“Needlework” 23

Ann Grace Donahue

“South Fork of the Snake River” 28

Vivian Jordan

“Here Lies They/Them” 31

“Mockingbird Meat-Mince Lullaby” 27

Noah Lee

“Commitment Is a Funny Sort of Happiness” 30

Ava Grace Noe

“Fall into the Creek” 21

Kelvin Pool

“Cotton Gin” 13

“Strawberry Crush Soda” 45

Simon Riggle

“Hidden Tree Stand: Pontotoc, Mississippi” 25

“Personal Plummet” 6

Brianna Riordan

“Starry Night” 26

Ben Tabor

“The Body of Christ” 7

“Hunter’s Mass” 21

Sophia Williams

“The Devil’s Garden” 27

Phoenix Wilson

“Windy Morning” 46

Richard Zheng

“Fear Itself” 7

“Red” 22

Nonfiction

Makenzie Brannon

“Where I Come From” 16

Raegan Calvert

“A Train Ride to Somewhere Else” 29

Nora Courtney

“Creek Baby” 18

Chloe Dobbins

“And I Will Turn Their Mourning to Jubilation” . . . 9

Nathané George

“Dirty” 5

Lucianna Marquez

“Flowering Mango” 38

Ava Grace Noe

“Dusk Falls Again” 12

Ben Tabor

“Muddy” 44

Iris Xue

“Thin Sheet of Plastic” 32

Richard Zheng

“On Being American-Chinese” 37

Fiction

Jayden Cochran

“Twelve” 20

Nora Courtney

“Melody of a Dying Road” 41

Chloe Dobbins

“The Carpenter’s Trace” 34

Maple Griffin

“The Perfect Spot” 10

Lucianna Marquez

“The Smell of Kerosene” 43

Ava Grace Noe

“Damn Right.” 3

Kyla Roberts

“New Year’s Eve” 14

Richard Zheng

“Memory Tablet S27” 47

Art and Photography

Photography

Rusleen Bhalla

"Mt. Norquay, Canada" 23

Ozzie Caddell

"Dewy Spring" 24

"A Surprise Visitor" 18

Noah Lee

"And Then There Was Light!" 47

"Brief Standing Shadows" 13

"Icy Roads" 37

"The Last Pillar" 22

"Lost in Shipping" 32

"Mr. Hot Dog Man's Marvelous Adventure" 19

"Overgrowth" 8

"The Stone Tortoise" 31

La'Destiny Lemock

"Work Service" 5

Simon Riggle

"An Ant's World" 46

"Budding Life" 39

"Bug's Point of View" 22

"Desolate" 12

"Eiffel Towering" 14

"Extending Railways" 29

"Gateway" 36

"Golden Hour Koi" 25

"Mont-Saint-Michel" 10

"Now Do a Silly Face" 31

"Painter's Palette" 26

"Ready for Takeoff" 24

"Up in the Heavens" 7

Fine Art

Elijah Camba

"The Bald Intellectual" 17

"Bandit Girl" 40

"Ink Shoe" 8

Ivie Kirkland

"Her" 28

Ava Grace Noe

"Ava Watched Bo Burnham in July" 27

"East of Eden" 34

"I'm Lonely and I Haven't Played

DND in Months" 45

"Soon Everything's Golden" 21

Vivian Peng

"Ending" 42

Simon Riggle

"Tomorrow's Transition" 6

Mandy Sun

"Grazing in a Flower Field" 25

Addie White

"Grandmother's" 23

"To What End" 45

"What Once Was" Cover, 21

Iris Xue

"Mississippi Meadow" 27

"Nostalgia" 3

Damn Right.

Ava Grace Noe

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

Wasting time and wasting bullets—that’s what my daddy used to say. We would sit at the old picnic table with the sun setting off to the side of the house. We lived in a trailer on a small plot of land only reachable by a long winding dirt road. It was just Daddy, me, and the dog, Brutus.

Growing up, I never really thought much about the way we lived, with our thrown together chicken coop in the backyard and our patched-up roof. There were always little kids on the school bus who would snicker at me when I’d walk on with wildflowers (weeds) threaded into my braids and my shoes on the wrong feet. And there were the old biddies at church who would slip me a to-go platter after service on Wednesday and Sunday nights, telling me they would pray for me. About once every few months they would hand me Walmart sacks of the clothes their kids had long grown out of. I didn’t know why they would give me these things, but they were appreciated. Ms. Janice made the best rolls in the county, so a whole plate of them just made my week. None of the snide comments amounted to much in my mind.

Daddy wasn’t home much. Most nights he’d get back from a late shift around midnight, and that’s how I learned to cook. He’d walk in with a six-pack tucked under his arm, pulling up a chair to the fold-out table in the kitchen with a large belch as he took a seat. I remember how his breath smelled like bourbon, a smell I would become more familiar with each time I snuck the glass bottles out of his room to pour the amber liquid down the drain and replace it with sweet tea. He always knew it was me, though, but the bruises were easy enough to cover. On those

nights with my powerful father and his liquor breath, Brutus knew better than to get close, instead choosing to lie beside my ankles. Daddy was tired and hungry. It shouldn’t be an excuse, but it was. We learned things quickly in those days, Brutus and me. We learned ways to survive.

I learned quickly how to take the can opener out of the drawer and put the green beans on the stove. I learned how to warm up Ms. Janice’s rolls and act like I’d learned to cook rolls overnight. (Every time I had tried the bottoms came up burnt.) We didn’t talk about much as I would set small plates on the table (none of them ever matched) and pull up a chair across from him. It was probably better that way.

And our days kept going in this pattern: my daddy coming home late at night to a decent dinner, or as decent as any seven-year-old can make, and me getting myself onto the school bus early the next morning before the rooster crowed. The only time we really were seen together in town was on Sunday morning when we both combed back our hair and I added ribbons to mine. Everyone shook my daddy’s hand in that backwoods Baptist church. I always thought we must be royalty on Sunday. I remember my pink Velcro shoes had little flowers on the toes. I only wore them on Sunday so I

wouldn’t mess them up or dent the little flowers. The shoes were a birthday present from my Mama and those flowers were prettier than anything I could find growing on the side of the road.

Some days, very special days, Daddy would come home with a cardboard box in the passenger seat of the old Chevy truck. I would watch him driving up the dirt road much earlier in the afternoon than he



“Nostalgia”

Iris Xue

Acrylic

should have been and slam the truck door as he triumphantly held the box above his head. On special days we would skeet shoot.

I remember one cool autumn day with my hair in pigtails off my shoulders and Daddy's dark curls covered by a baseball cap with a curved brim. There was much more than a little scruff on his face; there was a smile growing on his face as I pulled the frayed string that let loose the orange clay disk, letting it fly off into the sky. He pulled the trigger on the shotgun. With a bang the disk disappeared into a cloud of dust.

"Way to go, sugar," he said to me as he cocked the shotgun, letting the still smoking shell fall into the grass below.

"Thanks, Daddy." Brutus was curled up in the grass by the picnic table and gave a yawn. "Daddy, will I always be your little girl?" I asked as he helped me load the next disk into the machine. He let me believe it was me resetting the springs when it was just my hands on his. He was always stronger than me in that way.

"Damn right, you'll always be my baby girl." His voice was gruff and thick with pride. But I swear, his voice wrapped my heart up in joy and it felt like the best hug. His voice sometimes boomed and made the thin walls of the trailer shake like a tornado was coming through. And sometimes it shivered and trembled as he

cried on the concrete steps up to the front door wondering why Mama left us. But in those simple moments I knew he loved me more than anything else in this world.

We spent the rest of the day running around the back field finding all the last dandelions and daisies before frost took everything. Together we weaved the weeds into crowns and necklaces to adorn ourselves with. We had dirt caked under our fingernails and grass stains on our blue jeans, but it had been the best day. It was the best day we had had together in a long time.

When the preacher told me Daddy was in Heaven that next week, which was a better place and with more flowers than I could count, I thought back to the day with the clay pigeons and our adornments of foliage. The church ladies got together enough money to pay for a small funeral and me a brand-new black dress to wear. I heard them behind me in the pews in hushed voices, "Did you hear where they found him?" and "That beat-up truck off in the ditch. He was a sorry man but to leave your daughter like that. I couldn't imagine." I treated this gossip just like I treated the rest: I forgot to listen. I remember kicking my legs back and forth during the sermon—my feet didn't reach the floor. But I made sure to wear my pink Velcro shoes. We were in a church after all. △

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

Dirty

Nathané George

Third Place—Essay Competition

“Why is everything so dirty?! You need to clean it now!” I remember her frequent command as I carefully wipe the clay and freshly cut grass off her tombstone. My mom, my only parent, died a year and two months ago, yet the dirt that covers her refuses to host grass, a reminder of the pain in my heart. Every visit, I carefully perfect her plot, pulling up the wild grass; straightening the flower vases; and polishing her perfect smile, as everything imperfect is “so dirty.”

Living in rural Mississippi as an effeminate “boy,” I felt dirty my entire childhood. In kindergarten, I ran down the long, gravel driveway after a thirty-minute bus ride, my lunchbox and backpack swinging erratically like a typical six-year-old; however, tears poured down my face. I ran into my mother’s arms, interrupting the pot of green beans and mashed potatoes on the stovetop, and mumbled the words any Southern parent dreads to hear: “They called me gay.” Gay: the dirtiest word I have known since childhood. NanNan, my name for my mother, turned the stovetop off with one of her aging hands, took my hand with the other, and guided me to our safe space, her room. She laid me down softly on her oak king bed, the aroma of cigarettes and her arthritic fingers running through my hair fighting away my tears. Despite the effort to fix myself and my mother being there to clean me, I knew I was dirty.

Everyone reminded me I was dirty. In eighth grade, I walked into school and everyone shared a picture of me in a crop top. No one approached me. Both teachers and students just laughed and mocked me while I cried.

After this, I worked hard to clean

myself. Every quarter, I would see my mother’s yellow and gappy smile from years of smoking displayed full effect as she stared at my grades: As. I relished in these moments. I wanted these moments. I needed these moments. However, attending a school in a rural town with a class size of 45, no honors or AP courses, no extracurriculars outside of sports, unqualified coaches teaching math and history, and students destined to attend community college and live in their hometown forever, I knew I had to accomplish more. Notebooks filled with advanced math formulas, ACT prep books filled with notes, and devices filled with Khan Academy videos began to take over my room. The culmination of all my cleaning grew freshmen year of high school when I learned of The Mississippi School for Math and Science (MSMS), a residential high school for Mississippi’s academically gifted juniors and seniors.

The day I learned about MSMS I ran home mirroring the younger me’s motion but with a smile; however, the usual smell of cornbread and green beans was not there to greet me at the front door. I ran confused yet overjoyed to my mother’s room finding her bent over her bed sobbing. She said the three words that forever changed my life: “I have cancer.” I held her tight in my arms caressing her prideful hair that would soon disappear

continuing to wipe her tears away. Two weeks later, the pandemic started, and our final chapter together began.

For the next seventeen months, the sound of an alarm pierced my ears every morning at 5:30 a.m. I brewed a pot of Folgers coffee and made a cup with two scoops of sugar and a dash of creamer to wake my mother.



“Work Service”

La’Destiny Lemock

Photography

We began our forty-minute journey to her cancer treatments sipping caramel frappés along the way. During one of these rides, she admitted something neither of us wanted to hear: “Nathan, one day I won’t be here.” I sadly knew this, and I watched over the next year and a half as her health rollercoaster up and down with me there to help her up and down. In a blink of an eye, I was letting her down one last time into the one thing she hated the most: dirt.

Two weeks later, I took my first step on the MSMS campus beginning my two-year journey to success. My junior year became the first time I had to work for

my grades. I spent my nights reading the AP Bio textbook; calculating derivatives for hours for AP Calculus; researching and writing research papers for History, English, and Engineering; and speaking Spanish in the mirror. However, MSMS allowed me to develop and pursue my interests. I filmed and edited videos for MSMS’s YouTube channel, learned to play piano, performed vocally, led financial seminars, and became happy. Every other Sunday, I relay my time at MSMS to my mom while I wipe the dirt off her grave with a rag and tears, ensuring we aren’t dirty. △

Personal Plummet

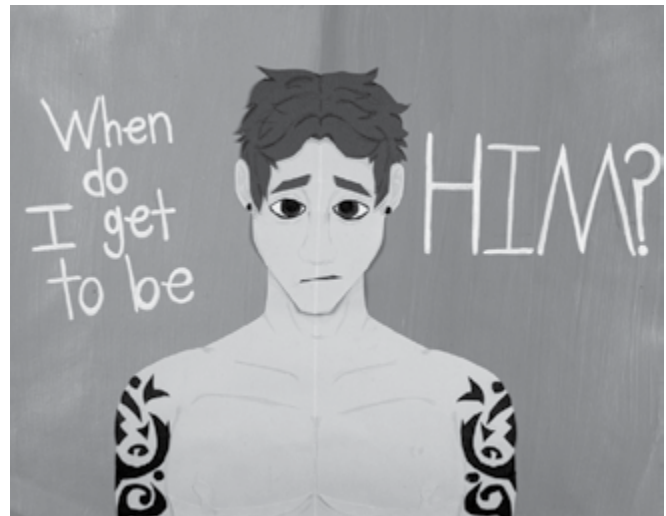
Simon Riggle

I stand on the very edge
of my childhood.
The crushing weight of the years
spent living someone else’s life
settles heavy
on my shoulders.

Do I take the plunge into
the darkness
and uncertainty?

Or do I stay in the body I was forced into
for that fragile safety?
In the end, does the decision even matter?

This is my flight of Icarus.
If I fly too close to safety
I will be pulled under and drowned in my own mind.
If I become too bold
my wings will be melted by a hateful sun.
I will crash and burn.
Maybe somehow
I can find my
middle ground
and soar.



“Tomorrow’s Transition”

Simon Riggle

Painting, Papercraft

Fear Itself

Richard Zheng

// Inspired by Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III*

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?
Certainly not me,
though Albee may disagree.
But the play manages to boil my blood,
all the walking around
talking about
leading to nothing but an empty ending.

It's too much like abstract art;
it angers me that men could stare at
these lines and blocks of
solid colors
and come away from it feeling
more enlightened or smarter.
A waste of the good money I work for
to buy pieces like this,
and an even bigger shame to
hang them up or
even ordain them
as if they're the next *Starry Night* or *Mona Lisa*.

I will rip this wasted canvas from its frame,
tear at the seams that bind and display this
wretched work.
One gash,
two slashes,
and three's a strike out.
I'm afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue.



“Up in the Heavens”

Simon Riggle

Photography

The Body of Christ

Ben Tabor

Dear Heavenly Father,
throbbing on high,
all flesh and all blood,
all bone
and sinew,
held above the altar by
ordained, organized
organs,
we circle, lifting
predatory prayer,
begging to consume.

Airing January 6th

Jayden Cochran

Gil Scott-Heron
tried to tell y'all
we were starring in the cheesy
B-plot comedy of America.
With actors *acting* like the
President
and Presidents *acting* like our
friends
on a stage that pacifists share with fascists,
attempting to boost their own ratings.
Our protagonist blunders his way onto center screen.
“You’re fired,” he tells democracy,
as hundreds of his fans rush into the scene.
Freedom dies tonight
in front of a live studio audience.
No one ever sees behind the curtain,
until Jordan Peele or somebody gives us a line read of
what’s really going on.



“Ink Shoe”

Elijah Camba

Ink Pen

The Side of the Road in Columbus, Mississippi

Makenzie Brannon



“Overgrowth”

Noah Lee

Photograph

The current tugs at the massive lily pads.
Delicate pink flowers
tower above.
Between the Sacred Lotus are hundreds of
vibrant green plants
that bloom in bowl-like bursts,
edges like wilting flowers.
The last rays from the setting sun
desperately reach out.
Swampy water takes hold and the lake’s
ripples begin to shimmer.
The sky fades pink, and I swat at mosquitos.
Trees admire themselves in the water.
The reflection vanishes. The scorching heat
transforms into a warm hug.
I skip a stone away from the lively
stirs beneath the water.
Then I carefully get back in my car
and drive past the “do not park” sign.

And I Will Turn Their Mourning to Jubilation

Chloe Dobbins

Crash.

Crash, crash, crash—then more hollering, and a shrill piano riff that sent a knife straight down my ear canal.

More *crash, crash, crashes*, followed by a bass's wail I felt crawl down my throat and rattle around in my abdomen, clink-and-clank-and-clunking its way further and further down until I could barely keep myself upright.

The sanctuary was too loud.

Even on my knees, head mashed in the pew's stale velvet with my eyelids nailed shut together, I could sense the movement around me. Men running round the room shouting in a nonsensical language, little old ladies shaking and sobbing along to the hymns.

I was trying to keep my hands pressed together, but they were quivering too quick for me to control them. What's worse—I couldn't keep my thoughts in the line they were supposed to be in.

I bit down on my cheek, hard, hoping the warm metal taste in my mouth would ground me. I could feel my heart beating fast, too fast, and I tried to imagine the rapid thumps slowing down.

From the top, I thought to myself. *Dear Jesus*—

No—no, that was wrong. I had to address the prayer to God—

Dear God, I want to ask about—

No, that was even worse—I had to thank Him first—I needed to focus.

In Sunday school earlier, I'd asked Sister Rachel how old you should be when you get the Holy Ghost, and I'd learned I was already running late at eight years old. My prayer had to be perfect.

Dear God, thank you for letting me live another day—

Sister Wendy let out another upper-octave trill from the choir, and Brother Marlon screamed a *thank you Jesus* again, and Miss Caroline started jumping up and down in the pew behind me, and I felt a rupture somewhere deep in my lungs.

I choked on the short, rapid breaths as they came drumming out, coughing until I thought I had to have

ripped a hole in my gullet. Miss Caroline sprinted over, reddened eyes full of concern on her flushed face.

I tried to tell her I was okay, to just leave me alone, that I'd be fine if I could only go wash my face, but I couldn't force anything intelligible from my mouth. My words came in splintered staccatos, harsher than the snare still battering against my skull, separated by pointless attempts to suck in more air.

I stared at Miss Caroline, disoriented, as her worry morphed into jubilation.

She's getting it, I heard her distant voice call, *she's getting saved!*

More bodies surrounded me, some forms I recognized, others appearing unfamiliar in the haze.

I had thought my world was loud earlier—*this* was what loud was.

The *crash* of the drums and *shriek* of the piano and *lurch* of the bass had stopped, but the shouted nonsense and frenzied motion was closer than ever. Old ladies whose names I couldn't remember pressed their palms into my back. A distant cousin I'd seen few times before clutched my hand. Brother Alton stopped his sermon to grasp my head between his hands and chanted over me.

I tried to protest, to squirm away from strangers' hands and eyes, but my movements only drew more rejoicing, the church body convinced I'd begun to speak in tongues as I slurred smatterings of unintelligible pleas.

I searched for my mother in this Sea of Galilee, but I couldn't discern her face from the others I was trapped between.

I took a last breath. I would escape or drown trying.

"Thank... you for praying... for me," I stumbled out before at last breaking from Dagon's pillars, sprinting for the bathroom.

I staggered to the door of the small white room and locked myself inside the den. I stayed there for the rest of service, leaning against the wall with my head between my knees as I tried not to shake or vomit, begging for someone to be sent to close the lions' jaws. △

The Perfect Spot

Maple Griffin

The weight Josh felt seemed to drag him down as he continued to truck through the forest. The leaves crunched underfoot as he took one heavy step after another. Despite this burden, Josh trekked onward. He had a mission, after all. He was searching for the perfect spot. He'd been looking for an hour now, but so far, the forest hadn't shown any promising places. As he ducked under low limbs and avoided the ubiquitous spiderwebs, he noticed the variety of small mushrooms in clusters at the base of tree trunks. Most were light grey or brown and blended in against the dull background of the woods, except for the chanterelles, which were a bright orange and boldly rejected the dreary brown around them. He remembered picking chanterelles when he was younger.

After heavy rain, his aunt and uncle with all their kids and other arbitrary family members would go on an expedition for these dazzling mushrooms. Baskets in hand, they would all split up within yelling distance of each other and compete to see who could find the most. Josh never could seem to pick the most, often beaten by his younger cousins. This didn't matter, though; they would taste the same. He remembered his first time trying chanterelles. After a rather successful crusade, they returned with baskets full of the little

stools and plopped them onto the counter for their grandparents to take care of. After being carefully washed, cut, and dried, the best of the mushrooms were tossed in a pan with whatever else and salted until they were such a golden color they were almost brown like their dull counterparts. Though Josh was hesitant at first to try these mushrooms, the aroma they produced was enticing enough to tempt him into hesitantly sticking one into his mouth. Their electrifying color matched their heavenly taste and slick texture as it touched his tongue.

Josh's mouth began to water just looking at the ones on the ground as he passed. He suddenly hated these mushrooms for reminding him of these memories long gone and suddenly brought down his heavy foot on them like a blacksmith with his hammer—over and over until they were nothing more than an orange splatter on the underbrush. The rain that brought about all the mushrooms seeped into his boot as he did so and soaked his thin socks. Josh turned away and continued into the forest. He was beginning to grow impatient and was close to just picking the next decent spot he saw. He couldn't do that, though. The place he picked had to be perfect, and he knew he would eventually find it as long as he kept looking.



“Mont-Saint-Michel”

Simon Riggle

Photography

As the sun sank closer to the horizon, darkness and Josh's hair soaked with sweat and the rainwater that steadily dripped from the branches above began to impair his vision. He shook his head violently back and forth and continued to drag onwards. Everywhere he looked something reminded him of memories he desperately tried to forget. The blazing red berries of the holly reminded him of making wreaths with his father at Christmas time. The cry of the hawk in the distance shattered his ears as he could hear his grandfather saying, "Did you hear the hawk? Can you see it? There it goes! Woaho..." Every crunch of the leaves made by his hefty feet made his face contort with the recollection of jumping in leaf piles with his younger sisters. Josh grunted and shook his head again as if to shake off all the memories that plagued him. He turned his attention to walking but instead felt the steady ache that was beginning to take over his body. He wouldn't be able to carry this weight much longer before he collapsed. This weight. He tried not to think about it, but it was always there. Looming over him and clouding his mind.

Josh had torn the remnants of his childhood to shreds, but he felt no remorse. He felt nothing, nothing but irritation. Mosquitos began to swarm around him, and the eerie shrills of the frogs overtook the forest. His footsteps grew heavier with each step and his legs were beginning to give out. Just a little longer. Josh had no idea where this perfect spot would be, but he knew it wouldn't be long until he was upon it. Comforting himself with the idea of finally reaching his destination almost made him smile. He paused to rest and bask in his rejuvenation.

As he leaned against an old oak to catch his breath, Josh noticed a small dandelion poking through the blanket of dead leaves that covered the ground. He bent

down to inspect and was reminded of his younger sister. "Dandelions are good luck!" she would often say as she delicately plucked the little radiant yellow flower and tucked it behind her ear to wear for the rest of the day. Josh had always thought she was crazy, but he would chuckle a little and say, "Maybe." Now, Josh bent down closer to the flower. With his thumb and forefinger, he plucked the flower and brought it level to his eyes. A small black bug crawled across the surface unaware of Josh's gaze. In one swift movement, Josh wrapped his colossal hand around the yellow ellipse and squeezed with all his might. He opened his fist and the crushed yellow flower fell limp onto the top of his boot. The little black bug had left a small smudge at the base of his pointer finger where he could feel a sticky spot whenever he moved his fingers back and forth.

Josh shouldered his weight again and turned back to his expedition. This time, he noticed nothing. No thoughts invaded his mind as he trudged mindlessly to his perfect plot. After about twenty-five paces, he came upon a great pine tree with gnarled roots that stuck out of the ground like a hand reaching towards the surface. Josh sank to the ground and immediately felt his knees become soaked from the mud on the ground. Despite this and the spreading darkness, he brought both hands, cupped, to the ground and began to draw them towards his chest. Cupping the ground and drawing them back. Out, in, out, in. Back and forth Josh's hands worked until finally he pulled himself back to his feet. Before him was a vast hole at the base of the pine tree. On either side were two roots that he had purposely dug around in his excavation. His work was finally complete. He had found his spot. His weight was finally lifted as he carelessly tossed the body into his perfect hole. △

Dusk Falls Again

Ava Grace Noe

First Place—Essay Competition

I remember running in the corn fields with my sister. The stalks were taller than our heads, like most things were at the time. We would look out our windows into the field and see the forest that had sprung up in our backyard overnight. Allie would drag me out into the field just as the sun was setting so we could wait in the shadows of the green with its top painted in the same pinks and yellows of the sky. There were these gaps in the corn field, barely the size of a cupboard, where the seeds just hadn't sprouted. We would hide in these secret spots with our sunburnt faces. We had run out of the house in such a hurry to catch the last rays of dusk that we had left our shoes inside. Now our tiny toes squished in the red clay, each of us with the confidence of gods that those same toes might not find a stray shard of glass.

Mama watched this movie one time where these kids would disappear into the corn fields and come back as zombies or something else just as scary. It became a game in that odd, sadistic way. In those Autumn nights, Allie and I would creep into the corn from the far edge just so Mama wouldn't see us, and Allie would bury her face into her hands trying her hardest to hold in a laugh. We would take flashlights in our hands with our pockets stuffed with

muscadines and scuppernongs we had pulled off the vine earlier in the day. The stars would twinkle above us with the harvest moon waving hello in the distance. I can still see my mama on the porch yelling our names with Allie and me so deep into the field we couldn't even hear her. We felt limitless in those nights, our laughter endlessly echoing into the night. So, in a way, I am from the corn and the sky with her hues of red and orange.

Or maybe I'm not. Maybe it's just sentiment in a memory from days I can barely remember. The corn grew in the field again this past year. I sat in the backyard and stared into the endless depths of its green. It didn't hold magic anymore. The past was gone. If I'm not from the corn, I must be from somewhere else.

Maybe I am from the treetops I never got to climb or the pond with its swirling snakes slithering away in the bottom. Or maybe I'm from something else altogether. Something not tangible. Maybe I'm from a feeling.

I remember riding down backroads where I could see the stars best. There's a boy to my left driving; I

don't think I'm in love with him or if I even like him, but he offered to drive me out here. I've learned I'll do almost anything to get out of



“Desolate”

Simon Riggle

Photography

my house nowadays. He interlaces his fingers in mine, rubbing his thumb across the heirloom on my middle finger. He may ask where it came from later. I won't remember. My head is stuck out the window as I count the stars spinning above us. They're brighter here than anywhere else, even with the dust kicked up by the old Chevy truck. Tires turn gravel out of its place, a coyote howls in the distance, he squeezes my hand a little tighter.

I couldn't care less about the boy sitting to my left. This broken gravel road of my soul was leading us closer to the end of the night and I couldn't stand that feeling. Could I not feel endless for ten more minutes, even if it was with someone I didn't love? It didn't matter who it was to my left. They came a dime a dozen. But these stars, they're worth a million. So, in a different way, I'm from the stars and the gravel roads that spin under tires in the dead of night. I'm from the feeling of being endless. △



“Brief Standing Shadows”

Noah Lee

Photography

Cotton Gin

Kelvin Pool

Second Place—Poetry Competition

I don't know what a cotton gin is, but I do know I'm Black. I am entirely sure I am Black, though I don't understand it. It has never been taught to me in school and asking is tricky. I should focus more of my attention on the three Rs instead.

Reading my grandmother's hand should sound like the past. 'Riting in my journal; spelling "future," "dreams," "peace." 'Rithmetic being over in an hour or forever but all the same. $1+1 = 2$ and Black + Young = Long Lessons and Short Time.

The "How-To-Be-Black: Guide for Teenage Boys" is restricted. It is kept in a section marked "When You Look Back On It." However, I have seen a page on Twitter, and I saved it to photos. It reads, "Take all the time you need and breathe when you can."

New Year's Eve

Kyla Roberts

I got a text from my mom. *I'm going to stop smoking starting tomorrow :)*

I rolled my eyes. *Why tomorrow?* I guess I had forgotten what day it was.

For New Year's. It's the perfect time to stop.

I didn't respond. I stopped making New Year's resolutions years ago. It seemed as if they were destined to fail, like if I wanted to do something I shouldn't make it a goal for the New Year but just do what I needed to do.

--

I got a call from my mom. "I finally convinced your dad to let me take him to the hospital. He's on IV fluids, and they say that if he doesn't stop drinking now he's not going to make it much longer."

"I guess he's not going to be here much longer, then."

I could hear her laugh sadly at my response. "I told him he could stay with me at my house and I would take care of him, but I'm not letting him drink. I actually hid the alcohol in your room because he doesn't have enough energy to climb the stairs. He can barely stand. He's been using Grandfather's old walker to get around."

We talked for a bit longer on the phone before I told her I had work to do and would check up later. I didn't really know how to feel. I wasn't surprised, but it was still unsettling to know.

He hadn't been to work in weeks and my mother was already convinced he was on his deathbed, but I had assumed she was being dramatic and my father was being lazy.

My sisters started telling me how bad my father looked. They told me that I should come home that weekend to see him. "Just in case," they said. "We don't want you to regret not coming if something does happen." I had plans that weekend. I didn't go home.

--

The weekend after that I went home. I stayed with my sister. I knew I had to go to my mom's place at some point, but at that moment I just wanted to relax and not worry about it. The next day, though, I got in my car and drove to my mom's. Nothing looked different as I pulled up to the house. I put the code in the door and walked in. Even though you couldn't tell from

the outside, the inside of the house was a wreck. I didn't say anything about it.

"Hey, mom."

She hugged me. "My hair is a mess. I haven't had a chance to shower since I've been running back and forth from the hospital. Every time I get home he has the nurses call me so he can ask where I am. I feel bad, but I am so tired of going up there. I just want a break."

"You're better than me. I wouldn't go up there every day."



"Eiffel Towering"

Simon Riggle

Third Place Photography

“Yeah well, you’re also in school, so you have an excuse,” she half-chuckled.

I couldn’t tell if she thought I would go up there if I wasn’t in school, but I knew I wouldn’t either way. She ranted about the house, about my father, about everything. I made an excuse to leave and went back to my sisters. I never went to the hospital that weekend to see him.

--

The next time I went home, my father was staying at my mother’s house. When I went to see her, I talked to her for a bit before asking about him. “So, is he still here or what?”

“Yeah, he’s been sleeping in my room. I don’t know if he is awake right now or not.”

She walked to her room and I followed behind, stepping over the boxes and random piles littering the narrow hallway. I watched as she went to the right side of the bed and woke him. I had no reaction as I saw his hollowed cheeks. His eyes were wide and seemed to be bulging out of his face, which was half the size it usually was. What was left of his hair was sticking up at odd angles. I couldn’t make myself say anything. I couldn’t even tell if he knew I was in the room, so I just watched as my mom talked to him and offered him something to eat, which he denied.

My mom gave up on trying to make him eat or drink water, and I followed her out of the room. We were talking about her plans for a new greenhouse in the backyard when we heard the sound of the walker against the hardwood floor. My father had left the bedroom and didn’t look at us as he headed out the back door. My mother called after him and my father looked back, seeming to notice me for the first time.

“You have your car, right? Drive me to my house. She won’t let me drink any whiskey.”

I hated looking at him, the whites of his eyes were completely exposed. When I didn’t respond he grumbled loudly to himself and turned away to exit through the back door, slamming the walker down as he went.

“You should probably leave now.”

I couldn’t tell what the look on her face meant. Was she sad for me or for him? Maybe both. Maybe for herself. I wasn’t mad at her, though.

“Yeah, I’ll head out before he comes back in.”

She came outside with me to say goodbye, but mostly to warn me against any future phone calls I might get from my father asking me to bring him alcohol or cigarettes or to take him to his house.

--

A few days later, while I was at school, I got a call from my mom. She told me that my dad had figured out how to call a taxi to take him home so he could drink. I was shocked that he had thought about a taxi. I thought he would have taken her keys and driven himself home, though I don’t know if he would have made it all the way back. I talked about what was happening at school to take her mind off my father. I didn’t tell her about the calls and texts I had ignored from him.

--

I headed to my mom’s to pick up some stuff from my old room. I found her on the back porch, and she came into the house offering me some food she had made the night before. It was a green bean casserole. I don’t know how many times I have told her I hated green bean casserole.

“No thanks, I just ate.”

We talked for a bit and then I grabbed what I was looking for and walked to my car. She followed after and gave me a hug goodbye. I got in my car.

I drove back to my sister’s house, where I would be staying for the weekend. I missed the turn. I drove straight for twenty minutes before my sister called me asking where I was.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay, I was just calling so I knew when to start on dinner. How’d it go?”

I took a minute to answer. My throat felt swollen and my face burned as I thought back to the hug my mom gave me before I left.

“She smelled like cigarettes.” △

Where I Come From

Makenzie Brannon

My hand reaches out into the murky water swallowing me as I walk on. I can't glimpse it beneath the brown river, but that is not my intent. I'm carefully feeling for the powerful pull of the current, the part I would have to fight against to cross. I was never a strong swimmer, so when my head begins to slip under and my toes no longer squish in the muddy earth, I panic. The Mississippi water seems to sense my unease and reject it, dragging me down the river. My tiny arms are no match for the water I had just found an appreciation for earlier. The sparkling ripples transform into snakes and alligators within my fear-struck eyes. My father was on the other side, equally unobservant to his little girl floating away as he was to the sunburn beginning to develop on his neck. My sister that had already crossed catches my eye and slinks back into the river to come to save me with a smug smile. My muscles fatigue and my head slips under.

When I come up, I'm in Uncle Robert's pool. He's not my real uncle, but he's my dad's friend, and that's close enough in the South. I follow everybody else getting out of the pool towards the table. Dinner is ready on a table full of red claws and lifeless eyes about to be devoured by several drunk southerners. The drunkest of them all, my dad, digs in first. I follow suit and put pressure on the crawfish's tail with my fingers. I hear the crack and begin to peel as my fingers get covered in juice. I eat the tiny morsel, the result of my hard labor, and suck the head as my dad told me. I get several aggressive pats on the back and whoops because of this.

I reach for my second "slightly spicy" crawfish, and tears begin to form. I repeat the process of cracking, peeling, and eating, each bite saltier than the last from my watering eyes. I wipe my eyes so I can better focus on the corn and potato I'm about to eat. Bad move. Juicy seasoning stings my eyes, and I believe I'm blind.

"Jump in the pool!" My sister shouts. I usually hesitate before a cannonball, but not this time. Chlorine cleanses my crawfish eyes, and I combat the burning sensation. I climb out of the pool and patiently wait for my dad to finish eating. Once he is done, I clamber into the truck and let sleep take me on the gravel road home after hours in the sun and a belly full of mudbugs.

I wake up to my sister shaking me and telling me to put on my "play clothes." I put on my t-shirt and shorts, then let her haul me barefoot out the door. We crouch in ditches, waiting for movement in the gray water. A ripple to my left and me and my sister strike at the same time. The crawdad wiggles out of my hands and into my sister's muddy fingers. It gets dumped into a red bucket of muddy water, and the waiting begins again. I always feel a little dread in the pit of my stomach during the hunt, the fear of being pinched. My sister never shows fear and is always first into any moving mud. We attempt to contain giggles and stay silent like real hunters, but we never can. We always end up with a bucket full, nonetheless, and trudge home, pushing each other into the mud and ruining our clothes.

That was long ago. I would dirty up my finest dress just to relive our adventures. She is long gone from Mississippi, married, and a mother to a niece I hope to meet someday. I never left, but she did, and so did the world we shared together. Where I come from is where I am, but it is not the same. My dad stopped attempting to make me the son he could never create, so I stopped trying. Crawdaddy hunting turned into reading, and the place I come from became the place I'd like to escape. I used to cover myself in mud just for a laugh. My sister would steal four-wheelers for us to have a good time. Our childish quests had no limits in our imaginations or the real world as they do now. In a blur, my adolescence is gone, even in my attempts to keep the adventures alive. △

The Red Eyed Sun

Elijah Camba

I remember as a kid
in class
starstruck
when I realized that the sun
was a white star
the one I colored
with a warm yellow
the one I looked up to
the one I knew for a fact was yellow
before I got blinded by its light

It was white
and pure

And,
I remember being blown away
when I learned that the stars
could change color
They could be blue
and it wasn't cold or sad
It was burning hotter

And I remember
her broken face
as the white star in her eyes
turned red before bursting
into a void of waterfalls

She holds it in
blue sky
gray trees
burning red
even as she sets into darkness

She holds my arm
in the Asian restaurant
clinging to me before she sits
And before we set up our shopping spree
she says

“Send him my apologies”

Get a Taste of Your Own Medicine

Makenzie Brannon

They thought they could walk all over me.
Well, I'll give them a taste of their own medicine.
With their consent, of course.
Because oral dosages must be taken seriously
And at the right time.
But what do I know?
I'm just a rug
With dreams of being a doctor.



“The Bald Intellectual”

Elijah Camba

Graphite Pencil, Acrylic Paint

Creek Baby

Nora Courtney

Second Place—Essay Competition

Whenever people ask me where I'm from, I usually just say the coast, even though that's a lie. When I answer truthfully, I'm met with blank stares and sharp nods from strangers too afraid to say they don't know where Wiggins, Mississippi is. Sometimes, I even hear "What's a Wiggins?"

I have a love-hate relationship with my hometown. I hate the muddied, de-mufflerized jacked-up pickup trucks that run me off backroads, but I love the smell of wet magnolias when I step onto my front porch on an early April morning. I hate sitting through long, droning sermons about how as Southern Baptists we must become "one like God and stop judging others," only to receive unapproving stares as I shuffle past the pews because I accidentally wore a dress with spaghetti straps, but I love the sound of Red Creek as it moves over the pebbles and forgotten Ultra Lite cans.

My Nanny and Pappy have a huge chunk of land out on Red Creek. They even got a sign, letting all those who drive by on dirt bikes and four-wheelers that "Possum Holler" rightfully belongs to the Cooleys.

There's a long dirt road overgrown by weeds and briars that leads to the back of the property. About halfway up, there's a slough full of baby alligators. Our dogs have been known to leap from the back of the truck to go swim in it.

I've been going out to Possum Holler since I can remember, and in front of the elevated FEMA trailer that has since been infested with dirt daubers and spiders is a pear tree. When I was little, my cousin and I ran around with large sticks and planted them in the sand, pretending to be explorers conquering new terrain. We declared Possum Holler as ours, but of course, we changed the name to "Pora Natrick Land." We weren't creative enough to come up with a new name, so we decided to combine our names into one. Patrick, my cousin, and I like to believe that the stick we planted is what led to the sprouting of the pear tree, contrary to whatever our grandmother might say. We didn't really care if that's not exactly how nature works.



A Surprise Visitor

Ozzie Caddell

Photography

If you listen hard enough, you can hear the creek bubbling from the pear tree. About a football field further, you'll find Red Creek. It twists and turns like a snake throughout Stone County, and we get to call a few fallen logs and sandbanks ours. My favorite thing to do is to see what new things I can find in the creek. The classiness of Stone County residents is shown best when evaluating the new treasures that wash up on the banks of Red Creek. Usually, it's just an array of old beer cans and cigarette butts, but sometimes you can find something really special.

One time, we were having a skipping rock contest out by the water when we noticed something strange. Stuck next to one of the many moss-covered logs that make up the creek was something that appeared to be a baby. At first, we were all startled because what eight-year-old wouldn't be startled to discover a dead body floating down the creek? But finally, we mustered up the courage to investigate. Upon closer inspection, it

turned out to be an extremely life-like baby doll.

The creek water had made the baby's head soft and soggy, and its body smelled like mildew. It was missing an eye, and I could've sworn I saw a spider crawl out of the empty socket. To make matters worse, there was a weight tied around the baby's neck. It was the best thing we ever found in the creek, so we took it to our parents to show them. Once they got over the initial shock, we finally convinced them to let us keep the baby instead of throwing it away. Soon, the "baby doll found with a weight tied around its neck in the creek" became known as "Creek Baby." Creek Baby was around for years, always creepily watching every bonfire, mud ride, and s'more eating contest. We knew Creek Baby was destined to be ours because a few weeks later, a bed built just for Creek Baby washed up on shore. Even now, as the creek floods and the sand bar changes, I can always count on Creek Baby to be sitting there, haunting my nightmares. △



"Mr. Hot Dog Man's Marvelous Adventure"

Noah Lee

Photography

Twelve

Jayden Cochran

Second Place—Short Story Competition

“I ain’t never cheated nobody! I ain’t got no reason to cheat and no reason to lie neither!”

Contrary to his words, Leon Hughes had more than enough reason to do both on the juke joint floor. At the ripe age of twelve, Leon watched his father gamble him and his mother out of their house and home. His father only left him two things in this world: his lucky pair of dice and a heap of debt that no amount of blackjack could take care of. Despite witnessing that bit of good old Hughes luck, Leon found himself shooting dice quite regularly. Tonight, the heavy scents of whiskey, gin, and tobacco sullied the air and impaired the better judgment of the men that he usually played with. The sound of two dice with their twelve tumbling sides was drowned out by yelling and ice falling into shots of whiskey. *Clink, clink.*

“You calling me a liar, b-boy?” snarled Mugsy Bridges. Mugsy had earned a reputation as one of the best dice rollers on this side of the Tallahatchie River. The only thing shorter than the list of men Mugsy had lost against was his own temper. Whenever he went out to gamble, he carried a twelve-gauge shotgun he affectionately named Denise. Mugsy had dealt with a stutter for his entire life, so Denise acted as his arbitrator when words failed him during heated dice matches. “Dr-drop them d-d-d-ice ag-gain then,” he commanded as his right hand began to reach out for the familiar comfort of Denise’s barrel. *Click, click.*

Leon quickly inserted his hands into his pocket to retrieve the sparkling emerald dice that his father had left him. With a jerk of his wrist, he rolled a three and a four out onto the floor. “Now see there?” Leon rationalized, “I’m just that good. Ain’t no type of cheatin going on!”

Mugsy remained unimpressed. Now the word of one begrudging gambling partner is enough to raise suspicion, but falling into the ill graces of Mugsy Bridges was the equivalent of a Caesar flashing a thumbs down before throwing poor victims into the

bellies of whatever malnourished lions the Colosseum had to offer. As the juke joint clock struck midnight, Hughes knew that he had to do more than convince Leon that he wasn’t a cheat; he had to convince Mugsy that he was the fairest, most honest-to-God partner that he had ever had.

“Let’s play one l-last game th-then,” Mugsy growled. “If, y-you r-really ain’t cheatin, then shoot for one more game of cr-craps.”

Leon’s face lit up as the dice began to make their familiar sounds while he played for his life. *Clack, clack.*

Mugsy took another swig from the cocktail held within his twelve-ounce cup as he closely inspected Leon’s habits through his own blurred vision. His stupor caused Leon’s heart to beat against his rib cage with nearly three times as much force. Leon rolled a two and a three, a three and a one, a four and a two, and two ones. The combinations teetered dangerously close to being seven without ever quite surpassing it. After ten rolls, Mugsy had either become too drunk to notice that Leon was still winning, or he had grown to respect him too much to care.

“O-ok m-man, you can stop n-now,” Mugsy slurred as he almost tipped over.

Leon pumped his fist in relief, causing his lucky dice to slip out of his breast pocket. As the inebriated Mugsy bent down to pick them up, he could have sworn that one of the dice was nearly heavier than the other.

“Actually, r-roll one m-m-more time, and t-try to hit m-more than seven, b-but less than twelve,” he commanded.

As Leon rolled a final time, the unsteady eyes of Denise slowly rose to meet him. He swallowed his Adam’s apple as he prayed that his dice would not betray him as Judas betrayed his Lord. As Leon closed his own eyes, he heard only his dice connect with the ground, but for some reason, they sounded heavier than normal. *Click, click.* △

Fall into the Creek

Ava Grace Noe

First Place—Poetry Competition

With me.

Take the trail behind the house to the edge of the field.

Push past the line of trees, climb down into the ditch

Beside me.

Hold my hand; I don't want you to slip and break your neck.

The water will be cold; a piece of me wants you to wrap your arms

Around me.

Don't swim too far, you yell from the bank because you're scared of drowning.

I'm just floating with the current, I hold out a hand for you to come

With me.

I dip my toes in; I don't say it out loud but I almost drowned last year.

I forgot that water could be this terrifying; everyone else loved to swim

Besides me.

You decide floating seems like a fine idea on this hot summer day.

You jumped in first, I'm coming in too, you shout

After me.

You grab my hand, and we fall together under the water.

Creeks aren't this deep, but they are

With you.

Water floods our lungs; we find a new way to breathe.

I don't want to go up for air. Please just stay here forever

With me.



“Soon Everything’s Golden”

Ava Grace Noe

Acrylic



“What Once Was”

Addie White

Gouache

Hunter’s Mass

Ben Tabor

I found Him in a river,
murky and muddy in the
depths of Stone County.

Waist high over Easter break,
an anointment of creek water
and a 12-gauge bible.

I ate a peanut butter communion
to a sermon of bird calls and
muddy four-wheelers.

*Dear Merciful God,
may this creature die
quickly.*

*In the name of
the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Spirit.*

Bang.

Amen.

Red

Richard Zheng

Third Place—Poetry Competition

// Inspired by Mark Rothko's *Seagram Murals*

Suffocate.
Suffocate.
Suffocate.
Gaze upon an ocean of maroon,
a sea of blood your hands only seem
to stain redder,
a red that even pales the
scarlet of your *Chateau Margaux*
or the brilliant ruby of your
7th month-aversary ring,
a red that trips your conversations and forces you to
refocus your thoughts while nervously wiping your
mouth with a vermillion handkerchief after which you
comment on how delectable the saffron is to break the
staleness of the conversation as it pecks anxiously at
your burgundy collar and uproots you from your velvet
seat to claw at the glass of the 80th floor view before
realizing that the
windows
are painted
shut.



“The Last Pillar”

Noah Lee

Photography



“Bug’s Point of View”

Simon Riggle

Second Place Photography

Fruit Trees

Nora Courtney

Every time someone tells me
“The apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree,”
my heart becomes petrified wood.

I hope your decaying tree & its rotting fruit
stay far away from me.

Your apples of lies and banter
deserve to roll down hills of weeds
& be eaten by mangy dogs.

I never want to bite into one of your pears
because I will discover the maggots and fruit flies
festering underneath.

Because of you,
I want to be a seed,
lost in the wind,
drifting far away.

I want to settle somewhere new
and produce clementines sticky
with kindness and hope.

So every night I pray
that the apple has fallen far, far away from the tree.

Needlework

Chloe Dobbins

Every little stitch I weave
still reminds me of you.
Threads intersect, pins overlap,
white strands string over pink fabric.
It's women's work, what I'm doing,
but my clumsy hands shake too much
to hold the dainty needles tight enough
for a good backstitch.

You always stood over me,
eyes pinned to the pins and
grading my grades.

The hem was too crooked,
the running stitch too long.

*(I was too tall,
my shoulders too broad,
my hair too short).*

You told me to keep the seams stuck together
I would have to try harder, to sew well enough
for a good backstitch.

You never let me use a sewing machine;
it wasn't honest work, even if would fix the flaws.

*(You hated when I wore makeup;
I was dishonest even when I tried
to fix the flaws you saw).*

You forced me to hold the needle tighter,
and I felt a prick through my finger.

A sharp sting and a red drop on pink, just enough
for a good backstitch.

My hems and my stitches,
seams and sewing machines,
were never enough.

My hair and my height,
whether I chose modesty or makeup,
I would never be enough.

And the seams would never stay stuck together —
I would never learn to hold the needle tight enough,
never learn to try harder, to sew well enough,
never learn to keep the blood from draining just enough
for a good backstitch.



“Grandmother’s”

Addie White

First Place Fine Art
Gouache



“Mt. Norquay, Canada”

Rusleen Bhalla

Photography

How You've Slowly Turned into One of My Many Hyperfixations

Nora Courtney

You are a candle I forgot I lit, one of sweet laundry and sharp cologne, hidden deep beneath the floorboards of my house. All at once, a spark catches a splinter, igniting my home in a furious blaze.

You are autumn, with leaves of golden brown and dark yellow tangled in your hair. I look in your eyes and pools of misty forests and damp trees answer. I taste chai tea and pumpkin spice on your lips as they meet mine.

You are a tune I can't get out of my head. It's like a playlist, stuck on repeat, as you dance around my mind. Echoes of Taylor Swift and Bon Iver sing me to sleep as I listen to your heartbeat.

You are espresso, always there to sharpen my senses and get me through the day. Etched in your fingertips are the swirls of caramel lattes, and your smile is soothing like lavender cold brews. Your laugh is caffeine coursing through my veins, turning into liquid dopamine, as I become hooked on every breath.

You are the Chrysler building, standing tall in the New York skyline, glittering in the midmorning sun. You're a fascinating work of art as you dull every building around. I am a tourist, fixed on you as I clamber to the top. The wind kisses my cheeks as I plummet to the ground, fallen from your mighty steeple. Once I hit the concrete below, I thought I couldn't fall for you any harder, until the soil swallows me whole.



“Ready for Takeoff”

Simon Riggle

Photography



“Dewy Spring”

Ozzie Caddell

Photography



“Golden Hour Koi”

Simon Riggle

Photography

Mortar and Pestle

Maryann Dang

Honorable Mention—Poetry Competition

Con mệt không?

Yes, Bà nội,

I’m very tired,

But trails don’t shorten for aching feet.

Not the ones you traveled down

With a basket of mangoes in one arm

And a life in another.

Con muốn dừng lại không?

No, Bà nội,

I can’t stop

Because hunger doesn’t stop for weary souls.

It didn’t for you

When less money in your pockets meant less rice on the table

And one more day pretending you’ve already eaten.

Con vui chưa?

I don’t know, Bà nội, if I’m happy,

But I can pretend like I am.

Isn’t that what you did?

Work until ropes rub your palms raw

And stick them in your pockets when eyes lurk too far?

Con, hết cái này đang không?

Bà nội, is this all worth it?

Con, hãy nghỉ đi.

Bà nội, I’ll rest when I’m with you,

In that place where restless hands intertwine

With restless hands long lost to time.



“Grazing in a Flower Field”

Mandy Sun

Third Place Fine Art

Acrylic

Hidden Tree Stand: Pontotoc, MS

Simon Riggle

The sun’s light still
stretches

out across the evening sky.

Two sets of footsteps walk quietly

Through open fields towards a
forest

of towering maples,

pinés,

and dogwoods.

Chipmunks

chuckle at them

as they enter.

Wrens hop,

hop,

hop from

branch

to branch

to watch the odd pair

prepare for their upwards climb.

By this time, the sky has

exploded

into vivid hues of reds,

oranges,

and purples.

The two will settle down

in the camouflaged hunting stand

and exist in the quiet

stillness

of the trees

until the silence is

shattered

by the breaking of a twig

by a heavy hoof.

Starry Night

Brianna Riordan

Honorable Mention—
Poetry Competition

Streaks of crimson fire
burning in the sky
slowly turning into
nightfall.

Lilac flowing into twilight,
moonlight cascading around me.

Stars glistening in the night sky,
twinkling with delight.
Their iridescent light sparkling,
they are aware of their
beauty.

Something crunches on twigs.
It should frighten me,
but I know a cat is nothing
to fear over.

I become mesmerized,
constellations blur,
a breeze revives me,
but yet again,
I am lost
to the night.

For a moment, it's all
behind me.
The shutter sealed tight
against the raging wind,
and it is just me
sitting with
the night sky.



“Painter’s Palette”

Simon Riggle

Photography

If I Were to Have Alice’s World of Nonsense

Nora Courtney

Women braid their hair with commas and semicolons
as prepositions drip from silk satin bows.
They wear dresses of facts and pantsuits of opinions
as they blush their cheeks with similes and paint their
smiles with metaphors.

Coffee shops sit on every corner and every street is cobblestone.
Scents of sourdough and caramel macchiatos
burst into every shop and cottage as children fly on carpets
and try on glass slippers.

Tulips sing and daisies dance in epic retellings
of Perseus and Achilles. Every amphitheater is sold out
while stars give standing ovations from the plum and lilac sky.

Golden retrievers write podcasts and orange tabbies hold press
conferences as they speak every language known to man. Labs wear glasses
and terriers wear ties as they head out to beat rush hour traffic.

Crawfish and King Cake are served at every tea party. Aromas of crab
boil and cream cheese icing echo from every kitchen because every
Tuesday is Fat Tuesday. Beads of purple, gold, and green hang
from every lamppost in every city.

There’s no Queen of Hearts and there are no red roses.
Utopia governs the land and wildflowers spring
from every brick and every hollow tree.



“Mississippi Meadow”

Iris Xue

Acrylic

The Devil’s Garden

Sophia Williams

Lush grass tickles my ankles
as I trek into the place I know
I cannot be. The towering vines
welcome me, crowding trees
wave hello.

The place itself is warm,
a meadow supporting millions of life forms.
They whisper to me, some bellow hostility,
others in gentle amazement.

Grazing my skin, the wind persuades
me to get what I came for.
Calling to me, it yearns to be discovered.

I comply, and plants glistening like gold
consume my vision.
I pluck the green garment from its vine.
Conjured from my lips are words I soon long to snatch back.

“Oh my God.”
I flinch at my own voice, scrunching my face.

The garden is illuminated by a holy light, exposing my sin.
The angels hum their melody,
introducing Him.
I begin to turn around, head down in shame.

Speak of the Devil.

Mockingbird Meat-Mince Lullaby

Vivian Jordan

Hush mama dearest, don’t say a word,
Somebody’s feelings might get hurt.
Hum a hymn, lull demons back to bed / with a lullaby.
Don’t wake the babe with your
Booming bouts.
Hush mama deary, you can kiss me goodnight.
Don the
 plain executioner’s mask.
Snap its thin elastic cord,
Make sure the fit’s
Juuusstt right.
[MWAH]
Gut your little baby bird,
It’s all right.
I wasn’t catching any
 shuteye tonight.



“Ava Watched Bo Burnham in July”

Ava Grace Noe

Acrylic



“Her”

Ivie Kirkland

Digital Art

Honors College Essay Draft No. III

Nora Courtney

In the days of slap bracelets and duct tape wallets,
I hopped over ant beds, twigs in hand
as we cast spells and curses to conquer trolls
and destroy horcruxes.

Words leapt from yellow, creased pages
as Greek gods soldiered their tridents and threw
their lightning bolts, their children stealing fleeces
and saving Olympus.

I spent days roaming the woods, hiding from Tributes
and other flying arrows. I heard the cannon sound as the tracker jackers
found their victims and the nightlock entered the bloodstream.

All of a sudden, the worlds began to fade. Gone were the castles
and the lightning thieves and the victors.

Cursors blink, each pixel a slap in the face
as the essays begin to blend together.

What can we do without? Why do you want to major in this?

*What can the Honors College do for you? How will you succeed at
our university?*

I take a breath and banish the golden snitches and the pen-swords and the
mockingjays. My fingers click away, writing the same essay
I've written eight times.

South Fork of the Snake River

Ann Grace Donahue

Standing up in the boat:

one leg
tucked
so I won't fall,
rod in my hand
as I cast swiftly
back

and forth,
back and
forth.

I watch the bobber,
wait for a bite.

It comes fast
and is gone
even faster.

I wait again.

Sitting down in the boat:

resting.

The boat

rocks

back and

forth,

back

and forth.

Snow tops enormous
mountains;

evergreen forests

survive the climate.

If I'm lucky,

I'll spot a moose

drinking from the stream.

I've only been to Idaho twice,
but I've spent hours on
this river.

Two people with me:

a guide and a fishing partner.

We take a break

to eat our packed lunches—

just a sandwich and some chips.

No one needs to say

a thing.

We sit in the loud

silence,

only catching the

waterfall

in the distance

and the swishing

of the paddles.

A Train Ride to Somewhere Else

Raegan Calvert

On nights when my schoolwork taunted me and the shame of my roommate walking in *again* on my pity party in bed grew too great, I found solace in a swing set: the one sitting left of Goen Hall. I spent mostly cold and lonely hours there, but they gave me time to think. My knees would ache, palms blistered and coated with the smell of rust, and pants much bluer than before—the seats had a funny way of staining any fabric that touched them for too long—and each time I finished swinging, my mind quieted. I admit that I felt a touch of embarrassment at my childish form of stress relief; I avoided eye contact with any passerby, too scared I might see them laughing. After a while, though, I started waking up early before class if only for a few moments with the swings.

After sitting in one spot for long enough, a person starts to *see* the things that are usually glanced over, never appreciated because of their habitual existence. I introduced myself to the grass, the trees, the old buildings and their cracked bricks. I fell in love with the world. I watched a mama bird fly to and from its nest atop a tall tree, and I greeted bugs hovering around a streetlamp. I only ever avoided the people, but I loved them too... from a distance. I watched the students run at full speed from academic buildings to residence halls; their laughs boisterous enough to reach my ears, and their infectious joy always made me smile. I saw one group of students lay on top of a blanket underneath the stars, huddled close together, with their fingers pointed to the sky as if to reach out and touch their favorite constellations. I felt as if each day held something new and remarkable. I witnessed the world for the first time, but ‘seeing the beauty in everything’ became a saddening sort of bliss. I felt somehow smaller—even more insignificant—than I already did. I wanted nothing more than to hold the world in my arms and embrace it tightly to my chest, but the more I observed, the greater the divide between me and the

world grew. I walked on top of a flawless artwork and felt remorse for every stain I left.

This mixture of love and isolation made me nauseous most days, sick with an emotion I had no words to describe. The nights spent swinging became fewer and farther in between. However, I found comfort on the weekends known for their vacant parking lots and quiet afternoons. The campus stilled to a peaceful hum, and in those moments, I felt invisible, nonexistent, in the most liberating sense. During one of those tranquil nights, I decided to reacquaint myself with the swings, excited at the lack of foreign eyes. Soon after I got outside that night, I heard a train clanking along some nearby track, blowing its horn loudly. I desperately wished it would take the route traveling past Goen Hall, leaving only a few feet of grass and fence between us. I stole glances behind me, praying I’d catch sight of the rust-covered cars sprayed with art people wished others would see. Graffiti became one of the little things in my life that helped me feel connected to the world, if even for a moment: “I see you,” I wished to whisper to the train, “I hear you.” But as the rumbling grew fainter, I resigned myself to a view of dormitories for the night.

As I humored the idea of jumping that fence one day and allowing myself a train ride to somewhere else, my eyes drifted along the windows of the residence halls. I heard the heartbeats behind each set of blinds. *An anthill, my brain groused, stacked five stories high with human-shaped ants hunched over their desks, wasting away in the present for the hopes of a future.*



“Extending Railways”

Simon Riggle

Photography

The thought was assumptive at best, pretentious at worst. People worked hard for what they wanted. An itch at the back of my brain said that I should be working harder too.

My body swung back and forth, back and forth. “But I don’t want to be an ant anymore,” I pleaded with the world, “I want to be a train.” △

Commitment Is a Funny Sort of Happiness

Noah Lee

the air convulses with scared unsaid words, choking two
she whispers of blissful contentedness
raucous thoughts itch at their emotional scabs
body heat emanating, melting into tranquility
clawing at stifled, compressed insecurities
soft, resting breaths
he trembles, fearing relational cracks irreversibly shattering
comfort in a doe's brown eyes
fickle love inevitably escapes through interlocked fingers
our true feelings are captured, certain
i promise.

promises are only words
time will expose her naivety
words degrade into lifelessness eventually
clock hands scraping closer to the moment she despises me
nostalgia warps into hatred and
every beautiful memory becomes marred with selfish intentions
youthful love is but security
we love to flaunt our freedom
these feelings soon lose corporeality,
their smell and taste and touch
until one day we grasp at nothingness
and the senseless, innocent butterflies are suffocated
love is but a word.

*my romantic cynic,
you do injustice to raw, fervent feeling:
affections not of reason
we love intrinsically
for together we are
impossibly complete
for we are one other
and, forevermore, will be
still, lie back down, and rest your eyes
your twisted knots unfurling
and awful doubts purged from
those tired, boyish eyes
i love you forever
and though our selves might soon be far
our beings, perfect-binded, and lovers are,
eternally
for forever lasts forever*

i promise.

an exhausted, enamored smile
eyes flutter shut
her beauty soaks drifting dreams
and so his restless soul is quieted.



“The Stone Tortoise”

Noah Lee
Photography



“Now Do a Silly Face”

Simon Riggle
Photography

Here Lies They/Them

Vivian Jordan

Here lies
my lovely bones
sheathed in a cotton shroud,
previously Sunday best.

As the service proceeds
and funeral-goers march
to and fro' / creasing
the grass with muddy
shadows in the shape of
dress shoes,
I toss and turn in
my grave.

May she rest in peace.

Here lies
she/her, floral
print dresses, long hair,
and strawberry pink.

Rest in peace,
the daughter
my mama / and / daddy
will never get.

Thin Sheet of Plastic

Iris Xue

The sticky beanbag crinkles underneath me as I adjust my position against the wall. I had sat there for hours, poring over the latest young-adult book release, absorbing its storyline in the dying afternoon light. Even now, thin rays of sunshine shoot through the stained-glass windows, shining on the polished oak bookshelves lining the lilac walls, granting each row of faded childhood classics an even greater nostalgic quality. Just beyond the stacks, I smell a faint whiff of jasmine perfume, drowning out the must of the old, yellow pages.

As the sweet scent drifts away, I'm brought back to my surroundings. I hadn't visited my childhood library, the Bolivar County Public Library, in ages after I moved across the state to Southaven, but I always dreamed of returning to this oasis. To my surprise, the mute, beige walls of my distant memories are now glossed over with a therapeutic lilac, the oak shelves replaced with polished cedar.

As I crack my back against the smooth beanbag cushion, my eyes focus on the librarian's desk with its tall book stacks, each one ready to topple at the slightest nudge. Though Mrs. Bobbie, the librarian, isn't here now, I can just imagine her working behind the counter, looking up occasionally to smile at me. When I visited this room weekly as a kid, I'd always step up to her desk first and ask for all her best book recommendations. She'd then lead me

through the maze of shelves, plucking out her favorites and stacking them in my arms. Though I never believed in myths, all the tomes of Greek and Norse mythology she layered in my thin, bony arms over the years proved to me that Mrs. Bobbie was a goddess. Day after day, month after month, that counter, that divine portal, beckoned me with the call of new literature from a heavenly being wise beyond my years. It became such a habit to visit her counter that I could notice the slightest difference each time, like new bookmarks scattered across the surface or a different pair of reading glasses propped on the keyboard. Even when she wasn't in her sleek yoga ball chair, I'd sit beside her counter with a book in my lap, waiting for her to return from her endless number of board meetings, like I'm doing right now.

In front of her desk rests another plastic beanbag, unoccupied. I start to envision my best friend sitting there, a thick book in her lap. When we were just six years old, sitting in different, crustier beanbags but in the same spots, we read for hours, shushing each other incessantly for the slightest bit of noise. We always caught the suspicious eye of a parent, so we'd quiet

down and burrow into our stories, but only for a second before we started again. Now, we're both entering high school, but we're in separate states across the country, two separate worlds with no immediate magical portal in between. I would give anything



“Lost in Shipping”

Noah Lee

Photography

to have her beside me in this cartoonish children's room with Amelia Bedelia and Clifford the Big Red Dog smiling down at us from the wall. If only both of us were here, we could read the silly kids' books we used to love instead of the classics we need for school.

Shifting my gaze away from the beanbag, I get a glimpse of the hallway outside the room's entrance. The dark, wood-paneled passageway leads to other sections of the library, the ones that I more frequently borrow from now. I stand and amble toward the door, clutching my book. I tread slowly now, but in years past, I would frantically rush down the corridor to get to the children's room. On my way there, I always diverted my gaze from the "adult" and "biography" and "historical fiction" sections. Those dark navy signs and all the dark beige bookshelves resting beneath them blurred into a dull, solid patch of radio static as the luminous, technicolor kids' section came into focus. In my mind, I ran a marathon to break away from those humongous tomes written in small typeface and Old English, everything from *The Lord of the Flies* to *Little Women*; little did I know that some of them would become my favorites in just a few years.

As I pass by these books now, walking in the opposite direction of my childhood self, I get ever closer to the main desk, with its sleek, curved exterior. I look down at my book, and I decide to check it out since I've read so much of it already. When I step up to the man at the counter, I fish for my library card from my wallet. It's a different one from the kid's card I held the last time I was here, a time I hardly remember, when I was barely able to look over the counter, let alone graze its surface with the tips of my fingernails.

The card I hold now has a pink curlicue emerging from a thick cyan book; it's the adult card. Five years ago, I stood at this exact counter, clutching my adorable kid's card with its embellished tropical parrots with mouths open wide, books in wings. I held on for dear life to this card, this thin plastic board that represented a slice of my identity, making it an ID card of sorts. The same librarian, with his horn-rimmed glasses, peered down at me with a glint in his wide, owl-like eyes, smirking ever so slightly before confiscating the card in a swift swoop, presenting me with this plastic strip instead. I couldn't help but sneer at it.

My friends always looked forward to this rite of passage, but I was frozen in place, tears threatening to drip down my sore cheeks onto the fresh sheet of plastic. This card was physical proof that I was too old for the kid's section. Too old for the naivete of blissful youth. Too old to assume that myths were real—*could ever be real*.

Too old that I needed to grow up.

Looking down at my library card now, I realize that it never meant that I had to grow out of the children's section.

No matter how many times I turned the pages of the books in that room, the room never turned, could never turn, a page on me.

As the librarian hands back my book, I turn towards the children's room, and its bright colors beckon me, just like they did years ago. At this moment, the thin strip of plastic shoved in my front pocket aches a little less, barely scraping me as I smile and start to head back to read for another hour in my favorite corner, next to my favorite desk, in my favorite room that I called, and still call, home. △

The Carpenter's Trace

Chloe Dobbins

Third Place—Short Story Competition

I crushed the little three-pronged orange leaf in my hand and let it crumble into Nana's casket. The two of us never enjoyed flowers—like great-grandmother, like great-granddaughter, I guessed. I wanted to send her off with something pretty anyway—she always liked pretty things. With that, the casket's top closed shut with a creak and they lowered her into the grave. I wondered how long she would still be there before the worms got to her.

The Bellamy family graveyard was beautiful today—Nana probably appreciated it. The sky was a candy blue, and the clouds looked like little scoops of vanilla ice cream floating about. The leaves of the trees had morphed into a pumpkin orange and drifted into the cottony clearing. Cream-colored mushrooms sprouted below our feet. I'd bet she liked it, being below the soft grass in the cool dirt.

The headstones were polished with no cracks to be seen. Many of my several-times-great-grandparents were at rest here, along with my Uncle John, Aunt Scarlett, and Miss Laney.

Miss Laney was my sort-of-grandma. She was my grandfather's first wife, dying at age twenty, decades before I was born and years before my mother. I just called her *Miss* since she wasn't really my grandmother and she felt too young for the title anyway.

Mom and Dad and Daisy and the rest of

my family had all left, but I stayed behind, mumbling something about needing more time. They believed me—I'd always been closer to Nana than anyone else.

I kicked my black dress shoes off and laid down next to Nana's grave. She was buried next to Pawpaw, my grandpa and Nana's son. He had already died a few years prior. I fiddled around with the tiny grass roots underneath me. Thin and pale, they reminded me of veins.

I plucked a mushroom from the ground. I had to pass the time until night; then, I would be able to get to work.

"Angel Wings," I told Nana. "Folks used to think you could eat them just fine, but nowadays scientists are saying they're poisonous enough to kill you."

I stroked the mushroom's delicate ruffles and held it up to the sun. Blocking the star out, its beams of light seemed to come from the fungus, a trick of perspective. I smiled at the sight. Angel Wings was a fitting name.

Sitting up, I stretched. My back was starting to hurt again, like it had been for the past few weeks. "I went by Carpenter's before the funeral this morning. It's in pretty bad shape, but I think I can fix it up again."

The Carpenter's Trace was an old boutique Nana used to run. I always thought the name was weird, but people in town liked it well enough



"East of Eden"

Ava Grace Noe

Acrylic, Gesso

before she shut it down one day. Evidently folks were surprised since the shop was doing pretty well. I wouldn't remember, though—it was a long time ago, before I was around.

Truthfully, saying the old shop was in *bad shape* was being generous. The Carpenter's Trace was falling apart. Its windows had still yet to be boarded up after three decades of disuse, flaunting garbage and debris to any passerby who cared to look into them. Old mannequins stood lifelessly against the walls, long stripped of their garments, and boxes were strewn haphazardly across the floor. Nevertheless, I'd been sneaking in since middle school. Something about the abandoned store had always enchanted me, drawing me in closer. The cracked floors and flaking ceiling had their charms.

My favorite part of the shop was the mural fading along its easternmost wall, resembling artwork one might find in an old children's Bible. Jesus stood in the center, his outstretched arms beckoning children in once-colorful robes and headscarves to come closer, to touch. Yet parts of the Carpenter's face had chipped off, leaving him with a blank stare, as though questioning why to even bother drawing nearer.

"Y'know I got accepted into that art school I always talk about. Maybe I'll repaint that mural." I paused. "Maybe not, though. I'd probably feel like I'm disrespecting it."

I stopped speaking and listened for Nana's response. None came. Disappointed, I kept on.

"It was there—Carpenter's—where she told me what you did." I traced my index finger along Nana's tombstone as though comforting it. "Don't worry—I still love you. But I can't believe you'd do that."

Whenever I snuck into The Carpenter's Trace nowadays, I usually stayed the whole night. It was a good place to work on my art. Tucked away from the

rest of the street and mostly unknown outside of the older folks, no one would ever come to bother me. At some point freshman year, I brought a sleeping bag with me, and thus began my tradition of spending the night.

About a month ago, I had an odd dream while there. Miss Laney was talking to me. I didn't like what she said. Ever since then, I'd felt I had some inexplicable burden, like a weight was always pressing down on my chest and shoulders and spine that I couldn't lift off. The weight had lessened some now, though.

Hopefully, it would be gone after tonight.

"I get it, kind of. You thought you had to protect your son." I laid my hand over the fresh dirt covering Nana's casket. "But he did what he did to her. You can't change that. You should have protected *her* instead."

I sighed. I had burned the few hours until nightfall by now talking to Nana. It was time for work.

I walked to my car just outside the graveyard's fence. Popping open the trunk, I gazed at the items I'd brought with me. A large trash bag and a shovel. I carried both with me back to the tombstones.

First things first. I broke the ground in front of Miss Laney's tombstone. The digging was hard work, but eventually I uncovered her casket. Despite my confidence in my plan, I was still a little nervous. Bracing myself, I opened its lid.

I exhaled in relief. As expected, the casket was empty.

I felt a smidge of pride as I emptied the bag's contents into her casket. Police couldn't find her body in the decade the case was open, but I found her bones in one night, buried right outside The Carpenter's Trace.

I didn't refill Miss Laney's grave yet. I had one more job to do. I was almost giddy—I could barely feel

the once-crushing weight anymore.

Stretching my arms, I got to work digging up Nana's grave. Hers was much easier, the dirt still loose. I gently opened her casket.

Nana looked like she was only sleeping, the leaf crumbles from earlier still framing her face. I gingerly brushed my fingers into her silver hair and removed her hairpin.

My hand shook a little. As a little girl, I adored Nana's hairpin. She wore it everywhere, from the grocery store to church to my graduation. It was made from several strings of pearls, intertwined with golden thread. Nana promised me I could have it one day. Now her promise was being kept, if only for a moment.

"Like I said, I...I still do really love you," I whispered to her. "And I understand why you would cover it up, but...stealing from her was too far. You understand why I had to do this now, right?"

I could feel the shame rise from my bile into my lungs into the rest of my body, gnawing away at the weight on my shoulders and leaving me empty, as I closed her casket and covered it with dirt.

I realized I was scratching my forearm, an old nervous tic, and I made myself stop. Nana was on life

support when she died. If I hadn't pulled it...well, someone else would have eventually.

I carried the hairpin to Miss Laney's grave and gently placed it on top of her skull.

As I reburied her casket, I felt the last of the weight dissipate into the chilly autumn night air.

"Rest in peace, now, Miss Laney," I told her as I traced her tombstone's epitaph. *In loving memory of Delancey Bellamy. Faithful wife and daughter, returned to Him too soon.* "I'm sorry for what they did to you. You didn't deserve it."

I started heading for the graveyard's gates. I'd have to sneak back into my house — late as it was, I couldn't just walk in covered in dirt and grime.

I gazed at the graveyard for what might have been my last time. I would never come back willingly, that was for sure.

The graveyard was still beautiful, perhaps more so at night. The moonlight glimmered down and freckled the grass, reflecting off the tombstones and illuminating the whole cemetery. Another pretty autumn leaf drifted toward me. I raised my hand to catch it. Something to remember this place, this night, by. △



"Gateway"

Simon Riggle

Photography

On Being American-Chinese

Richard Zheng

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

Words tumble out of my mouth, fumbling to form sentences, and *xing nian kuai le* punctuates my mistakes as my tongue ties itself back into a knot. My sister steps in as I struggle to remember the next lines, and she finishes reciting with a flourish and a bow, rubbing her perfect Mandarin in my face. She flaunts her red packet money as my mom leans to remind me what is next. Later that evening, when I call my grandparents to wish them a happy Chinese New Year, I do it with a propped notebook with all the pinyin spelled out as to not embarrass myself a second time. I mutter about the impossibility of wishing for someone to live in good health for a thousand more years, and I curse myself out for forgetting the words another year. At least there will be dumplings to celebrate my mistake; perhaps the spice of the Szechuan chili oil or the acidity of the Shanxi vinegar will numb my tongue into unravelling itself.

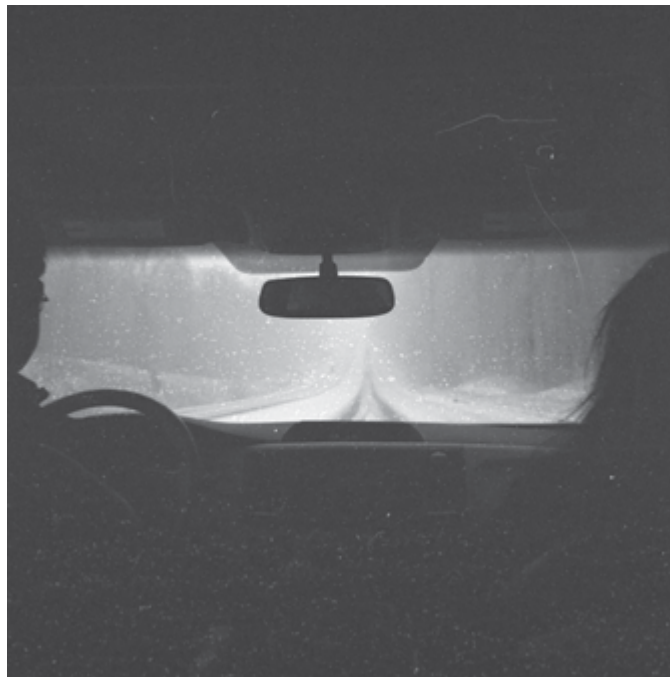
My sister always loved the traditional holidays with the dance performers and parades of the lions.

She stayed up late with my family on our velvet couch streaming the TV celebration from faraway China. Rachel was always the one in touch with our heritage, always with a calligraphy brush in her hand or reciting Chinese poems about frost and moonlight. I wasn't even bad at Mandarin, but she never let me live down my American accent and inferior pronunciation. I never got it; I mean, our parents worked so hard to bring us

to America, why can't we just embrace American traditions? I'm talking about grilled burgers in our mosquito infested backyard or extravagant Christmases with real firs and cookies for St. Nick. I don't want to drink the starchy boiled water of the dumpling broth or hear gymnasts dance to songs I can barely recognize the lyrics to. I didn't want to be Chinese.

I went on refusing to respond to my parents in Mandarin, and I only answered to Richard and no longer to Duo Duo. I even decided to boycott traditional Chinese food, but my hunger strike didn't last very long. The irresistible smell of my mom's *xier bing* lured me out of my room and my stubbornness to accept my culture, and how could I have ever resisted my dad's home cooked *xing hu shi ji dan mien* on cold winter nights? I was, no matter how much I wanted to convince myself, still 100% Chinese. Now, I'm glad my mom and dad's food coaxed the rebellion out of me. For one, baseball is unimaginably boring, and you get tired of eating beef every day. Now, whenever my

family folds dumplings together, I'm there with them, although mine are always the ugliest. With flour speckled pants and covered hands, I laugh at my dad's tales of his university experience or at my sister's most recent C-drama review. I've even learned how to create my own version of *xing hu shi ji dan mien*, although mine is too salty and a little crunchy from the egg shells. △



“Icy Roads”

Noah Lee

Photography

Flowering Mango

Lucianna Marquez

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

I learned how to cut a mango before I learned how to ride a bike.

It was late March 2012 in Detroit, and I was bouncing off the walls waiting for Dad to return from work. I spent all winter hoping that the spring sun thawing the blanketing Michigan snow would hypnotize him into finally teaching me how to bike. After all, it would be a shame if the hot pink Marvel with radiant handlebar streamers and the shiniest, sparkliest training wheels stood in the garage forever. The second I heard keys jingle near the front door, I excitedly scampered down the stairs to greet Dad. But there was something off. A sweet, tropical scent crept into my nostrils, and I slowed my pace down the stairs to take it in fully. When I reached downstairs, the smell seemed stronger and sweeter. Enticing, but I dismissed it, since Operation Sparkle Cycle was my main priority. Turning the corner into the kitchen, I saw Dad, finally home from work. I could hear the trumpets of triumph already. Today was the day. Soon, I'd be biking so fast I'd be a pink glittery blur to anyone on our street. The smell could wait—learning how to bike could not. “Dad!” I sprinted toward him with open arms, and a beaming smile.

“Hello, *Anak*. Did you learn anything new in school today?”

I pulled away to answer, but there it was again. The smell, sweet, pungent, and lingering. Still hugging Dad, I buried my face in his scrubs again. I took a deep inhale, and the sugary scent flooded my nose. My curiosity piqued; I wanted to investigate. Looking up at him in confusion, I noticed something in his hands. He held two lopsided round lumps with flat tops, the bottoms of them a dark murky orange as opposed to the bright, vibrant, glistening shade of orange on the top. Whatever Dad was holding was calling for me; I felt my mouth water as I inhaled the scent one more time, staring at these strange candies. Learning how to bike could wait;

whatever these were could not. I guess Dad noticed my curiosity because, before I knew it, he had scooped me up into his lap sitting at our dining table. He placed one of the lumps on a plate, and with his newly freed hand grabbed a knife.

“A mango, *Anak*. Back where Mom and I are from, we ate these fruits all the time.”

“Mang-o. Man-go. Man-o.”

While I struggled with the pronunciation of this new candy “man-go,” I watched as Dad sliced, diced, and scored away at the vibrant surface of the fruit. He set the knife down, held the mango with both hands, and pushed upward.

“A flower!” I exclaimed. Dad had cut the fruit so there were columns of square mango, and he pushed the bottom upward and into his mouth and ate it! I looked and looked to see if he had left any for me, and my excitement faded when I saw he had eaten all of the flower mango. I prepared to hop off of his lap and plead my case about learning how to bike, but then he handed me the mango he had left on the plate.

I cocked my head in confusion. Will he make the flower for me to eat? Why did he hand it to me? Then, he did something stranger. I felt him wrap my hand around the knife handle while simultaneously holding my hand firmly.

“Hold the mango steady, please,” he instructed.

He did the slicing, dicing, and scoring much slower with his hand over mine, and I felt like a true chef at work. He cut the mango smoothly and confidently, as if he could do it in his sleep. I tried my hardest to stay focused on slicing the mango, even though he was doing most of the work, but I heard my stomach growl in response to the sweet aroma and orange lusciousness. Once we finished cutting the flower mango, I pushed it open myself and took the largest possible bite. The mango tasted exactly as sweet, if not sweeter, than it

smelled, and flooded my taste buds with sugary fruity goodness. The juice ran down my chin and hands, coating them and making them feel syrupy, but I didn't really notice. Dad looked at me and gave me a thumbs up and I beamed at him in return. I forgot that I had wanted to learn how to bike that day.

As I grew up, I discovered that Dad's artful mango carvings were a merely a product of the genius he carried in his hands. I knew he was a surgeon, and his hands defined his life's work. His hands were powerful. Authoritative. His terracotta palms held a mountain range of hard-earned callouses, with the cigarette burn on his right hand serving as a medallion of battle. I watched his firm handshakes to colleagues and teachers and listened to his recounting of whichever operation he did that day. However, his war-torn hands scarred with experience were always gentle. In the spring, I'd peer out of our sliding glass back door to see Dad delicately picking pears from the pear tree in our backyard. He always picked each one slowly and meticulously, careful not to rustle any of the branches beside it. One day I decided to follow him outside and try a hand at pear picking myself.

As he hoisted me up toward the inviting pear tree branches, he said, "Be careful, *Anak*. The pears are delicate."

Of course, I didn't want to believe

him. I gripped a pear with both hands and pulled it off the branch with a giant, full force yank. In my peripheral vision, I saw the branches surrounding the pear I pulled bend and shake violently, dropping their own fruits to the ground with a multitude of light thuds onto the grass. With a tsk under his breath, Dad lowered me to the ground and picked up a fallen pear. He examined it before bending down to me and showing me a mushy looking indent on the pear.

"What happened to it?" I asked.

"You see, my child, the fruit may be crunchy and tough, but you still have to be gentle. You were harsh, and it broke the poor pear."

While Dad's tough looking hands placed the importance of gentleness and delicacy into one of mine, Mom's were the opposite.

Mom had beautiful hands that held mine through every step of my life. Every fall, she grasped my hand and escorted me to the front doors on the first day of school that year. In the winter, she'd spread some of her favorite blueberry hand cream into my hands

before sliding my warm gloves on. Come summertime, she used her hands to delicately put sunscreen on my brothers and me every day, never missing a spot. Her hands were flawless, always manicured and moisturized with not one scar, delicate



"Budding Life"

Simon Riggle

Photography

and sinewy unlike Dad's. However, she was never afraid to ball her beautiful hands into fists of conviction, or to slam them open-palmed on a table to demand something.

One day, when I was in second grade and my older brother was in fourth, I was home sick with a cold. I hadn't gone to school that day, but when it came time to pick my brother up, she quickly swooped me into the car unexpectedly. She had a furrow in her brow and gripped the steering wheel as if she'd die if she let go as we drove back to our elementary school. When we arrived, she clutched my hand as we walked in and before I knew it, she, my brother and I were sitting across our principal. My brother sat beside me with a runny nose and watery eyes, but I couldn't seem to make out why. I stared at him in confusion, with the sound of Mom's fists banging on the principal's desk in the background. Before I knew it, an hour had passed and the three of us walked out of the school with a quicker pace than we arrived. I could tell Mom was angry, but I didn't know why.

"My children," she began, "Listen right now. No matter what anyone tells you, you will never be in

trouble for standing up for yourself or each other. I will not let *anyone* punish my children for protecting each other. You won't be going to that school anymore."

I didn't know it then, but my brother had been a victim of bullying for the past few months. That day, he decided to stand up for himself by telling his harassers to go away, and their group of three fought him. My brother was punished for "instigating."

Mom transferred us to a different school and signed us, including herself, up for martial arts lessons shortly after. Although her hands were beautiful, she was never afraid to use them brashly to defend herself or us.

When we returned home, she quickly cut an assortment of cantaloupe, honeydew, apples, and flower cut mangoes for my brother and me. As expected, the mangoes disappeared immediately, and a smile appeared on my brother's face as he ate the last piece.

Moving forward in my life, I walk holding one of my parent's hands each. Dad's rough, unpolished one, holding kindness and compassion to my own, and Mom's soft, angelic one, firmly gripping mine with conviction and strength.

Mangoes are always sweetest when they cut them. △



"Bandit Girl"

Elijah Camba

Second Place Fine Art

Graphite Pencil, Ink Pen, Copic Marker

Melody of a Dying Road

Nora Courtney

Chicago never sleeps. Even at midnight, the streets bustle with activity, some ending their nights while others are just getting started. You can learn a lot from a person by studying how they maneuver throughout the city. It's easy to single out the young ones who just moved here in search of their big break. They're the ones with bright eyes, so different from the sullen, dead ones of those who have grown used to city life. The slow walkers, those are the tourists. They tend to stand out from the sea of black coats with their varying array of colored scarves and neon jackets. They also seem to always be holding hands. It's almost heartwarming to find people who can find romance in the city, choosing to ignore the overflowing garbage cans and puke on the sidewalks.

Being in the city my whole life, it's hard for me to find the attraction. It smells like garbage, looks like garbage, and makes you feel like garbage. There's no jobs and no housing. No way to *really* make a living. I was lucky enough to land the job I have. The people in my neighborhood would kill for the opportunity to earn minimum wage. I've been a custodian at Sears Tower for five years now. I grew up knowing I was never going to be able to afford college, so I started looking for practical jobs at the age of sixteen. I bounce around from here and there, picking up shifts at other places when needed. Yes, I live the glamorous life that many people would dream of. I mean, who wouldn't want to wake up at 4 a.m., ride the L for an hour and a half, work an eight-hour shift, catch an extra shift at the motel, ride the L for another hour and a half back, get in bed, and wake up to do it all again?

Here's the plus of being a janitor: you get to learn secrets. It's as if most people believe janitors are robots, there to clean up every mess and uh-oh you make, then immediately shutting off and retreating to a dark corner. Bathroom gossip is the best gossip, after all. I know about every affair, scandal, and swindle. God, the chaos I could wreak on my beloved city. I'm just picturing it now, watching Sears Tower and the Merchandise Market fall into a canyon deep below, with pieces of Tribune Tower sprinkled about. I would walk around the ruins, feeling relieved and free from the constant pressure on my back. No more one-dollar tips, overdue bills, and empty fridges. I would finally be free, free to finally feel alive.

But of course, that's all just a daydream. Instead, the monstrous buildings of Chicago will smother me, draining me of the life I've never once felt alive in. I'll continue to mop the floors, replace the toilet paper, and keep the soap dispensers full. I'll never matter to the great scheme of society. I'll stay on the outside, ready to taste the bitterness of stranger's hushed whispers and false rumors, barely managing to pay the bills.

Bills. It always comes down to the bills. They come in a continuous flow, always arriving when I never have enough money, which is all the time. So, I pick up night shifts. I mop and sweep and bleach the floors, all for pennies so I can keep hot water.

It's midnight, and once again I'm cleaning, this time to turn the lights back on to my duplex. The observatory floor is completely empty, with only the sound of my breath and the drip of the mop filling the stale air. It's almost peaceful. Suddenly, a loud crack fills my

ears. I startle, turning my head every way to determine the source of the noise. You see, they don't tell janitors what to do in this situation—if you're working alone and hear strange noises. They don't give you guns or a taser, it's just sayonara! Go clean! Get the job done or you're fired! I hear it again, growing louder. It's the glass. The crack is growing bigger and bigger, wider and wider, soon forming a chasm. My hands start to sweat, making the wood of my mop grow warm and wet.

“RUN,” I scream to myself. Do something, anything. Don't just stand here and take it, like you've done all your life. It's about four feet until safety, until that glass box meets the solid concrete of the 103rd floor. I can save myself. But here I stand, frozen in time. The cracking becomes more continuous, and I continue to stare at it.

As I stare into that growing pit, the sound of the growing crevice forming begins to change, to alter. It reminds me of a music note, of a sound produced by Chicago's great symphony. It's a tension note, in the key of B-flat, right before the climax of a piece. The flutes and clarinets' sound trickles into my ears as the trumpets and trombones materialize underneath, offering a continuous, bold sound.

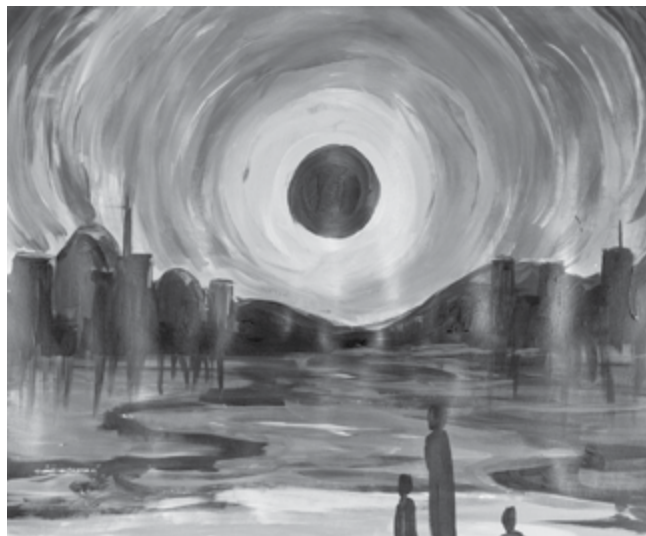
Suddenly, everything goes quiet. With the last

crack of the glass, I hear a flute soloist serenading me with her dainty, quick melody. I embrace it, running and leaping towards it with joy, the first joy I've felt since before my hands had ever touched a broom. The rest of the orchestra joins in, increasing the tempo. The instruments are whirling, showing me colors of vibrant reds and brilliant oranges, of glorious teals and magnificent purples, blurring around me, all different and yet the same. Their colors and melodies confuse the line between life and death, between good and evil.

I feel as if I'm on the journey of a lifetime, travelling throughout space and time. The violin joins in, adding to the chaos. From every direction, I'm surrounded by the melodic masterpiece of the tune. I feast on it, letting the tension and harmony float on my tongue. I devour the notes, letting them fill my stomach until it bursts, gorging on the mystique and finesse of the musicians.

The cymbals crescendo, reaching a loud, crashing controlled volume. With the crashing of the cymbals and the beat of a timpani, I see the conductor, wand in hand, dripping of sweat and focus. I see the musi-

cians as they look at their conductor, holding out the fermata, their breath dissipating into nothing. With a satisfying last boom of the bass drum, the tune comes to a close and the colors of Chicago fade away. △



“Ending”

Vivian Peng

Acrylic

The Smell of Kerosene

Lucianna Marquez

“You want me to do what?”

“You heard me. Tonight. His wife and daughter asleep. Kerosene around the perimeter of the house, you strike a match, you drop it on the trail. What about that isn’t going through your thick skull?” he spat.

He was serious. My heart rate pounded against my chest, and the blood drained from my face. *A family. I can’t. I don’t have it in me.* I looked at the water-streaked basement wall behind Boss, avoiding his eyes.

“Yes, sir.”

He glared at me. “Good. You know what happens if you fail. Maybe a scorched home and an even more burnt wife and daughter will teach him that when I want my money on time I get it.”

The fluorescent ceiling lights flickered with every step I took out of the mildewy basement, the cool air doing nothing to alleviate the anxious pressure on my chest. I left, a gallon of kerosene in one hand and a matchbox in the other.

I stood in middle of the street, staring at the single-storied shabby house ahead of me. Their porch lights were on, and a bike was in the grass in front. A wave of guilt washed over me. *I don’t have a choice.* I rubbed my tired eyes.

I opened them to hell.

Orange and red licks of flame swallowed the house, climbing as high as the heavens. I saw the family. The daughter, unconscious on the grass with burns covering her frail, small body. Her skin looked like melted wax. I recoiled in horror. Next to her, the mother, burning alive. The fire crawled up her clothes and charred

her skin. Her cries of horror scarred my ears. He was shrieking hysterically, trying to shake his daughter awake. His screams turned to sobs when he stopped and realized his daughter was gone. He cradled her limp frame and wept. My eyes widened in terror as they met his. He turned to me, anguished eyes boring into my soul, asking “How could you?” with just a single look.

But I rubbed my eyes again, and it was gone. The porch lights were still on. The bike was in the grass. Everything was calm, homey even. Nothing had changed. The house and the family inside were just, normal.

I can’t do this. I can’t do this to them.

But I had to. I had no choice. It was me or them. This is no different than anything else Boss had made me do. I didn’t even know them. I needed to save myself.

A guilty chill crawled up my spine and froze my entire body. This was different. I couldn’t do it. His wife and daughter shouldn’t have to pay with their lives.

The matchbox in my right hand seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. I stared at the house. It was my life or theirs. I had to choose.

Twenty minutes passed.

I took out a single match. The smell of kerosene lingered in the air.

My eyes blurred as I struck the match. I held it in my fingers, watching the flame crawl down the wooden stick. I dropped the match onto the kerosene trail.

I had no choice. △

Muddy

Ben Tabor

The early spring cold took gashes out from my skin as the four-wheeler roared down the dirt trail. My camo-green jacket did nothing but keep the mud from my arms when I went through puddles. My headlamp, getting hot from overuse, kept my forehead nearly sweating. The route from the camp house swerved through thick clusters of black gum trees before running over a trickling creek. Along the sides of the dirt path were deer scrapes, marks carved during the rut, into the dirt paths and trees. The A.T.V. tore down the trail, as much as one could tear through gaping puddles of mud and protruding roots. The bullets and single empty brass in my pocket clinked and clacked together. I kept my hands wrapped around my father's broad gut as we drove barreled back to the camp house. I made sure to hold him close to keep her off my back.

Occasionally, when we would hit a bump or come to a quick stop, she would knock into me, her hooves clattering against my upper thigh. I tried to focus on the half-frozen grass that hung to my boots and lower jeans. The wet blades almost shined in the darkness, but when I peered closer the light from my headlamp revealed her beige-brown hair clotted among the green. I shut my headlamp off, letting the blanket of cold and dark conceal the hair on my boots as the trail hit a sharp decline.

Despite the bungee cords that restrained her against the

metal mesh, she lurched for me as gravity and gasoline pulled us downward. With each shift, she fell forward a bit more, until I could feel her warmth against the small of my back.

Dad insisted that I learn how to clean a deer. I was too short to hang her from the iron hooks on the side of the camp house. Once Dad hefted her up, he pierced her legs in the thin slot between muscle and bone. As she dangled, I saw the bullet's exit hole: a bloodied spot, the size of a baseball in her front quarter. Her blood seeped out with the consistency of jam. A little clump of grass was still clenched in her mouth.

"Let me get the skin off, then you can help," Dad said, lifting his knife.

He ran it around and down each of her legs, opening skin and fur until the warm muscle steamed in the cold. Then, in one quick motion, he yanked the skin of

her body down, until only her head was covered. I could only focus on her blood, mostly gathered near her head and shoulders.

I felt the burning bile building in the back of my throat as he handed me the knife. As I got closer to her, she didn't look like an animal anymore. Her warmth was gone. Her muscles had lost their color, and red splattered on the green of my coat. I gripped her muddy corpse and dug in. △



"To What End"

Addie White

Gouache

Strawberry Crush Soda

Kelvin Pool

Love is a bandage on a bullet wound.
Strawberry juice leaks as the sticky fabric
tries to hold it in place—
pierced soft marshmallow organs that will
never be the same.

Don't move!
Stay still, and wait for the ivy to grow over you.
Lay there, and your lover will bring you
breakfast and comfort
until their pastels turn monochrome.

They bend down to squish your finger and
take the ring back.
The crisp autumn leaves crunch as they walk away.
When you lift up to beg them to come back,
the bandage falls off,
and the acidic red soda burns as it leaves your body.



**“I’m Lonely and I Haven’t
Played DND in Months”**

Ava Grace Noe

Acrylic

A Stir-fry of Tradition

Maryann Dang

Spice stings my eyes sometimes
When the fire is on high
And that peppery smoke hits my face.
But my mom tells me to watch,
Watch her stir-fry the peppers and garlic.
Watch so I can learn, so I can imitate.
Because am I even Vietnamese if I can't stir-fry?
Isn't it an embarrassment
When a Vietnamese girl
Can't hold a wok
For her Vietnamese husband
Who can't hold a mop?
I nod as she speaks.
Nodding towards the fire
As if I could see a thing she was doing.
But I couldn't.
Because spice stings my eyes sometimes.
And the fire was on high.
And all I could see
Was the blur of my own tears.

Windy Morning

Phoenix Wilson

Birds chirp then choke on their sound,
With this I know it is Monday morning.

I look out my window at a beautiful
brick wall as the morning smoke enters
uninvited. The early morning sun
cannot be seen till around midday.

The skyscrapers reflect what little they can into my room,
making sure I have just enough sunlight
to remain alive.

I grab my coat and hat that someone else bought.
Bought and then left during a funeral of a distant relative.

They don't mind that I wear it because
they don't know I wear it.

They say the fall leaves are filled with hopes and dreams,
so I walk onto as many as I can on my commute to work.

I take the scenic route through the park.
There are more trees here and thus more leaves.

As I crush that which is beneath me,
a gust of wind steals my stolen hat off my head.

I give chase since I paid nothing for this hat,
and I wish to pay no more for another.

The wind sends the piece up into the air
and gifts it to a family of birds.

It is lost and with no other options I turn
to get a head-start as I jump towards the closest branch
Barely reaching it, I pull myself up and into the tree.

As I close in on the family of five,
my sense of logic returns to me after being gone for several minutes.

My acrophobia fills my heart and mind.

I shout for help with all the strength of
a deflated balloon.

In no sooner than 4 hours do firemen arrive with a ladder
and a news crew.

As I am taken down and sent on my way,
I find a small butterfly has made my arm its landing spot.

I take my time to admire it in all its beauty
before my Lepidopterophobia kicks in.

I return home without needing to report my absence.

The news crew work in the same office.

I lie down on my sofa then feel the heft of an elephant.
Upon my chest arrives a black cat of considerable size.

My cat Snowball.

I recount my day to the feline before I lose consciousness,
Only for the morning ambiance to wake me once more.

I dress myself and set off for work.

Making sure to avoid leaves wherever they appear.



“An Ant’s World”

Simon Riggle

Photography

Flower like a Life

Maryann Dang

There were Carnations on the cradle,
Daisies on a baby blue bike,
Lilacs taped to first love letters,
And Daffodils on a graduation gown.

There were red Roses with a ring,
Peonies on ultrasound pictures,
Lotuses left on loan bills,
And Hydrangeas hung in happy homes.

There were Willows with last farewells,
Hyacinths grown with hollow hearts,
Funeral Lilies held in lifeless laps,
And Marigolds left on marble tomb markers.

But there was Grass growing from graves,
Grass living from life.

Memory Tablet S27

Richard Zheng

Please leave your name tag in the green colored bin on the right as you enter the simulation chamber.

Good morning, Residents! We—that is your captain and crew—hope everyone had a peace-filled and restful night aboard StarFlight570. As usual, we have traveled a total distance of 83 light-miles since curfew was established, and we have approximately 1,500 light-miles to go until our destination. Today’s breakfast will be a combination of bacon, bacon-fat, and greens served à la carte while a no-meat option is offered, which includes gruel, greens, and more gruel. Amenities open today include the pool on Deck 5, which is only accessible to Platinum-plus members, and the lounge on Deck 7, which requires a reservation to active star-windows. We hope that all Residents have a fantastic time aboard StarFlight570 today.

The climate on deck will be set to mildly snowy, which has been reconstructed from the memoirs found on Earth-1. The lighting around the ship will now be updated to reflect “winter,” a season that Earth-1 would have experienced around this time of year. The climate and lighting controls have been modeled with the support of data-collection teams funded by the New Euro-American Alliance. At this time, we would like all Residents to please stand for the New Euro-American Pledge.

*I pledge my flesh and working hands
to rebuild the nations
and to restore the glory
of former Euro-America.
Two nations,
one ideal,
under God
and for peace in our time.
Amen.*

Residents should continue to be cautious on Deck 4, and we would encourage all Residents to avoid Deck 4 unless it is an absolute emergency. Deck 4 has been

contaminated by an outside source, and we fear for our Residents’ safety in the worst-case scenario. Residents do not need to fear Deck 4 as long as they are not in close contact, and extermination efforts have already proven to be effective. Deck 4’s outside contaminant has been known to be highly transmissible and can easily get out of control without proper quarantine procedures. We would like to remind all Residents now of the proper quarantine procedures.

1. Notify any personnel on board with a bright orange name tag
2. Do not listen to any personnel on board with a bright green name tag
3. Lock yourself in your room, away from your loved ones
4. Do not pick at or touch the green scabs near your neck, forearms, or other sensitive areas
5. Report any Residents you have been in close contact with when feeling symptoms
6. Lock yourself in your room, and do not, under any circumstances open the door

Please report any Residents you see walking around aimlessly or with green scabs near their necks, forearms, or other sensitive areas.

As we approach our destination, we would like to remind all Residents of StarFlight570 to enroll in Platinum-plus membership. Platinum-plus membership will allow for immediate medical attention in case of emergencies, and Platinum-plus Residents will get first pick at voyage pods. Finally, to end our report, we have the daily updated census of Residential decks. Deck 1: zero remaining. Deck 2: zero remaining. Deck 3: zero remaining.

That concludes our morning report. Have a cheery day! △



“And Then There Was Light!”

Noah Lee

First Place Photography

Contributors' Notes

Rusleen Bhalla (Clinton) was inspired to pursue photography by her sister after watching her take photos everywhere they went. She uses photography to remember the amazing places she has been, and she hopes her work will inspire viewers to travel to beautiful places around the world. In the future, Rusleen plans to take more awesome pictures.

Makenzie Brannon (Meridian) lives by her motto, "Another day, another slay." She writes for fun, and she hopes readers will feel inspired by her pieces and gain the confidence to put their own writing out into the world. After graduation, Makenzie plans on going to college, traveling the world, and learning to swim.

Ozzie Caddell (Tupelo) first realized he enjoyed creating art when he drew and painted a butterfly in first grade. Now he hopes his art will show people that beauty is everywhere and does not need to be sought out. He lives by the motto "If you're not first, you're last," and is inspired by Ricky Bobby. After graduation, Ozzie plans to attend MSU for aerospace engineering.

Raegan Calvert (Wiggins) hopes her writing will make readers feel something. According to her, anybody can tell a story or imagine a great plot, but good authors are able to make readers understand the emotions that cause good stories to unfold. Raegan will major in environmental studies at Colby College after graduation, and she plans on pursuing a career in community building and environmental activism.

Elijah Camba (Starkville) creates art to vent his emotions and express his passions and interests. His first memory of creating art is filling out sketchbook pages with drawings of dinosaurs and transformers. His motto is, "The best gift you can give to yourself is experience" (Tyler the Creator). After graduation, Elijah plans to major in architecture.

Jayden Cochran (Indianola) hopes to capture his upbringing in the Mississippi Delta through writing and makes art to articulate and express his feelings creatively and comfortably. He lives by a quote from Kahlil Gibran, "Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self. Therefore, trust the physician and drink his remedy in silence and tranquility." Jayden plans to go to college in Mississippi, attend medical school, and become an anesthesiologist after graduation.

Nora Courtney (Wiggins) first began writing when she was five, originally writing songs which later led to writing poetry. She hopes her work will cause readers to feel connected to her while also being able to relate the writing to their own lives. After graduation, Nora will major in public policy at the University of Mississippi.

Maryann Dang (Winona) writes because she thinks writing is a way of encapsulating a piece of one's mind for others to see. She first began writing after keeping a vividly

detailed dream journal. She hopes her poetry will linger on people's minds long after they turn the page. Maryann plans on going to law school and specializing as an immigration attorney after graduation.

Chloe Dobbins (Leakesville) writes because she thinks she will actually implode if she does not get all the goofy ideas out of her head and onto a Word doc. She began writing upon learning how to read by creating Barbie knockoff picture books out of crudely-stapled copy paper she stole from her father's printer. Her role model is Ava Grace Noe. Chloe plans to study ancient history and English after graduation.

Ann Grace Donahue (Lake Cormorant) writes as a coping mechanism for things she cannot talk about. She first began writing after attempting to write a novel in the third grade, and she hopes her pieces will cause readers to stay optimistic and view life in more than one way. Her grandfather is an influential icon in her life. Ann Grace plans to attend Winthrop University and earn a degree in athletic training.

Nathané B. George (Baldwyn) hopes their writing will encourage people to cherish their loved ones more and become more comfortable sharing their own life experiences. They write to tell their story. Nathané plans on double majoring in biophysics and Spanish at the University of Southern California after graduation.

Maple Griffin (Columbus) writes to highlight the natural world and to express her feelings and emotions. She hopes her work will comfort readers and inspire them to have more appreciation for the natural world. In the future, Maple plans on traveling and seeing as much of the world as she can.

Vivian Jordan (Olive Branch) hopes readers will find a little piece of themselves in their poetry and see that there is beauty in everything. They write to get things off their chest, whether it be stress or love. They live by the motto, "Remember to read your own story as you write it." After graduation, Vivian plans on majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing.

Ivie Kirkland (Pearl) creates art because she finds it soothing and she enjoys seeing beautiful things. She first remembers taking a liking to drawing when she was in third grade and she and her friends decided drawing cartoon characters was more interesting than long division. She hopes her piece will cause readers to feel a sense of satisfaction from its beauty. Ivie plans on becoming a cosmetic surgeon after graduation.

Noah Curtis Lee (Southaven) was inspired to create art by his father, who was a photography hobbyist in high school. He began pursuing photography after taking the Photography I class at MSMS. He wants viewers of his work to understand the frustrations and emotions he has by feeling them, not by his talking about them. After

graduation, Noah plans on majoring in premed (as well as owning a domesticated raccoon named Rocky, whom he will bring everywhere in a little baby stroller).

La'Destiny Lemock (Greenwood) uses photography as a medium to capture and embody the beauty that surrounds her. She hopes her pieces will inspire viewers to take a moment to look around and reflect on nature. After graduation, La'Destiny plans on pursuing photography as a career.

Lucianna Marquez (Hernando) began writing when she was a child so that her father could read them back to her. She now writes to channel her ideas and opinions in a way that can speak to and resonate with others. She lives by her mother's motto, "You can never be overdressed or over-educated." After graduation, Lucianna plans on following the pre-law track in college and becoming an immigration lawyer.

Ava Grace Noe (Paris) creates art to encourage people to look at the South with more than just a glance. She hopes her pieces will cause each reader to feel as though their brain and nervous system has been ripped out of their back, dipped in ice water, then reinserted. Ava lives by her mother's motto, "Just think [chicken emoji] and you don't got to worry 'bout nothing else." Ava plans on majoring in computer science after graduation.

Vivian Peng (Starkville) creates art to relax and put her thoughts to paper. She wants to continue drawing and painting in the future, in hopes of reaching a self-satisfying level of creativity. Her artistic motto is, "The object of art is not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity" (Alberto Giacometti). She hopes her art will ignite curiosity and wonder and stimulate imagination.

Kelvin Pool (Belzoni) writes to express himself, and he hopes to write something someone can stare at and reread over and over again. He wants each of his pieces to contain a message readers will enjoy having described to them through his words and stories. After graduation, Kelvin wants to major in economics and find somewhere to live that he never wants to leave.

Simon Riggle (Pontotoc) began making art when he was a child, scrawling doodles of his stuffed animals in journals he got over the course of many birthdays and Christmases. He hopes his personal pieces will make people think more about being empathetic to those who are LGBT/Transgender. His role model is Vincent Van Gogh. After graduation, Simon plans on becoming an ornithologist.

Brianna Riordan (Meridian) writes because she finds it relaxing. Her first memory of making art is drawing a hand turkey in kindergarten. She hopes her pieces will make readers giggle, and she plans on becoming a crazy cat lady after graduation.

Kyla Roberts (Horn Lake) writes to think about life from a back view. Her motto is, "It is what it is." She hopes her writing will affect readers enough to remember the pieces. After graduation, Kyla plans on making it through college.

Mandy Sun (Starkville) hopes her art makes viewers happy in the same way she was creating it. Her first memories of creating art are with her father during painting lessons at her hometown's Chinese school. Amy Zhang is an influential icon in her life. Mandy plans on majoring in computer science while also taking art commissions after graduation.

Ben Tabor (d'Iberville) first began writing when he wrote monologues and scenes while teaching an acting class in middle school. He writes to express his thoughts and emotions, and he hopes his pieces will cause readers to have a new appreciation for the South and Southern merits. Ben plans on pursuing a career in pathology after graduation.

Addie White (Olive Branch) feels as though painting is something she was called to do; she hopes she can touch lives with her pieces and spread joy and community from her hands to others. She wants viewers to feel calmed by her art. Addie plans on majoring in criminology and going into law after graduation.

Sophia Williams (Meridian) found the spark for her artistic expression when she painted the front steps of her childhood home with her footsteps and was grounded for three weeks. In her current artistic pursuits, she finds fascination with nature and the everyday, and hopes that her writing will inspire readers to check their greediness.

Phoenix Wilson (Choctaw) wrote his first fiction story about aliens because of his fascination with the stars. Now, he writes to de-stress and to express everything his imagination conjures. He hopes his writing will be refreshing and relaxing for readers. After graduation, Phoenix plans on going to college and continuing to write.

Iris Xue (Southaven) first began painting and writing in the Delta Arts Alliance building in Downtown Cleveland, where she would spend her childhood afternoons creating silly works of art typically infused with glitter. She makes art as a creative outlet to share her view of the world with others, and she hopes her pieces will offer viewers/readers a chance to slow down and appreciate the moment in time that they occupy.

Richard Zheng (Madison) writes because he took the creative writing class. His father and Vincent van Gogh are influential icons in his life, and he hopes his work will spread some love of art and art history. After graduation, Richard plans on living.

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