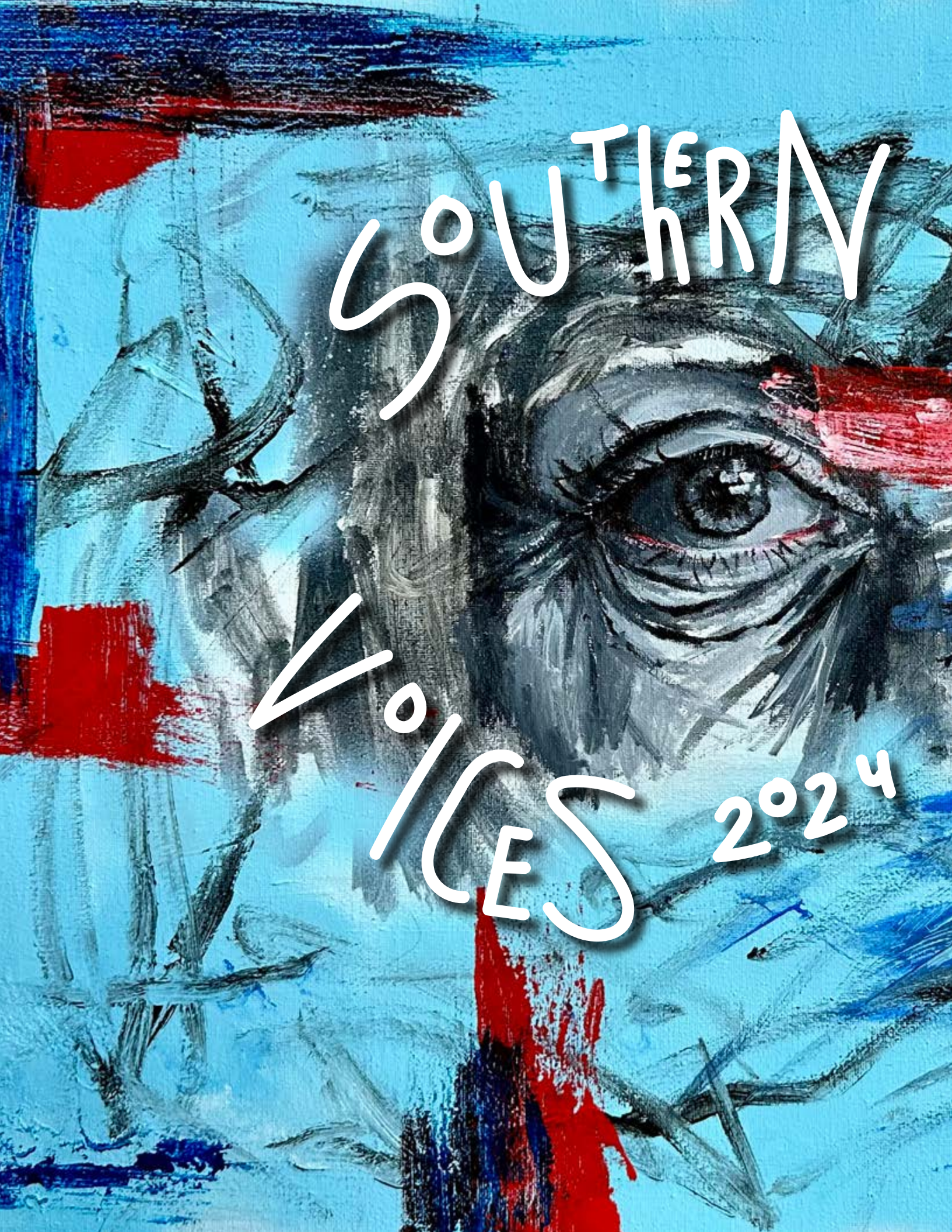
SOUTHERN
VOICES
2024

SOUTHERN VOICES

Vol. XXXVI

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Poetry Judge

Joshua Nguyen is the author of *Come Clean* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2021), winner of the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry, the Writers' League of Texas Discovery Award, and the Mississippi Institute of Arts & Letters Poetry Award. He is also the author of the chapbooks *American Lục Bát for My Mother* (Bull City Press, 2021) and *Hidden Labor & The Naked Body* (Sundress Publications, 2023). He is a Vietnamese American writer, a collegiate national poetry slam champion (CUPSI), and a native Houstonian. He has received fellowships from Kundiman, Tin House, Sundress Academy For The Arts, and the Vermont Studio Center. He is a humor editor for *The Offing Mag*, the Kundiman South co-chair, a bubble tea connoisseur, and loves a good pun. He received his MFA/PhD from The University of Mississippi. He currently teaches at Tufts University.

Nonfiction Judge

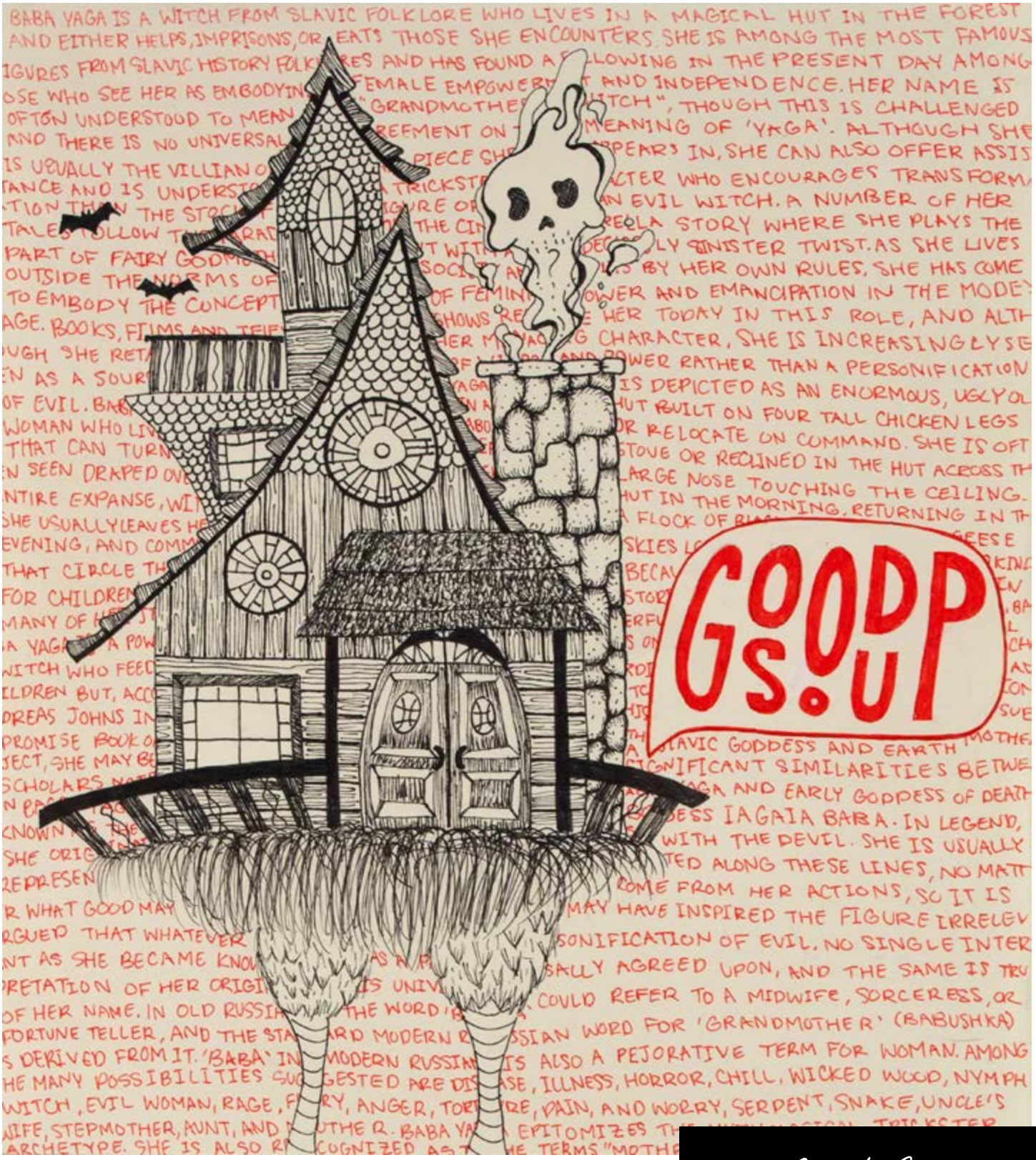
Ellen Ann Fentress is a Mississippi Delta native with essays in The New York Times, Atlantic, Washington Post, The Baffler, Oxford American, and Bitter Southerner. She previously worked as a newspaper reporter and columnist. Her memoir *The Steps We Take: A Memoir of Southern Reckoning* was named one of Garden & Gun Magazine's best books of 2023 and called "a forthright reflection on the effects of segregation" by Kirkus Reviews. Four years ago, she launched *The Admissions Project,* an online forum about the impact of the South's circa 1970 segregation academies. The project has been featured in the *Washington Post, Slate, Mother Jones,* and *Forbes*. Since 2018, she has taught in the Mississippi University for Women's MFA program. She also teaches community workshops in Jackson, Mississippi, where she lives. She is a 2008 Bennington College MFA. Her documentary *Eyes on Mississippi* on iconic civil-rights journalist Bill Minor has screened at universities and other venues nationwide.

Fiction Judge

Katrina Byrd, writer and playwright living in Jackson, MS, received her MFA in Creative Writing from Mississippi University for Women. An emerging writer published in several magazines, Byrd and Dora, her partner of 23 years, created the Boa Flouncer alter ego in 2010. The Boa Flouncer is a social media influencer who encourages followers to be themselves. "If who I am offends you, then, honey, prepare yo'self!" With attitude, flair, and feather boas, she delivers messages of hope. "Honey, keep struttin' yo' strut. Don't give up." Diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) - 100% fatal - November 18, 2019, Dora died on February 2, 2020, 76 days after diagnosis. A few weeks after Dora's death, Byrd's advocacy work began. For the past four years, Byrd has become fluent in telling hard and uncomfortable stories.

Art Judge

Church Goin Mule is an outsider artist that keeps her studio in the Mississippi Delta. She makes hopeful work for a hurting world.



Good Soup

Ella Walker

Fine Art, Third Place

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The Dance of Mother and Child

Sydney Beane

First Place, Short Story | The Chris Read Award for Fiction

It was 5:00 p.m., a supposed golden hour, but it was daylight savings time, so the gold was fading to bronze which would then fade into pitch-black darkness. As the car crunched on the rubble under its tires, the GPS took me on winding dirt roads I had never been on. Alani was in the back seat whining as always. After finally getting over a visceral hate for motherhood, I found that spending time outside of the house with Alani helped me mend our relationship bit by bit. I must have been mending a one-sided feud because my daughter trusted and depended on me for everything. Three-year-olds can't really hate anyone, but an eighteen-year-old mother who got her entire life derailed by a homecoming hookup can. I hated Alani—not the child, but the idea of her. She crawled out of me grabbing everything I lived for and stuffing it inside of me as her replacement. I never lost my "baby weight." I would feed Alani and house Alani, and never allowed anyone else to hold her, but all the while I wanted to throw her to the ground and forget about it. The guilt from the first couple of years of her life swallowed me whole. It felt like pulling the last foot out of tough, gooey, quicksand. I just kept driving down the unpaved road. I must make this right.

It was November, Native American Heritage Month. I had never kept up with holidays, but I kept up with every event happening around town. I went to almost every function with Alani on my hip, looking into her eyes, asking for forgiveness. While at my job at the local car dealership, I saw a poster for a Native dance showcase on the local reservation. The bright colors and prints on the flyer immediately drew me in: "5:15 p.m. this Wednesday, family friendly." That was all I needed to know. Alani and I were going.

I slowly stepped out of the car because it wobbled back and forth when I moved any faster. I wouldn't want to give Alani shaken baby syndrome. I trudged to the back door to grab Alani, the gravel now pulverized, mixed with water, and combined to make mud. As I walked forward with her on my hip, like always, I saw flashes of color sweep by my feet.

"*Halito*, welcome, the showcase is about to begin. Follow me."

I followed her, entranced by the beautiful aura this stranger possessed. I looked at her outfit, and it looked just like that of the women on the flyer. She wore a bright pink dress, something my mind would not have thought of when envisioning Native dance outfits. They were modern, not like the outfits frozen in textbooks. To be honest, I thought events like these ended at the inception of America. This was a surprise, shaking all my other prior knowledge of Native cultures.

Journey Beyond

Munjyot Singh

Photography

This beautiful stranger led me to my seat. I sat down and looked left and right, just as I would when checking if I could cross the road. A white guy was sitting next to me, potbellied with a young-looking haircut. On the other side of me there was another man of Native descent but dressed in clothes like mine. He must have seen the bewilderment on my face.

"I don't really dance; I prefer to watch. What a cute little baby you have. What's her name?"

"Alani." If I were going to say anything else, it was cut off by the sound of what I would later learn is throat singing. As the singing trailed on, I began to drift into what I thought was a new astral plane. The grip I had on Alani loosened, though my arms still safely held her afloat.

I felt as if I was at peace, watching people interact with each other with no malice at all. Of course, I spotted human emotions like competition to be the best dancer, annoyance at someone who made a misstep, and attraction shooting from the eyes of two women to each other. But something about the way that their feet rhythmically patted against the ground and the swoosh their garments made in the breeze sent me flying higher than I had ever been before.

I was slightly lifted out of my amazement when a hand reached for mine inviting me into the circle of dancers. I kept my loose hands around Alani and followed the man into the circle of dancers.

"Just mimic the line leader, follow the beat, and hold her hand," he whispered, pointing to the lady in front of me.

I joined in, swaying to the throat song and matching the beat of the people in front of me. I looked into Alani's face. She was trying to sing along and pushing her head back and forth. She wiggled her feet as if she were stepping along with me. I noticed how loose my grip was around her. I was holding her upright, but my grip wasn't harboring years full of resentment. I looked into her eyes and her face was the same as always, dependent. Her smile was dependent on mine and so were her tears of sadness. I looked at her dependent face and realized she was smiling along with me. I always put on a smile in front of her no matter the anger that was hidden behind it. I looked into her eyes with great awareness—they were the same color as mine. I began to cry happy tears. Alani only smiled as she had not yet figured out the concept of happiness garnering tears. We looked at each other smiling, holding each other with loose stable grips, and moving our feet to the beat of the music.

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 favoite) 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

At a Berry Farm East of Eden

Noah Curtis Lee

stick thick to the pads of my fingers, boy:

we're real low now, picking smudges of blue
under empty—maybe—skies when his farm kids
scatter upon their chores like a shrapnelled nest
of spiders crushed early from mama's womb

watch, that fat pig, fed leftover strawberry shortcake and
gristle from a sheepskin meatloaf—why, hunney, i really think
he might've scraped this mess down some gaping hellish hatch…
(but—maybe—great feasts make a happy slaughter for us all)

now, something easier: lazy chicken, EIEIOd & sick…slobbed in
her iron coop…some muttered, depressed clucks floatin…off!
poor, poor egg dropped—maybe—by cain, oh! watch!
the feeble fetal force seeping down into somewhere's soil

stop that wailing; all sweets spoil; those ugly blueberries rot; let
'em; pretty buds get picked by pretty hands, son, and don't you
know them deformed ones—maybe—taste like cocktails in heaven's
wine-soaked pits—and, Father-watched, don't sour with restless wandering…

look, look, look: some brother-stained nomad settles above God, he
thinks. he thinks, maybe *i am*, he thinks, in his one-strap denim
overalls, he thinks: thinking he feels adam's full-ribbed delight standing over
eden, he thinks "maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe" he thinks

You Should See The Other Guy

Ava Grace Noe

Honorable Mention, Photography

Firefly Season

Ava Wilson

"Goodness! The fireflies!
They look like a city.
They look like little windows
each lit up by candles.
God.
This is nice."

I'm going to digest the art on the curated brick walls.
I'm going to bear meaningful, hearty tattoos.
I'm going to stomp the cracks in the sidewalk
down to their even squares.

"See the way they
light up!
Cities won't get together
and blink like that,
they don't sing like
that."

I'm going to witness the music in the traffic.
I'm going to belt for my seat on that spaceship.
I'm going to record my six-string heartbeat
from sticky nightly walks home.

"Cities corrupt your mind.
The bright lights
aren't the same there
as they are here.
Ours know when to come
and when to go."

I'm going to light candles that smell of magnolias.
I'm going to form a brand-new brain,
shaped by some broken hearts.
I'm going.
I'm going
to drive away
from this last
firefly season.

"But you'll come back."

Helltrips

Annadele Beckman

Perfectly pristine patches
of green grass separate roads.
The land maintained only for
old men's pleasure.

Flowers could grow
if they let go.
Anyone could pick them
for fun, for love, for happiness,
for friends, for teachers, for strangers.

Instead, they stay,
so dandelions are called weeds,
so bees are called pests,
so faeries are called fake,
and kids are called wild.

Now people avoid
the plot of land,
looking up and wishing on the
stars not seeing the
wonders beneath them.

Man in the Moon

Maple Griffin
Photography

Drowning

Savannah Massey

The air is thick with the chemically strong smell of hairspray acting as complement to burning hair. It is the dense and familiar smell of a high school classroom adapted to show choir homeroom. Trademark quotes float around the room, tangling with the chemicals: "If scientists aren't naming a hole in the ozone layer after you, it's not enough hairspray." "Does anyone have bobby pins?" "Can I use your lipstick?"

drip, drip, drip

My director calls out five more minutes as I am clasping the band of my character shoes. My hands are covered with band-aids to hide tiny tattoos. The pale-yellow color of my skin clashes with the "tan" tights we must wear. I stand up and look at myself again in the cloudy mirror of a friend's makeup pallet. I don't look like me, but I look like I should. I have make-up powdered onto my face, my eyelashes are thick with dark mascara, and my body is shrouded in the '60s style dress. It's not what I would typically wear, not any of this. Right now, my dress is too loose, my hair is too crunchy, and I can't even see my freckles. I look like someone else, but I like this someone else. Whoever she is, she has the confidence to perform on that stage in front of 500 people and enjoy it. She is product of "faking it until you make it."

drip, drip, drip

The sand has run out and the five minutes are up. Girls clamber into the hallway. The guys are already there with bored looks across their faces. I find my walking partner and link arms with him. I stand to his right and my arm crosses over his as we are taught. I am only able to poke fun about being taller than him in my heels for a second before I'm shushed by my director. We start walking and heels clash against the concrete sidewalk leading us to this week's auditorium.

drip, drip, drip

I can hear my heart beating in my ears and feel blood pumping all through my stomach. Everything we say is a whisper as we wait to enter the performance stage. Then, the tall black doors are opened. We slide through the darkness onto the risers, trying to muffle our footfall as we walk to a predetermined position. I stand running my fingers along the hem of my dress and look to see other girls doing the same. We are all doing something to distract ourselves from the ping of stage fright in our chest. The thick velvet curtains are swallowing the hushed noise of the stage: the slight clacking of girls shifting their weight in pointed shoes and whispers of good luck.

The stage is so dark I can barely make out my friends' faces around me. I know in a few minutes that will have a drastic change. The lights will shine white and leave us blinded. I am wondering if it will happen again, like it has every other time. It has been a problem for me, or more so the her that is on stage. It is me peeking through her, like there are holes in her performance façade. The stage-set silence is broken by the announcer. Everyone on this stage knows who he is. He is the well-dressed man who had introduced every group before us and those against us, and he will announce those after us. Words blur together until I hear the catalyst of stage presence. Those words ricochet across the stage, echoing out against the cheers of a full auditorium as I plaster on my stage-worthy smile and roll my shoulders back. That ping in my chest is back. "Welcome to the stage, Innergy!"

the water is up to my ankles

The curtains roll back, and the swish of the velvet is almost welcoming as they give way to stage lights. They open, leaving everyone blanketed in a thick wash of white. The drummer taps off a roll call before the piano joins in to play the opener. The music is beckoning us to showcase the dance and the songs we spent months learning. The sharp movements slowly piece together a performance. My breath starts to catch the same way it did before, but the anxiety is interrupted by the airy swoosh of dresses and suit jackets.

the water is up to my knees

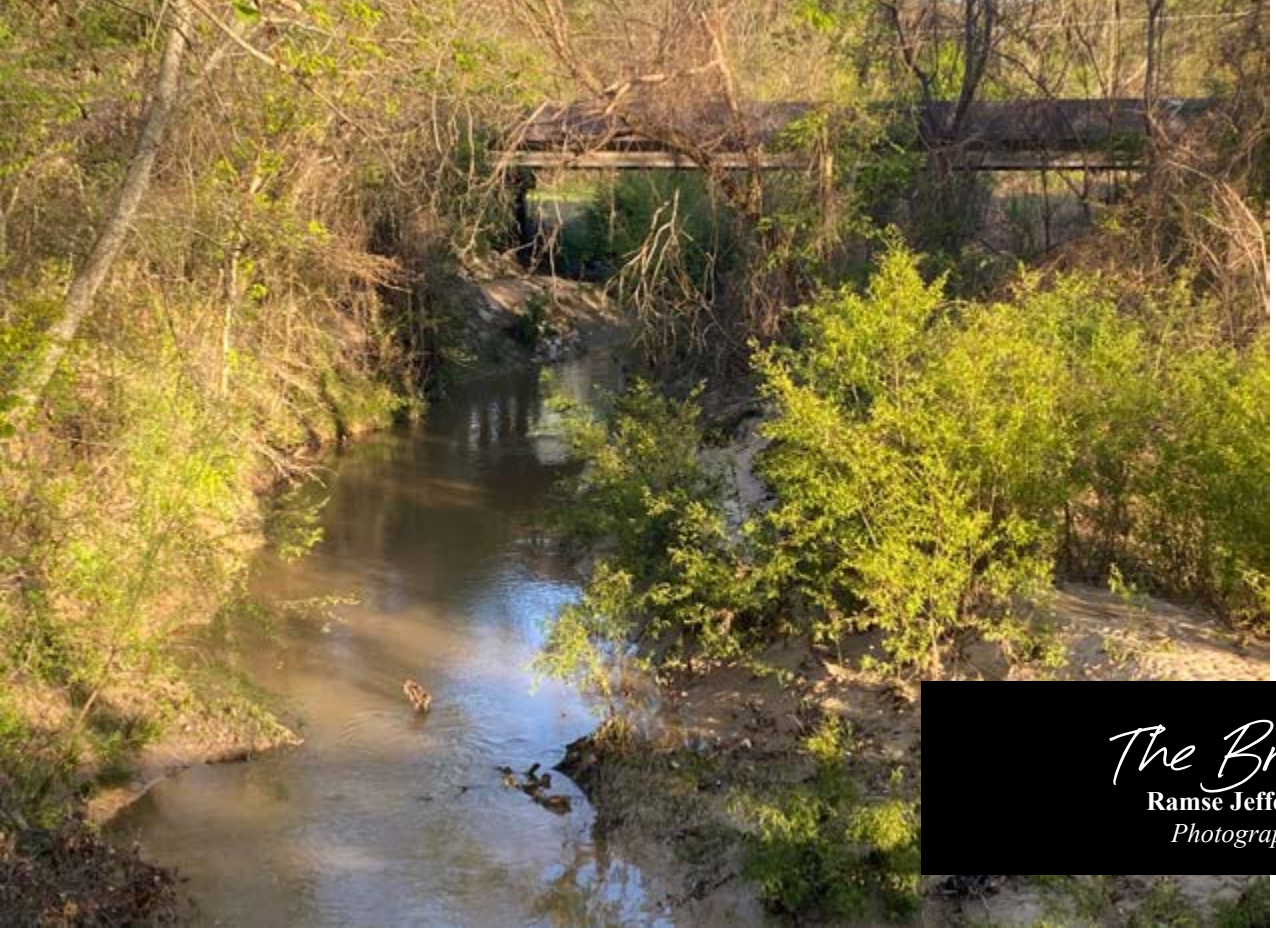
Then it begins just like it had every time before now. My chest tightens and my heart races faster. Loose breathing becomes a shallow pant. It is an obstacle as it always has been, so I see it best not to treat it like one. There is no reason to throw away attention to a constant if no one else can even notice it. From the stage, I can't let anyone notice it. If the audience can't see it, I can't feel it.

the water is up to my thighs

Happy Duck

Vivian Peng

Third Place, Photography



The Bridge
Ramse Jefferson
Photography

And yet it remains as the first song changes to the second. The tone changes from peppy and upbeat to being in love. I am stacking lenses over myself to hide my stress like the colorful counter chips from kindergarten and from that I am left looking at murky light. My face tenses in ways I didn't know it could as I throw around my body in a resigned union with everyone else. The stage—a cavity in the wall of a fancy room—acts only to amplify what seems to tear me apart. The light beats down on me like the sun. But this is worse because the sun isn't white light illuminating you for people watching. The noise of rhythmic drums, the melodic piano and roaring onlookers seep into everyone. But to them, it seems to be encouraging. To them it seems to be the constant reminder of being on a stage. That is why it bothers me.

the water is up to my hips

It takes all of me to peel myself away from a racing mind. I need to actually focus on performing. "Don't give attention to a constant" becomes my mantra as I fight to hold up my stage-worthy smile. It takes all my energy and then some to keep going but in the long run, it's worth it. I do love being on stage even if the stage itself is ripping me apart.

the water is up to my waist

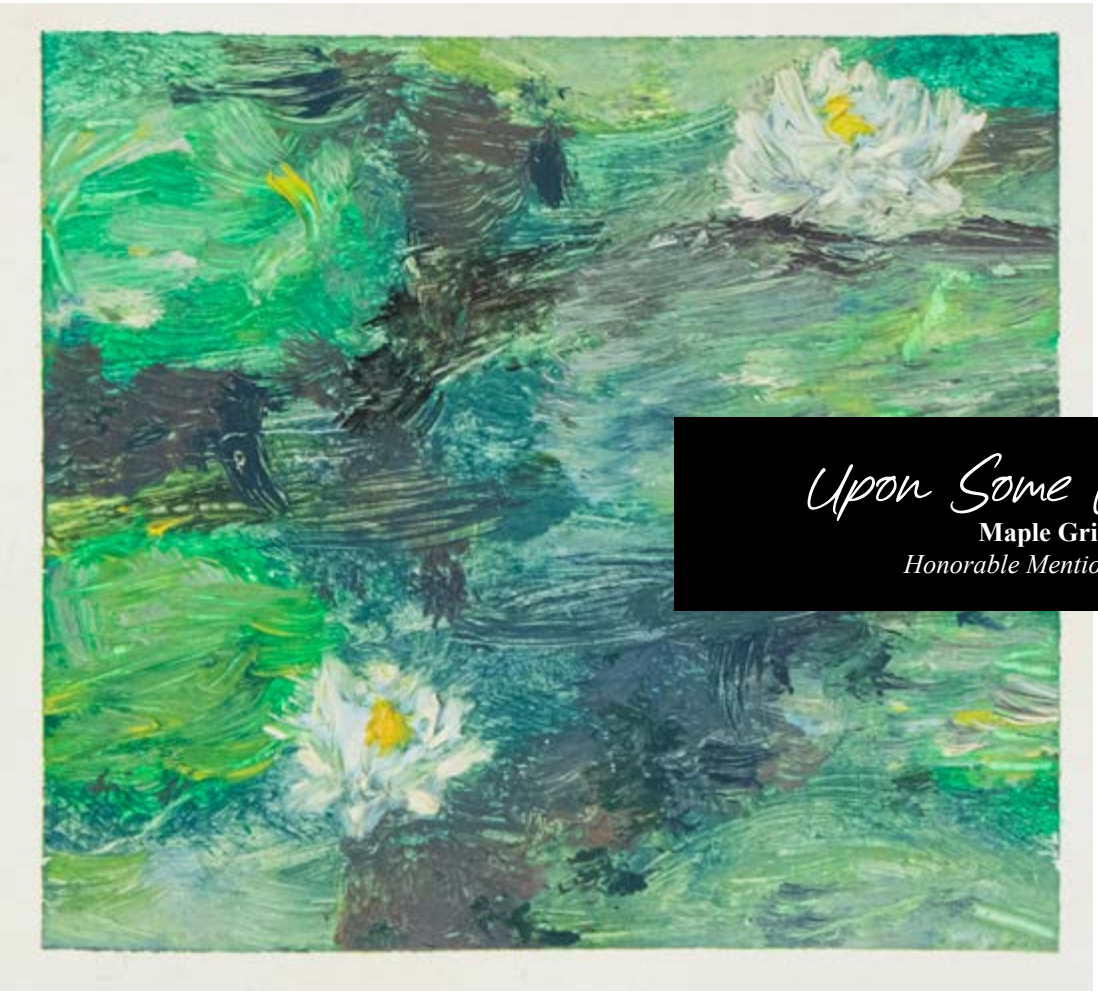
Just a bit longer, but of course a bit longer is never just a bit longer. The music pauses the tempo, waiting for us to hold our position before gliding to the next. I am on the third song, and it is slow and somber. As the ballad begins, a wave of relief washes over me. I have time to rest my legs and catch my breath, snatching air as inconspicuously as possible. For now, at least, I just must stand and act enough to make the song seem real.

the water is up to my chest

That song ends as fast as it began and the next cues on. At this point, time is both racing and dragging on. It is both tugging at my skin, trying to pull me from the stage and smearing and slurring around my thoughts. I am on autopilot now, my movements all a blur of muscle memory. Then the song is over, and I am running off stage, still bearing that stage-worthy smile. I can feel the ping of stage-light distraction—they are slowly fading from my direct view but still there. It's as if they are tethered to me, seeping into the black backstage.

I have no time to think because I have another task at hand, to change out of my '60s dress and into one fitted with hot pink sequins and purple tulle. Someone comes to unzip my dress, and it falls to the floor. I look down to see the pile of fabric at my feet. It is limp and lifeless, such a change from what it was minutes ago, dancing under bright lights. And for a second, I am bare there. I am exposed in the right wing of the deep black backstage. There are lights and noise, cheering and clapping, and I am just here, shrouded in darkness.

the water is up to my shoulders



Upon Some Lily Pads

Maple Griffin

Honorable Mention, Fine Art

I step out of the shell of that dead ’60s dress and climb into the sparkly pink one. Someone zips up my dress, and I still don’t know who. My mind is showing my surroundings through blurry snapshots. I was standing back with someone random but now I’m at the stage front, ready to perform again.

Anxiety courses through my veins, twisting and mixing in with blood and adrenaline. I have been overtaken by the pure rush of show. There is another smudge of defined dance moves and singing, another snapshot, and then I am done with that song. I only have one more song, one more chance to give it my all. I put as much energy and power behind each move as I can. The world and the lights and the people around me don’t feel real as I dart between my friends to get to my final position.

Somehow, I have gotten to the end of my show. I am still standing; I am still breathing. Somehow, I am still here. So, I will put passion behind every move and note because this is the last people will see, and this is what they will be left with. Then it is done, and the music stops. I stop with my arms raised high. They are screaming to be let down. My lungs are burning, grasping for what air they can and trying to save themselves from collapse. My eyes are still scorching from the lights, begging for a break. And I can feel myself start to slip away.

the water is up to my neck

I return to my resigned motion, bowing with my group. We walk off stage, still holding up those stage-worthy smiles. But as soon as we are out of the audience sight, I practically run away. I can’t take my eyes off my “tan” tights and character shoes. And even though I can’t take my eyes off the ground, I can feel the stares. I stick out like a sore thumb because I am the only one hyperventilating and shaking; I am the only one fighting back tears.

the water is up to my nose

The lights and the rush and the noise and the cheers all compact into solid weights. And then it is as if the bridge can hold no longer. It collapses; I collapse. I am now stranded by my own mind.

the water is over my head

I am drowning ≋

Girls Who Want to Drive Pickup Trucks

Ava Grace Noe
Honorable Mention, Poetry

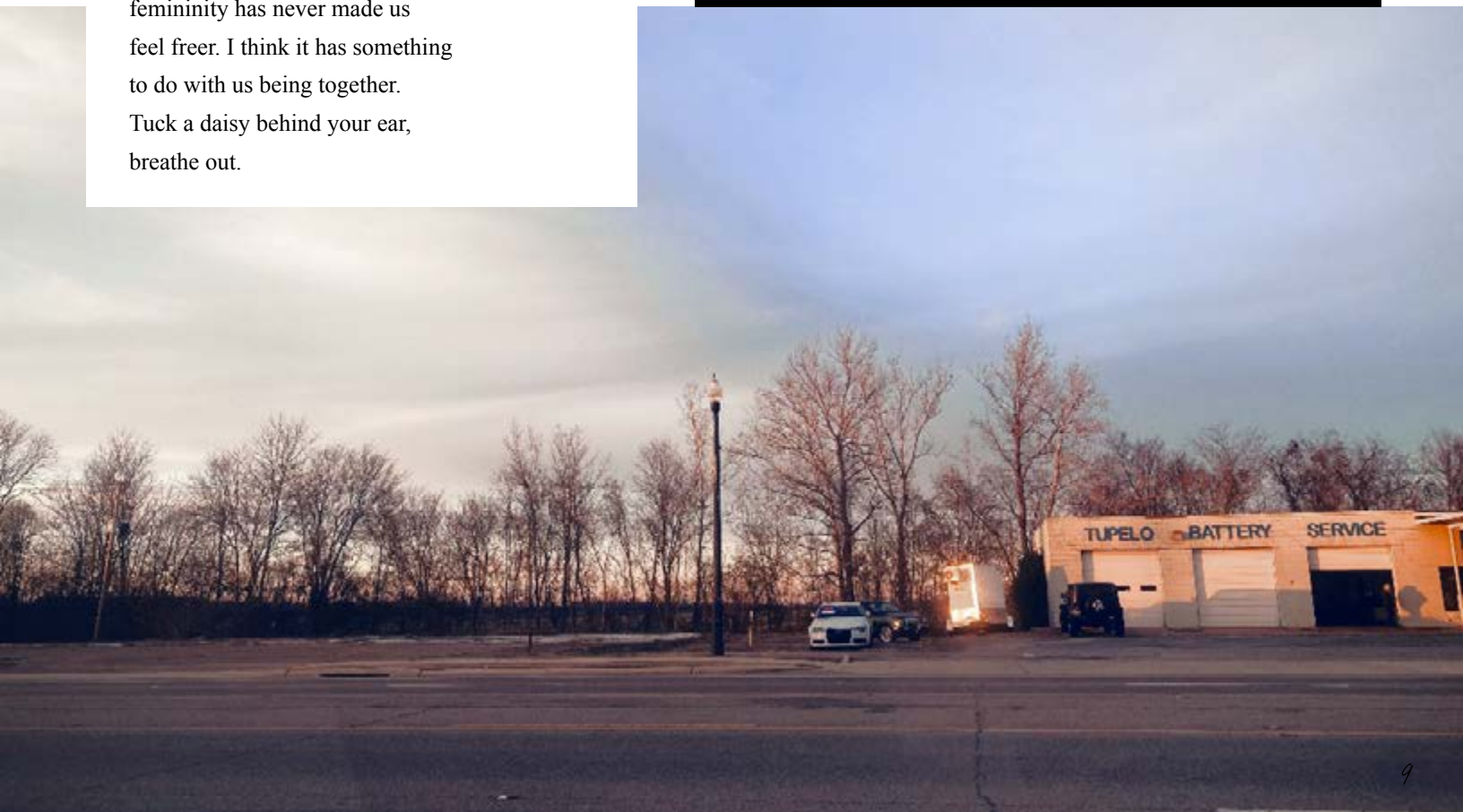
Was there anyone ever
as young as we are now?
And as we dance around
in the field behind your house,
our hair braided back with the
flowers from your mother's garden,
we sing with the bliss of Beltane
and the girls long before us.
We say smoke follows
beauty, and as your lungs begin to fill
I hold your hand as you cough it out.
Beauty burns bright here,
and it burns deep.
And we've thrown our
Converse to the side.
It's easier to dance with our toes
tilling the earth beneath.
Dressed in silks, our faces
painted in shades of blush,
femininity has never made us
feel freer. I think it has something
to do with us being together.
Tuck a daisy behind your ear,
breathe out.

Graphite Shoe

Ava Wilson
Fine Art

This Could Be Anywhere

Lila Jacks
First Place, Photography



Camp Somewhere: The Last Years

Ava Grace Noe

Third Place, Short Story

I am trying to convince myself that eventually I would get tired of this, the moon melting into the lake as it hits the horizon line. Where the two meet they are indistinguishable, reflections of each other in a past life. But slowly as the craters and divots make their way toward me it's as if someone has taken a paintbrush and blurred the lines in between.

"I think I am going to be a dancer." Cierra doesn't look at me when she says it. Partly because she knows that we've had this conversation before, not out loud, but I know it as well as she does. And partly because it's the first time she's said it and it wasn't a question. Usually, this is what she wants. But tonight, it is what she is going to do.

"And if you didn't become a dancer, I'd say that ten years of dance classes were a big waste, and your parents deserve a reimbursement." We'd come out tonight, out by the water, because it's what we always do on our first night back at the lake. Our parents have been sending us here, to Lake Somewhere, since we were nine and old enough to sleep in a bed without waking up in the middle of the night not searching for the familiarity of home. And since we've shared a bunk because of reasons out of our control (the alphabet), we had no choice but to become best friends.

There's a mosquito on her arm. I should probably do something about it. But it's not bothering her, so it's not bothering me. I let it stay and don't say a word about it. By the end of the summer, we won't remember what it feels like to not be covered in bug bites.

"So, what are your big plans?" She turns to face me baring a toothy grin right at me.

"Well, I was really thinking canoes tomorrow and then maybe swimming? Who am I kidding? Obviously, we will go swimming and then—"

Tennessee Sunrise

Grace Ann Courtney
Fine Art

"You know what I'm talking about." She's not amused by my long list of things that had to happen this summer. We are sixteen. It is the last summer we're allowed to come back, our last summer to be together. Who knows how many canoe trips last outside of sixteen, probably next to none. "What are you going to be doing while I'm dancing?"

"I have two left feet, so that is out of my cards."

"Obvious. Next option."

"You know there's always clown college." If she had something to throw at me, she would in this moment.

"Clown college doesn't count, either! Come on, you have to have some kind of idea about what you want to do. It doesn't even have to be realistic, and that does not mean say clown college again. You must have put some kind of thought into what's after high school."

I've thought about it plenty. I just don't know how to admit that I really don't have any sort of direction. I'd probably go to college and then get some kind of job vaguely to do with my major (which I haven't given a second thought about other than that I needed one). Or maybe I could help at the restaurant that my family runs on Main Street back home. There is a future for me out there; I'm just not sure what it is yet. But that's okay, I have plenty of time left to think about it.

Gravity takes over as I loosen my elbows, and the way my hands are holding onto the grass and earth to my sides, I let myself fall backwards onto the levy. Usually sitting still means my foot is tapping on the floor or my knees are bouncing, but I prefer this: letting each atom of force of gravity just hit my body. I can think about each breath I am taking, and if I think about it hard enough, I can feel myself pushing against gravity to let myself take in the next one. Maybe I am just making it all up in my head. Or maybe I am finally paying attention.

"I think I'm going to start a butterfly farm. And put the butterfly boxes on trucks so I can drive to all the Camp Lake Somewheres in all the states and bring them pretty pollinators. I think I'd like that a lot. And when I'm bringing the monarchs to the big cities, I can come see your shows. I can come watch you dance." She drops down beside me. A piece of her hair lands on my forehead—that's how close we're lying on the levy.

"I'm not for sure if butterfly farmer is a real profession."

"And that's what they told the first beekeeper too. Now you see those white boxes everywhere."

"So, I can dance, and you can bring butterflies to people. Both of those things seem equally as likely."

I lean on my elbow, turning to face her. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. I never said anything negative about the whole dancer thing and now you're raining on my butterfly farm idea? I think it is highly likely. You're just not a believer." I know she is talking about herself. Nobody we know has ever grown up to actually be somebody. She thinks she is doing the same thing I am doing, just speaking wayward dreams into the universe. But I did not sit outside of lousy dance studios or carry her home from rehearsal because her calves ached so bad she couldn't walk just for her to give up on the frilly, pink tutus now. "Tomorrow, I'm making you do like fifty pirouettes and maybe even a few handstands."

She laughs. I love it when she laughs. "Why am I doing this?"

"Oh, you didn't let me finish. You are doing to do this whole routine in the dining room, in front of everyone we know or are soon to know. And when they clap for you and start chanting then you'll know this isn't a fake thing. You're going to be a dancer."

She wraps her arms around me, and I think she even mutters a thank you. But that part really doesn't matter. What matters is that she got what she was after. I might not ever do anything important, but I know that she has every capability to do it. And if she doesn't, I'm pretty sure that the world would split open and take me to hell because I didn't do everything I could to help her. ≋

Emergency Pit Stop In The Mississippi Delta

Ava Wilson
Photography

Kicking the Habit

Kelvin Pool

Yellow embers fall from the end of your
cigarette as your ex-girlfriend takes the
dog with her, and now both your hands are
cold as you stand on the balcony and watch the
smoke dance in the air before leaving like
everything else does because this is what
happens to people like you—you're either
not enough, too much, or both—and as your
hands turn a new shade of blue, you want to
be ok with that, but you're not and you won't
be, because you were made to be warm, to sit
in front of a fire and be held like a cigarette.

Mississippi Boy

Kelvin Pool

I remember like it was just days ago, when
a boy came out of the Mississippi mud.
Of course, he was brown; could he have
been anything else, that Mississippi boy.

He bit off his fingernails and spit them out
like they were chewy Mississippi tobacco.
He had a smell about him that was at once
cool city cologne and Mississippi rainwater.

There was a time when, in my own, he gently
laid his soft, tired, sad, queer Mississippi hand.
As the days grew dryer and my grandad harvested
his fields, the muddy boy left, that Mississippi boy.

Love Letters to Daughters Like Me

Savannah Massey

I noticed
you've begun to wear
your daddy's anger
like the hand-me-down coat
you haven't grown into yet.
I don't think you ever will.

So, let's run —
let's run away far past those

NO
TRESPASSING

posts. Let that too-big
coat slip from your shoulders
as our feet fall into
the too-soft mud
of your backyard.

Let's get
in your shitty pickup truck
and drive —
let's drive
until far away
will finally not be too close.

Let's ignore
the number on those rusty
speed limit signs
and the way your face
looks just like your mama's
when you smile.

Me.

Maryann Dang

Second Place, Poetry

Watch the sunrise, Mẹ,
and I'll watch it set.
I'll tell you lies that are easier than the truth,
and you can tell me truths when I'd wish you'd lie.
Show me the coconuts, Mẹ.
I want to see the coconuts.
Even if they look the same every day.
I want to see the coconuts.

Watch the sunset, Mẹ,
and I'll watch it rise.
I'll tell you about differential calculus,
and you can tell me I've cut my hair too short,
I've lost too much weight,
and that my father needs to hold his tongue.
But when I ask to see the coconuts, Mẹ,
it's my way of asking you to do the same.

Me in America, you in Vietnam.
4 hours, 8 to 12.
When the difference between night and day is negligible enough
to be all we have.
4 hours, Mẹ. Tell me I'm too thin now.
Tell me to sleep more.
Tell me a 96 isn't good enough.
Tell me you're my mom for the 4 hours you get to be.

Listen to the birds chirp, Mẹ,
and I'll listen to them hoot.
I'll tell you about a new restaurant I found,
and you can tell me you're never coming back.
To America, to me, to where coconuts can't grow.
Because the sun shines in Vietnam where it's the darkest here.
And the birds sing in Vietnam where they're silenced here.
Mẹ. I want to see the coconuts.
They are the same every day.

I Float in a Tangle of Legs

Sebastian Harvey

Third Place, Essay

My butt is on the bare ground, my eyes equidistant from all the knees in the silent mosh in front of the stage. The opening band finished; it's been twenty.

Hundreds of legs. Extended calves, high heels and toes, dogs out, long baggy pants, shaved and hairy shins, high-tops and Jordans. They're packed together, hips touching, some hands wrapped around other waists. Shuffling and waiting.

I turn, uncomfortable, staring right at my father's white shins. He has the same brown hairs dragging down the entire calf; my legs are darker, more heavily tanned. His knees are covered with long baggy shorts straight from the '90s. It's comforting to sit close to his toes.

We're masked still, two years after anyone cared, scared of being stuck in a crowd. The people behind me keep talking like I don't hear them; they're saying we must not be vaccinated.

We make an odd pair. Most of the crowd is in their thirties, either newly coupled or broken up. We've been together my entire life— eighteen years of his. He has held my hand, read to me, plucked me up and tossed me into the air. We've sat together in front of a screen and screamed at red and white shirts kicking a ball. I've listened to his lectures on fart jokes and impressionists. I hear him every Sunday playing with his middle-aged professor band who are too scared to perform but are happy to sing old covers and practice for perpetuity. He has a great voice. He looks awkward there, hovering in the crowd, wanting to sit down with me, but he's still an adult and I can pass 'cause I look younger with a mask on and I'm short sitting down.

I don't know how much of me he's heard. He must be wishing for this child investment to pay off somewhere down the line, hoping for a return on the conversations we'll have or the things he sees. I can't look at a painting and see the intention of the brush strokes, the way it speaks to the people, the way it speaks to him. I can't sing beautifully. I can't finish a *Guardian* crossword.

Instead, I tell him how many goals Bukayo scored last season; I can say how the team we support sucks, how we're underperforming our expected goals. I now can say I've started reading Shakespeare; I can try and understand what it must have felt for him to sit in those dark theaters in Stratford as a child and hear the actors speak the words that have been spoken many times in many different accents and orders. Now, twenty-five years later, he's across an ocean at a different stage.

I'm sure he has done something similar at Stratford. Once, he probably sat on the ground during intermission and closed his eyes, wondering when the actors would go back on stage, or wondering when he could finally get out of the stuffy hall. Now, when I'm looking across, it's easy to see how my knees are just as knobby and displaced as his, stuck between an extended femur and shin.

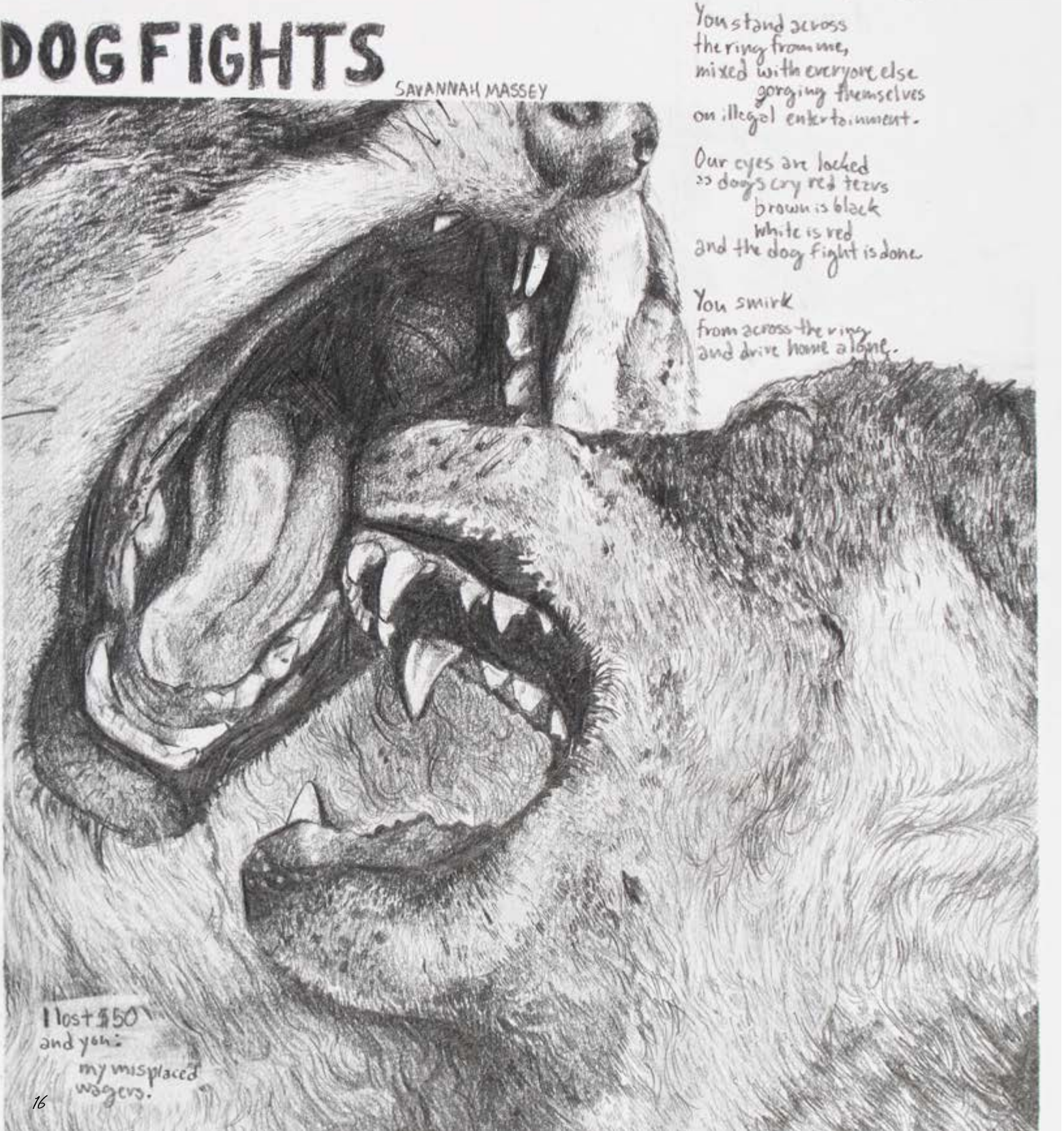
He has this long scar from a bike crash stretching across his calf. I have a smaller scar on the inside of my left thigh, short and white from a shard of glass. I was six at his parents' home in Somerset— an old Tudor farmhouse— when the coin jar broke, and I found blood spattered on my legs.

Caught in memories, I startle when I hear the low tremor of the speakers. When the band finally starts playing, we stand side by side and I make a half-hearted attempt to jump up and down and sing to the music from behind my mask, but it feels awkward doing it next to the still, comforting presence of a father who loves the music but doesn't know the lyrics well enough to sing. I sing. The notes catch the noise and quiver for him to hear. ≋

beatrice and alfie

Dog Fights

Savannah Massey
First Place, Fine Art



Daryl

Ramse Jefferson

Daryl was the only person there for me after my mom died, my one and only friend. Daryl says Mom's happier now, but I know better. She was screaming that night. She sounded broken and tired, as if she had been fighting for years. Her screams, though, never left. I can still hear them whenever it gets too quiet. Luckily, I have Daryl. He always finds a way to break the silence.

I don't remember seeing Mom. I remember vomiting, and then Daryl was there. Things always get fuzzy around Daryl. He says not to worry about that. When you're with real friends, small details get lost. Daryl is hard to describe. He's not all there—at least he wasn't when I first met him. Back then, he was a dark cloud the size of a basketball with one partially closed eye in the middle.

Daryl's only really spoken once. "All will be well," he said. His voice isn't the best to listen to, stuck between a bass-boosted garbage disposal and shattering glass. Instead, he does this thing where he talks inside my brain. I didn't care back then. I was happy to hear anything other than Mom. When he came, I was a mess on the floor. Too exhausted to form tears, I dry cried.

Daryl floated above me—watching, judging. He must have liked whatever he saw because he called the police. Without hands, he managed to grab Mom's phone and answer in her voice, exactly like hers. I was mad then, but Daryl told me it was the only way. His own voice was not an option.

Three officers showed up. They threw up a lot, leaving trails of vomit all over the house. They used big words like "grotesque" and "sacrifice" to describe what happened, but it was just my mom. One checked on me, barely an acknowledgment of my existence, but at least he tried. They all ignored Daryl as they waded through the house, swearing at every "atrocity" they found.

Daryl followed one officer the entire time, the one who checked on me. I think Daryl was judging him. And he failed. Only two officers left the house. Daryl came back fatter, almost double his original size, and with his eye fully opened. Tiny fingers sprouted all over his body.

The two officers took me out of the house. They put me in a big gray room with only a table and a bed. Every few hours, people came to ask me questions. In between questions, two sweet old ladies came to visit me. They gave me candy a few times. Daryl hated them.

He said they reeked, even though they smelled nice to me. Every time he saw them, he shook in anger. Or maybe it was disgust, but they don't come around anymore. No one said anything about the old ladies not coming anymore. And no one noticed Daryl had swelled to the size of a cow. He had arms now, about twenty of them, that he kept folded around him.

Daryl didn't care that I liked them, and he hated it when I said something. He threatened to leave. I couldn't survive alone with those ugly walls and Mom. I tried. I screamed at Daryl and forced him to leave. I didn't get any sleep that night or the next. Every moment was just me stuck hearing screams or staring at the wall. No one remembered me.

On the third night, I cried for Daryl. He was back before the first tear hit the ground. Daryl had changed. The only part of him that could fit in the room was his eye and a single arm. I begged and pleaded, and he understood. He told me that it's okay for friends to fight. If they make up in the end, everything is fine. Even if no one else is there for me, I know Daryl will have me.

Opposite Ends

Lila Jacks

Second Place, Photography

My Americana

Max Thompson

When I first saw what was in your eyes,
deep blue with a hunger,
that pang you feel in the bottom of your body,
I knew.

Like my face pressed against the window,
we were doing donuts in your truck.
I tasted the vomit rising in my throat,
and I blamed it on the whitney.

The football posters in your room
when you said you always wanted to play,
echoes of a boy killed by his father.

When I felt your shaky hands
searching for something within me
that you knew I never had.

I still remember my blue lips and your slurred speech,
two clouds of breath, and you:
bleeding prayer through a mouth of Jack.

You asked me if we'd make it out,
crouched at the foot of my window, saying
"Hope"
"We just gotta hope"

If only you knew how many times I begged
that it'd come flying in,
saving us from the men we were going to be.

The last time I saw what was in your eyes,
deep blue, with a hunger,
that pang you feel in the bottom of your body,
I knew:

Hope never had feathers, just two boys in a pickup truck,
running from a God they never knew.

Red Tail. Bob White.

Ava Grace Noe

First Place, Poetry

i always speed up when i get to
the intersection. it doesn't matter
if i've looked both ways
ten times over, at the four
way i never leave it to chance.
and when i see the red fox past
driver's flat, red tail and golden eyes,
i know i'm supposed
to call my mother. tell
her to grab a shotgun and maybe we
won't lose another hen. but i
just sit and pray
and i wish and i hope.
and i know there haven't been quail here
since the late fifties. but even
with a fox on the loose, i go to sleep
to the sounds of a bob white and
clutch a bible a little tighter.
my mama's name is
on the cover, written in gold.

Coop

Megan Colley

Photography

Orange Peel Theory

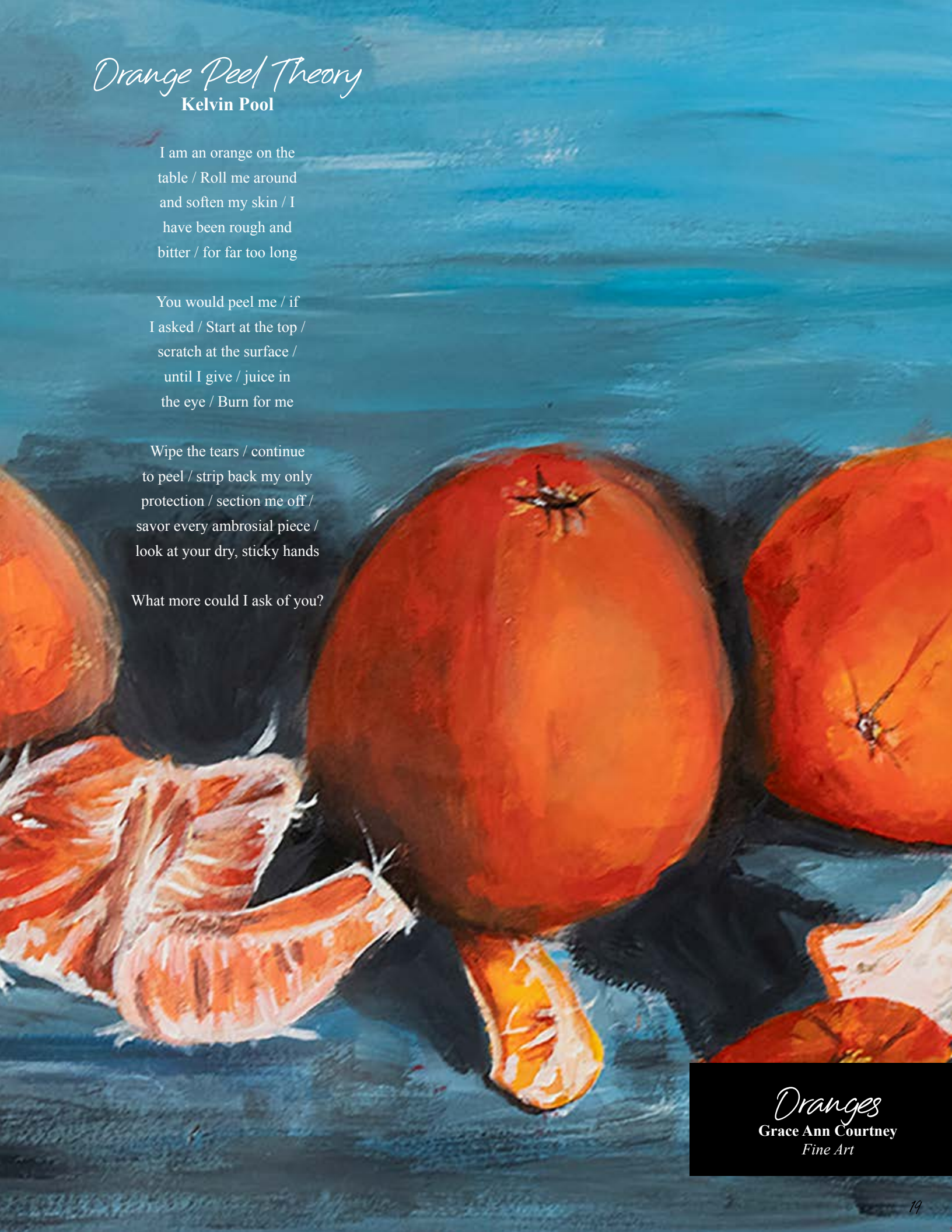
Kelvin Pool

I am an orange on the
table / Roll me around
and soften my skin / I
have been rough and
bitter / for far too long

You would peel me / if
I asked / Start at the top /
scratch at the surface /
until I give / juice in
the eye / Burn for me

Wipe the tears / continue
to peel / strip back my only
protection / section me off /
savor every ambrosial piece /
look at your dry, sticky hands

What more could I ask of you?



Oranges

Grace Ann Courtney

Fine Art

I Think I'm Living in a Ghost Town

Ava Grace Noe

Honorable Mention, Essay

There is a cemetery five minutes from my house on the east and the west sides. I'm not supposed to go out there. My mom has always been superstitious: pulling over the car if we need to knock on wood, lifting her foot off the gas when driving over railroad tracks, holding her breath when going through the underwater tunnel in Alabama. And on the way to the church hay ride she'd tell us about how the Bell Witch is from Mississippi and that she always comes back on All Hallows Eve to find small children resting under willow trees. She likes to remind us that stories come from the same places we do. And that every horror has an origin and a home.

I don't think she was as cautious when we weren't in a car. If walking under a ladder would summon some sort of bad omen, she at least knew there was a shotgun within thirty feet around the house. But on the road, it only takes a second thought of God or a tire blowing out or a person riding too close behind you to knock it all out of place. To knock us out of place.

I'm the one who told her about holding your breath when driving past a graveyard.

I had found a book a few months earlier called *Doll Bone*s. Just having it on me scared the shit out of my mom. It wasn't more than 130 pages, meant for the average fourth grader. But on the cover a small porcelain doll smiled up at you with a thin string of scarlet tied around her head. The background was painted in the watercolors of the French Quarter at night and the doll's eyes glowed in a pale-yellow hue. She looked like the porcelain dolls my grandmother had grabbed my sister and me from her attic.

I started to tell my mother about the things I would notice in the same breath as explaining my school day. I said that I had read somewhere that during the Civil War soldiers would take the thinnest string off their guitars, pulling it around someone's neck and taking their heads with them. My mother reminded me that she did not want to hear about the decapitation of Union soldiers. I told her the story is about a dead woman's ashes scattered inside of the

Have You Seen My Ghost?

Ava Grace Noe

Photography

doll and how the dead woman won't stop haunting them until the ashes were scattered in the proper place. She reminded me that I should go back to reading *Harry Potter*. I told her I found a typo on page sixty-two. She reminded me that no one likes a smart-ass.

I didn't tell her about the graveyard scene until we were driving past it. The graveyard itself lay past a line of trees. It's not easy to see from the road. Just a wrought-iron gate at the front with an arch overhead reading PARIS CEMETERY with small spots of rust shining through. As it passed out the back windshield, past where I could crane my head around to see I let out a breath I held silently.

"Mama, you've got a ghost inside of you."

She was driving faster than she should have, sixty in a thirty-five, a skill she didn't mean to teach me. As we turned around the bend, she hit the brakes harder than she should have.

"Do what?"

"The book said that the spirits want to wander, and you didn't hold your breath. You let them in. Now they live in you." I knew this would scare her. Not the kind of scared that you go running into the great beyond or even the kind of scared that made proper young ladies feel faint. But the kind of fear that would make her swat me on the knee to cut that shit out.

"Ava Grace, you are not being serious right now."

"I would never kid about something as serious as this."

When we made it back to the house, she didn't open the driver-side door. I didn't know whether or not to open my own door. I just sat with her in the silence that replaced the steady whirl of the AC.

"What's that book called, again?"

"*Doll Bones*."

"That doesn't sound like something I would be brave enough to read. I always loved the sick cancer kid books." She got out of the car and went inside to let the dogs out..

Love Our Neighbors, Move The Statue

Ava Wilson

Photography

Persimmon Picking

Maple Griffin

I reach up with two small hands
to pick persimmons
because they are too big
to fit in only one.

One by one the orange spheres
fill the brown woven baskets,
overflowing and rolling off the top,
leaving a trail of auburn behind.

I hold the basket as you pick them now,
multiple in each hand, atop the ladder,
their smooth, glossy skin is cool—
there's a faint cinnamon smell.

What do I do each fall?
"I picked persimmons with my dad."
I beam as I show off the bright fruit
I brought for my school lunch.

Classmates gather with curious looks,
"What are persimmons?"
they ask.
Orange orbs we share between us.

Recollection

Heaven Alvarado

It is sweet treasure these swirling flowers,
gliding in such blur the sky seems an amber Eden.
This velvet carousel sea of fragrant jewels
is kin to aureate honey or Saturn's flaxen rings.

Above, that affable coruscation hints at warmer weeks,
a cosmic conflagration, bearing bright flaxen teeth.
Atop its journey's crest it glares at spring's cool grip,
then down it lies to rest, a vernal sun's final trip.

A sweet dandelion, puff of wishes unanswered
drifts in above me, its steadfast integrity a balm
on my cracking soul of duty and debt.
Fitfully, in the solace of a lonely night
tumbling overhead blithe and lovely,
I tempt to grasp gently to take hold and blow,
so that I, too, may dance among the stars.

With it came refulgence, a dazzling sunflower.
Brilliant ashen petals shelter a withered stem,
artless selflessness dripping from the rot.
Wetness like blood roots drenched,
desperately reaching with slick hands,
whispered pleas at an indifferent sky,
distorted reflections on an amber floor.

Golden hyacinth hugs summer's nearing coat,
hovering closer now close enough to graze
breath-taking beauty stifled in hardened calyx.
It hurts to observe, to yearn but not to touch,
to suffer the eyes' caress behind a yellow line.
Yet still I clutch close, would rather feel the burn
than let it slip away into that bright floral abyss.

The Pollinator

Maple Griffin

Photography

My Backpack, A Monster

Max Flaschka

My backpack is a worn and abused hulk of synthetic fabric. The light blue hide has been muted by the stain of spills, food, classroom dust, outside dirt, and more debris. The left pocket, its writing pouch, has a hole in it poked through by some pencil or other that has yet to heal via staple or rubber band. The zippers struggle to keep themselves together as they laugh at the state of the thing and simply fall loose instead. Worst of all, both of its straps are broken.

The left pauldron snapped five minutes before the first class of senior year began. A new mental note was made to get another backpack soon. Two months later, the other strap snapped with a mighty clack while I waited in line for the cafeteria to open. It was an awkward, strenuous five-minute trek back to the dorm, as I constantly tugged on the tattered remains of the bands lest they be dropped again.

Drawing on the worst of Dr. Herbert West, a few items had been received for its following surgeries: a mini-stapler, Elmer's glue, scissors, and a mad glint in the eyes. Twenty full staples were pumped into the left strap alongside the squelch of an unhealthy amount of glue goop. The cheap plastic clamp of the right strap had not only been snapped but entirely fell out of its loop. Unfortunately for the bag, it only gave me the idea to simply push the rest of the tail through then staple it shut.

The former operation worked for all of thirty minutes before snapping, only to reveal a new toothy half-maw of stapler clips that tugged at the seams of my pants in a wish for a merciful death. The request, of course, was denied. The other strap lasted a day before succumbing to the same pleading with the same dismal rip of stapler clips coming loose. The final dual-operation was to remove the last of its plastic flesh, push the frayed ends through, and tie a sailor's knot intended to keep it there permanently. Every day it feels looser, both straps are filled with stapler holes, and one has glue gunk scattered over it—yet it works.

Much like its soft, weak carapace, the insides of this abomination are damaged in their own ways. The first pocket has folders of all sorts with improperly fitting papers, frayed and bent corners, and utter disorder within them. Books that have been under school (and student) ownership for far too long are filled with poor annotations—most of which is obsessive underlining of nearly everything—sticky page corners, and other injuries unmentionable.

The second stomach is dedicated to the storage of the thinking arts: a well-kept chemistry lab journal, a cardboard-back notetaking journal of the same science, and a hulking, ancient binder thick with the paper of a hundred print-outs. The thin plastic lining is crinkled, punctured, and torn at every possible turn. It has no name and no way to tell which side is up apart from the vague outline of a stick-dragon imprinted on the front among dozens of tiny linear imprints and odd bumps on its surface. Calculus and Statistics fight for who is first to be shown on the first page while the English of last year's curriculum laments behind a quiz-filled blue folder.

The gizzard, the third storage vesicle, is filled with all the gimmicks to crush time, math problems, and boredom within itself. Its stones are unused highlighters, a calculator, never-opened Chapstick tubes, a chest of googly eyes, half-working earbuds, a monolithic pencil, and far more rubbish tucked away within. This stomach is the heart of its wearer and thus is filled with whatever it can take in.

Unbeknownst to even its owner, there is a final fourth stomach. The single zipper of its maw is lonely while the space itself is shrunken from lack of use, apart from a single delight: a never-before-used planner for the year 2022. Of course, even this is touched by wounds and marks somehow gathered despite lack of contact.

The backpack likely won't be replaced. Not until it rips clean in half with a moan of pain or a new beast of burden forced upon me. Despite the oddities of the backpack, it is a too-loved yet lovely creature that demands it be kept. Of course, maintained and kept alive out of nostalgia and love for it. With fewer staples. And less glue.

Crushed It

Ava Wilson

Fine Art

Dog Gone Soup

Kelvin Pool

Second Place, Short Story

There's another one. A dead dog in our front yard. I once again have the decision to make soup or bury it. It is never an easy decision. The children always make such a good argument, and my husband is never around when a new mutt appears. My mother always told me it was easy. You simply grab a shovel and start digging. If you can put the dog in the ground before your kids get to you, then you make no soup. However, it is never that easy.

The children are still asleep. I usually don't get up this early, but I can't sleep with the dog out here. Well, I can't anymore. There was a time when the smell would pinch my nose and I would wake up to an empty bed. Back then I could roll over after I knew. The smell would leave me be. An hour later my children would come into my room and beg with hungry eyes and digging claws. By the time my husband got back from the night shift, there'd be breakfast, lunch, and dinner all in one bowl. At least it saved me some time and dishes. But I don't want to do this anymore.

I keep a shovel by the door. I've gotten away with burying the dog four times now. I'm starting to think it's the same dog. That doesn't matter; all that matters is putting that hound in the ground. The familiar scent opens my nose and pores. I have a blurry memory of when my mother would add tears to taste. My teeth would slowly grow crooked and shape themselves in almost perfect timing to mom's soup. Like clockwork, once a month I managed to get up right when the perfect pup was dropped off. The first time I caught her, she seemed to just give up. It just wasn't as worth it to her then as it is to me now. Maybe she had gotten away with it long enough by that time and figured one taste couldn't hurt. I wasn't prepared the first time the dog showed up, but I've been cooking it for the kids every time until now. Now I would rather they starve.

It's like the blood hardens the soil. My husband's spare boots protect my feet as I step on the shovel and push down. I take the shaft and break the ground. I hate the look of dirt. How true it is, only ever opening, hiding, and settling. If only I could be dirt. I wouldn't fear my own children. I would be natural. I guess this is natural in its own way. I'm doing what I think I'm supposed to—hopefully there's not another way. I pray to God that what I've been doing is the only solution.

The hole is finally big enough. I only ever saw Mom put it in with her bare hands—maybe it's because we were poor, maybe it's the only way. She never told me exactly how to get rid of the dog, only how to make the soup. It's funny how she died right when the little questions became important, but not the kind of funny you talk about over brunch. The kind of funny where you let out a burst of laughter before catching yourself and hoping the kids didn't wake up. I wait for the silence to return until a single bird chirps in the distance. I should have gotten up earlier. I grab the dog and throw him into the hole. Shoveling the dirt over the animal in a fury, it feels as though there isn't enough. Without warning they're in the doorway. Claws sharpened, skin wrapped tight against their ribs. There's still a leg sticking out of the grave—if only I could have a few extra seconds to finish my work. I try, and before I know it my legs are bleeding, tears streaming down my face, and the shovel thumps as it hits the ground. One of the children grabs the dog's leg and pulls the animal out in one piece. It's time to start cooking.

Dog Gone Soup

Ingredients:

1 whole deceased dog

3 handfuls of soil (fresh)

As many tears as you can muster before you give up

The spit from a promise you made to yourself

Boil on high heat until your spouse comes home, or you find someone else to blame.

Serve and enjoy!

My husband comes in just as I bring out the ladle. He just looks at me and the kids. Sits down and waits. I pray to God that the next dog to show up on our lawn is him.

Summer Jazz Festival

Sydney Beane

In the land of the peaches,
my family cracks down the sidewalk to the Summer Jazz Festival.
We swelter in the sun, sweat dripping off our every inch.
Our cart is packed with blankets for sitting,
oranges for eating,
and UNO for endless arguments to pass the time
before what we really came to see comes through.
I came to see Nicki Giovanni grace the stage.
I don't write poetry, I certainly don't read it,
but Dad loves her, so I do.
After walking for ages, hunting down the perfect spot,
setting up camp right in the center of the bustle
created by Southern hippies,
I'm nestled in.
I'm ready for the show I have trained for.
I borrowed an anthology of African American poetry for this.
I was reading over my favorite Giovanni poems
before she appeared.
I pondered on "Nikki-Rosa,"
just when
neon blue
appeared in my line of vision, a man in neon blue.
A white man, 6ft tall yet standing on his tippy toes with an
empty chair
below him begging to be sat in.
My eyes cut to my mom's which are ready to meet mine.
Jazz festival remembrances always seem to drag,
if you're Black.

Termites

Sebastian Harvey

One hundred and sixty years
the farm house stood there
on the mud. Once firm, bright
yellow walls now sit spongy.
Long humid summer days
broke down, tilled the wood
like the land around. But,
the farm was sold,
and mid-century modern
became the new thing.
The wood developed,
an open plan,
housing a
nuclear family.
At least it's
still

Antebellum.

Face Card Never Declines

Megan Colley

Photography

Rummaging

Noah Curtis Lee

Third Place, Poetry

a life develops musty smells,
and Time spits
termite damage—

but clenching hearts must
glue their nooks and
holster every frame—

a man i loved hinged
out the doors, creaked
down beneath the floorboards,

so now i dig his cabinet
out to nail in
dead mementoes.

here lies: his mug,
glazed thick with dust,
crack dripping down its body,

a leather album:
scratched, clear sleeves—
that smiling skeleton's photos.

beside, inside
a box for shoes
love-letters from his widow.

and birthday notes,
and foggy plaques,
and candles nibbed from crayons.

grandfather, dad,
and friend alike!
we love
to love
you geezer!

i swing my arms
into the grave
to dump his body out—

and feebly try to
coffin in the matchbox
man i folded:

but Time rolls on,
and in its path,
leaves a quiet past.

it cracks the mugs.
it burns the wax.
it tears up every letter.

some wooden pallor
rots and snaps—
i slam the cabinet shut.

What Remains

Ramse Jefferson

Photography

We Could Be Giants

with a line from The War on Drugs

Ava Wilson

If I took a walk
in a wild wheat field,
I would go find
the ravaged grass,
dismembered under the tread
that caused the earth to bleed.

If I picked up the rocks
lain in the tracks,
I would throw
them, those blessed
bullets, at the horizon.

If my rocks hit your head
and I heard the yawp,
I'd run across the wrecked field
for as many precious days as it took,
until eyes meet bare soles.

If I found you,
sedentary on your truck,
blank as you stared,
searching for pavement,
we would walk it like giants.

If I screamed at the sky,
I'd never get an answer.
But I would climb towards you,
and the cherished hours it took
would never be remembered
as a symptom of regret.

If I inspected your rosy wound
and shrapnel remained,
I would dig them out
until you were unclouded.
Please leave uncorrupted.

If you spoke back to me,
the *occasional rain* would come,
and you would drive me out of the field
to our forgotten destination
where we could be giants.

Five Hours

Nora Ruth Scott

Honorable Mention, Short Story

Five uninterrupted hours on an underwhelming rural highway. Enough time to tell her all she needs to know. How to begin…My stomach twists. Is it because I'm nervous or because…Don't go there. If you don't say it out loud, it's not real. Maybe that's why my mouth goes dry, tongue goes numb, and vocal chords frost over when I try to tell her. The air in our newest Mercedes is crisp and tight, like a maze of string. The single slash of a blade could expose my perfect life to the one awaiting me. I replay the morning.

Puking my insides out at 2:03, I regret every decision I've ever made. The scent of coffee as I drag my exhausted body into the kitchen a few hours later sends me scrambling to the downstairs bathroom anticipating another upheaval. Frustration escapes in the form of tears. How long was I there? I don't know. Time flies when tears fly. Soft hands on my forehead pull me out of the bottomless pit of the toilet bowl. Mom. I hadn't heard her come in. *I wish you would tell me what's going on*—my least favorite words to hear. Don't you understand? I can't.

All I have to do is turn the music off and open my mouth. The words will tumble out with a few stray tears. Why is it so hard? My lips are clamped shut. Anxiety creeps into my heart. *Mom, I'm throwing away my future—the future you worked so hard to give me.* How can I phrase that? It only takes three words. I know I can say them separately, but can I say them together? *Mom, I'm*—I jolt, remembering. It's not real if you don't say it out loud. The problem is, it *will* become real all too soon, and then what will I say?

I'm packing the car for our much-dreaded family Thanksgiving, one ginger tea and four Dramamine later. Too drowsy to be of much help, I sit in the front seat, AirPods in, eyes closed, contemplating. Nosy grandmother, even nosier aunts. I have to get it together. They will be the first to suspect. I could go see a professional. Austin is a big city. What would that do to my conscience? I'm musing deliriously. That would destroy whatever remains of my mental health. I don't think I could ever walk into church again knowing that I had…I can't think it.

My lips won't move. They refuse to budge. The words I cannot say, stuck behind them, yearn to be released. My heart feels like it's being tugged out of my chest as my words wage their war. *I'm sorry.* I can't even bring myself to say the most important phrase. Speeches of unconditional love resurface. Facts about the inherent love of a parent for their offspring come to mind. These things must be true or people wouldn't say them. Am I scared of losing her love, or am I scared of the disappointment I will see in her eyes? There's no reason to ruin a perfectly good Thanksgiving with explanations that could be given another day. The return car ride is five hours, too. ≋

Optimism

Grace Ann Courtney

Fine Art

The Land and Lanes That Raised a Child

Claire Rizzo

Honorable Mention, Poetry

I am murky bayou silt
sifted through my mother's womb,
the wax and wane of a bobcat's pupils in the night.
I am a citadel of ancient cypress trees,
still watching from the swamp
and the kudzu's claw marks upon the hills it refuses to surrender.

I am the magnolia's leaves
shining silver-blue through the bitter winter,
the eyeing alligators that slip from the river's abyss on floodtides.
I am the coyotes' call,
echoing through the sleepy dusk,
and the clamor of young bucks' antlers rutting in the night.

I am the waft of watered-down perfume
on a distant cousin's hug,
a junked-up backyard lying behind the levee's break.
I am crop insurance for a rare hail,
instead of dental insurance for the children,
and the leftover rosy bathroom tile from *back when people had taste*.

I am the hypodermic needle
sitting in the gravel lot of a beloved childhood diner,
the shattered Fireball bottle littering the floor of an underage barn party.
I am the faded fake flowers,
wind-bent over highway family grave plots,
and the chipped white chapels tracing the river's bend.

Atrophied Ambition

Tony Bradley

On this day,
the seventh of September,
a meager man, withered by many winters,
sits sleepily on his sofa.

Little luminescence trickles through the lodge,
sunken far in Sylvan forest.
Too timbered for favorable travel,
he solemnly heeds his secluded psyche.

Without friend or family,
leafed trees lose their tint far faster,
and Stygian skies streches a sunless spell.
The bygone man beseeches his woes into bare air.

Among The Azaleas

Claire Rizzo

Fine Art

Fruit Flies

Savannah Massey

My nana and I
are picking off
blueberries and blackberries
and strawberries and figs
from the short bushes and wire fences
and the garden box and green trees.

She drops them into her woven basket
where they plop down and melt into
the sea of just ripe fruit.
I drop mine into my mouth and the excess
of my shirt curled up into my hands.
My fruit is the color of Southern sins,
all green and red from not being ready yet.

The sun is hot and I feel it
in my hair and on my nose
as the fruit flies swarm.
My nana tells me I should've
put on sunscreen like her.
She tells me my face will burn
to the same crimson as my hair
and my freckles will turn
dark as the blackberries should be.
But before Southern sins,
there is Southern spite.

I pluck another blackberry from the wire fence
and a thorn catches my finger:
the price to pay for picking
sour blackberries.
The fruit flies filled with Southern spite
leave the nature of their name to come see the
blood puckered on my skin,
to see the color
of Southern sins.

A Trace Of Wizardry

Ava Wilson

Photography

One Row

Ava Grace Noe

I remember the smell of stale beer and the haze of cigarette smoke so thick you can't see through it. Figures dancing in front of the peeling yellow wallpaper of the trailer lit by the open refrigerator door and the Christmas lights strung around the pool table. The porch lights shining in through the broken plastic blinds. There was a group of people standing beside the CD player passing off their glass bottles as they grabbed at the plastic cases, each trying to get theirs in next.

My dad had his hands on my shoulders, not even having to bend his elbows, pushing me through the screen door and closing it behind us, his koozie rubbing against my bare shoulder. My green tank top with the rhinestone peace sign on the front hung loose on my shoulders.

It was late in Potlockney, late enough that everything outside had become quiet. The coyotes and bobcats usually screaming deep into the night had drifted off to sleep. The only thing awake for miles was the trailer on the side of the county road with the plywood porch clinging to the rusted exterior or the people inside of it.

I had tried to dance with the women dressed in cut off shorts and boots with mud caked to the heels, each of them taking turns spinning me around while they flicked their ashes into a dish on the card table. But every time I would get to dancing, and they got me spinning, it was as if they forgot I was there. Bumping their hips into my rhythm, throwing me off balance. And I had tried to join in on a dice game, grabbing the red snake eyes off the table and throwing them against a wall praying for a seven. Then I saw the wadded-up tens in the center of the table. There was one thing I was never allowed to mess with, and that was if there was money in a game and I didn't bring my own coin purse.

At some point in the night when the music was still booming and the pool table was still surrounded, I found myself half asleep on someone's couch wrapped around a pillow with a strange stain. My dad shook me awake by my shoulders.

"Weso's gonna take you home," he shouted over the speakers.

I didn't know a Weso, and I knew that I had come in a truck with my dad. The lights in the room suddenly felt too bright. He helped me down from the couch and walked me outside to an old white pickup. Dad waved bye from the front porch.

There was only one row of seats. And in the driver's seat sat a skinny man with a camo hat on top of his head. He gave me a smile and a laugh when I put on my seatbelt.

"You're not going to kidnap me, right? Because I don't pray a lot, and I'm praying right now." I reached over and rolled down my window with the crank. The little AC that was coming out of the vents wasn't doing enough to counteract the Mississippi air that felt sticky on my skin or the sweat clinging to the back of my neck. I felt it in my bones: this was the night I would die.

"Now why would your parents send you with someone who was gonna kidnap ya?" He kept both of his hands on the wheel, and he technically wasn't drinking the half empty beer sitting on the console.

"Well, I'm not for sure."

The pine trees flashed by as the tires from the pickup turned up dust and small pieces of gravel. There were beer cans and boxes in the ditch along the side of the road, small rabbits scurrying around trying to get behind the tree line. The silence wasn't deafening but instead was replaced by the whirl of the engine and the low hum of the radio.

"Do you listen to any music?"

"Some, I guess."

Weso reached his hand over, turning up the dial and began to sing to whatever country song was playing. And slowly, I started to find myself in a rhythm with him. My feet didn't touch the floorboard, so I started to swing my legs back and forth to the beat. And when he hit the chorus, I joined in with him.

I didn't turn around to see the dust cloud illuminated from red taillights. I don't lean out the truck window to see the stars above the pine trees. I wasn't concerned about the gravel flying past underfoot.

Weso drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, and I beat on the sides of the worn leather seat. He took a drink of his beer.

Tied Winners | Untied Tennis Shoes

Savannah Massey

i.
an overhead shot sounds
is it that of the race
or the nature of Mississippi
you are still
fumbling
with the tattered laces of hand-me-down
tennis shoes as they
kick up
clouds of dust in your face
you let the dust
cut
into your eyes and the rocks
tear
at your skin

ii.
now you are
running / racing / ravishing
the less desirable parts of you
let the dirt racetrack
[or otherwise a rock driveway]
give way to daydreamed success

"this is not your race"
you can tell by the lapping of dogs
at the rationed race water
and the lapping of racers around you

you are their mile maker
and they, your inspiration

iii.
call attention to ribbon-breaking winner[s]
as the race is called to a close

spectators wager on winners /
winners fight for who
crossed the line first

you fight for your breath

who ran five laps and the hallmark step
before the other
tensions rise as hopes fall

you ran two and a half laps
and no one cares to fight with you

Rose Blooming

Harrison Shao

Photography

To Be a Sunflower

Maple Griffin

The little black seed glistens
as I hold it up in the last rays
of golden sunlight.
My bare feet sink deeper into
the moist soil with each step I take,
all my weight pushing down
on the seeder in front of me.
With each turn of the wheel,
more black seeds drop into
the brown earth below.
Sometimes I wish I could sink
into the clumps of dirt
as the seeds do, getting
covered in a blanket of
warm, damp soil to rest
until they sprout to grow towards
the sky, amber petals unfurling
into a breathtaking sun.
I plant, weed, harvest, and sell
these delicate heads, secretly
wishing I could be like a flower:
spending my days following the
sun and receiving kisses
from bees and butterflies.
Growing to bring joy,
blooming in my own time.

Sunflowers
Maple Griffin
Photography

Morning Glory

Ava Grace Noe

The more I dig, the less I feel the blisters resting on my palm, the small pieces of wood pushing themselves into the space between my skin and the blood rushing deep underneath. I can't remember how many hours I've been out here, the five-gallon buckets I brought out with me now filled with the last of the season, vegetables that shouldn't have made it this far into the summer with the sun blaring down on their stalks and the rain that never seemed to show its face.

My own face now painted in red and dripping down like the underpainting awaiting me inside. A new box of oils right next to the easel. Something left to do. I can feel my sun-kissed skin now burning with the beating of the Mississippi sun on my shoulders. Dirt caked under my fingernails and my shoes I've long since abandoned at the edge of the field. Row after row I pull up the last of the okra and snap beans as the red clay pushes itself between my toes, coating itself over calluses from years of practice. Years of digging up.

Flowers Bleed Blue
Maple Griffin
Fine Art

And once all the viable plants were picked, that's when the real work began, each plant hanging bare and holding the Earth like a child clings to its mother. I tried coaxing them, pulling gently where the green met the ground, hoping for at least one to budge. These plants that I'd stuck in the ground not even two months ago now just as stuck as the century old oak in the front yard. Roots deeper than I could have ever imagined, the kind that were never intended to be seen by a human's eye, at least until they were closed. The only way to get rid of roots that want to stay is to break them.

In the same way I would plant a sapling, breaking the thread-like roots in my hands so that when they grew back they could grow back stronger, I took the shovel row after row stabbing at the ground. Each plant eventually growing weak enough to pull and then soon thrown out of the field into the already too tall grass. It felt like digging, the process of sending the spade back into the dirt. It felt like killing, the way you take a hunting knife to the shirt seams of a deer. It felt like rhythm, the kind that only the earth has heard enough for it to matter.

It's when I'm knee-deep in the purple hull peas that the strings of the snap beans start wrapping around my ankles. These mothering vines, now being treated like a common weed, holding tight to me. I don't want to think about why this is happening. In a way I knew it was coming. I could only wonder how long the land would keep me here, or maybe how long the Earth would wait to drag me down deep.

My left hand reaches for the spade, my right reaches to stop it. I start to give in, grabbing a handful of the soil and dropping it over my reddened thighs. I reach for the vines and start to pluck the morning glories that have started to grow in tandem, arranging them around my crossed ankles.

I think I'm burying myself, but you can never be sure about these things.

I can see the pond from here as I feel the world fold in around me. Maybe it's too selfish to think that way. I can see the geese landing in the water, flapping their wings behind them, as the world closes in around itself. The tomato plant's spoke starts to scratch its way

against my back, pulling me up to my feet. I had left the tomato vines alone, too ripe to pick this late in the year. Now the ones I had left are oozing and scarred, small things crawling in and out, calling the wilted red fruit home.

The seeds and juice run down my arms as the plant presses itself against me, the morning glories now wrapping around my wrists pulling my hands out to my sides. The sun is setting in the west. I don't know if I've ever stood still long enough to watch the first hews of pink start to meet the indigo of the east.

I wonder if my sister will find me first in the morning as the sky paints me in the same hues it does now, pulling me from the darkness. Or maybe my mother will see and watch as the first mother takes me back.

I wonder if she will weep or cling to my earthly body from where it hangs. If the earth will come for her next when she comes for the last row of plants that I can't reach from here. I don't regret the Earth taking me back—she has every right. I do regret not getting to take this last burden from my mother.

I can hear the goats bleating behind me, hungry for something I can't give them. The horses brush against the barbed wire, testing the line between them and the way to the end of the sunset. I wonder if my mother will hear them calling her. I hope she remembers the way back home.

The morning glories brush up against my ear, weaving themselves into the twin braids running down my back. I can almost make out what they're trying to say.

And as time passes slower by the second, a bundle of peonies and briars atop my head, I can't help but wonder if I brought this upon myself. The past few days of ripping the moaning bodies out of the once tilled red clay. Whipping away at the okra to leave the bare plant and the seed pods for harvest. Every time I take, all I give back are the withered plants worked past the point of exhaustion. The mud in between my toes and the ground beneath my heels have felt every first step, every hoof beat, every heartbreak. The sweat that dripped from my brow, the scarlet blood that dripped from dead chickens leaving a small pool in the gravel, the sickly-sweet summer wine my sister spilled off the back porch. I feel it seep into my skin.

There's only a little bit of light left in the sky, almost all stars. And as I reach a state of peace, the morning glories begin to grow in my mouth, weaving in between crooked teeth, filling my lungs with indigo star shaped petals. I let the leaves cover my eyes.

What Dreams Are Made Of

Claire Rizzo

Photography

Purrfect Afternoon

Kaylee Alford

Fine Art

Clairo

Savannah Massey

Second Place, Fine Art

Trees and a Hammock, a Book, Suspended

Sebastian Harvey

prufrock in lap.

he waits and he waits and he loses
time,
lovers,
hair.

I wait on my mustache.
grown as a sad joke during the eve of summer
while i was holed up, sun shining on the smooth earth,
then peach fuzz, then brown rotting peach flesh
smeared across my lip and chin.
attracting flies that bit.

but it was the first time i tried to grow a peach,
and my mouth and chin started to feel warm,
and my hands grew to love sitting on my 'tee
and twisting the roots, and feeling them grow.

i should chop it now.
the mouth won't be pulled and shaped and moved
by the roots anymore. it'll be exposed again, talk
on its own without the cover, and conversation won't
be about *its* peach farm, it'll be about *my* peach harvest.
it won't be about *its* added inch,
it'll be about *my* salted earth and bare ground.
it'll be about how the peaches were once so
peachy and juicy and fuzzy, and how
it'll never be the same the second time around
because it's not the first time around.

hopefully the deep roots stay.
and i can call 'em up.
and say hi.
and say sorry.

I quake, adrenaline pumping and dulling into
silence — not awkward silence.

comfort silence.

Tripping Over Feet

Noah Curtis Lee

we could have waltzed, you and
i—we could have scraped our
bodies through a young, loveless

something, and i'd have shined
you if you fancied—slathered
mascara polish on you and

we'd have free falled together
in love with puppy cravings
and your skimpy blue

dress and cutezie rom-com
proposals—so i'd asked
you to dance, when the music

was blushing and a slow song glitzed
over my mind and over my
feet and i three-stepped my way to

you and stopped by the punch
bowl on the way out to
choke a cigarette or blackout on

lusty booze or do whatever
boys do to blue rouge faces in movies—
in my mental gymnasium,

where memory batted your
lashes to protect a sophomore
fantasy and wadded your name into

a thick lipstick ball and hurled
it at my black-dripping eyes
over and over and over

until my heart shattered
open in the strobe of the dance
venue dream where i learned i

didn't know better than to mess with
pretty girls
who didn't want to mess with me—

yes, your skin-level smile started
flaking when i slipped from your kiss
of concealer—but every heartbreak in

a while i'll
find that quiet
blue dress
and
first- love- stained
ball and whisper
we
could have

Serotonin

Claire Rizzo

Honorable Mention, Fine Art

Pet Peeve

Maryann Dang

Your parents say that you're as lucky as women get to be.

Your husband is the perfect man. He has a steady job, pressed suits, and a certain gentleness towards women.

Married life with him is comfortable—he treats you well. There are far worse men you could've ended up with, you know. So, you live your life gratefully: cook his favorite meals, clean his house, give him all he asks for.

There is just this one thing—this one strange habit he has that tarnishes his perfection.

When he drinks his morning coffee, he makes this peculiar sound when he gulps, like a bubble rising to the surface of a fish tank only to burst.

Umph.

Round, yet sharp. Smooth, yet croaking.

You hear it every morning while you fry the bacon, its spiced smoke reaching into the air like tendrils.

Umph, umph, umph playing in tandem with the *sizzle, sizzle, sizzle* like some demonic symphony.

Some days, it sits at the forefront of your mind like a looming threat, the small, insignificant sound surrounding, smothering, and *suffocating*.

You burn the bacon.

It is as if when you had married the man, you had married the noise, too. When he kisses you, hand around your waist and body warm like a wildfire, it is there.

It bubbles out of his mouth and into yours.

Umph.

You don't say anything when it happens — don't even flinch — but after your husband leaves, you vomit the sound out of your body until your frame shakes like a leaf.

The next time he tries to kiss you, you dodge.

Your husband makes the sound in his sleep, too.

You had noticed after your 23rd or 24th night together. It is hard to be certain. You had only started counting *after* noticing

the noise after all.

It is your 58th night together with that dreadful sound—that, you are certain.

It comes at the tail end of his particularly guttural snores, the deep, booming noise tapering into that dreadful, dreadful *umph*.

It sounds like he is being choked, the flow of his breath cut off by the catch of *umph* in his throat. How could a man sleep so peacefully while torturing you so shamelessly?

You circle your hands around his neck just to feel the way the sound surges through his throat like a wave. *Umph.* His Adam's apple bobs when he makes the noise like driftwood swayed by a tide.

For some reason, the combination of feeling and hearing is so, so much worse.

So terrible that you don't release your tightening grip when he awakes, not when he struggles, not as he looks at you with betrayal and fear.

You don't let go until you can't feel sound or breath underneath your fingers. It is peace. It is quiet. It is stagnant water.

You release your grip.

What We Lost Between the Corn Stalks

Savannah Massey

My momma told us not to
play between the corn stalks.
    But we do anyway.

We run through
sticky, spiked leaves
as the cricket's cry gets louder.
    But my momma finds us
    after dark.

She drags us inside
    before we can lie.
We bear the signs of our sins:
    my shoes are splotched
with mud
    and your skin is pocked
with red bug bites.

My shoes won't ever be as clean
and your skin won't ever be as smooth.
We lost my momma's trust
between the corn stalks.

It was dirtied up
    by the mud
and eaten away
    by the red bugs.

Speech Delayed Yet Purpose Undeterred

Iris Xue

First Place, Essay

I didn't start speaking until I was three-and-a-half years old.

It wasn't from a lack of trying. My journey with language began in kindergarten, when I let the other kids shove past me with sticky hands to the multicolored alphabet rug for story time. As I sat at a moon-shaped table, I listened to how they chattered and gestured at the air, filling the space with tall tales of their families, their pets, and the adventures they planned to have in the playground each afternoon. I vaguely nodded whenever they spoke to me, afraid to respond in case a foreign sound slipped out.

Before I could ever hear the story, though, a slender woman with a Canadian government badge, Mrs. Mei, knocked on our technicolor classroom's door. The other kids turned to me with thin, raised eyebrows as she led me out the door, barely touching my hand through the long corridors until we reached a secluded office. Under fluttering fluorescent lights, she slid various flashcards—their bold phonics clashing with cartoon illustrations—across the rickety, lopsided card table.

As she methodically sifted through the cards, drilling English pronunciations into my malleable mind, I experimented with "ah" and "uh" and everything in between but couldn't help but think of my father, who, at night, desperate to coax syllables from my pink and perpetually puckered lips, spooned soup into my mouth while simultaneously mouthing Chinese characters, attempting to feed me words, too.

I was living a double life, and one day Mrs. Mei sensed my knit brow, furrowed from learning two words for everything and rewiring my thought process all the time.

"I know you have a lot in you," she murmured. "But no one will know the fantastic thoughts floating in your mind unless you voice them and do it well."

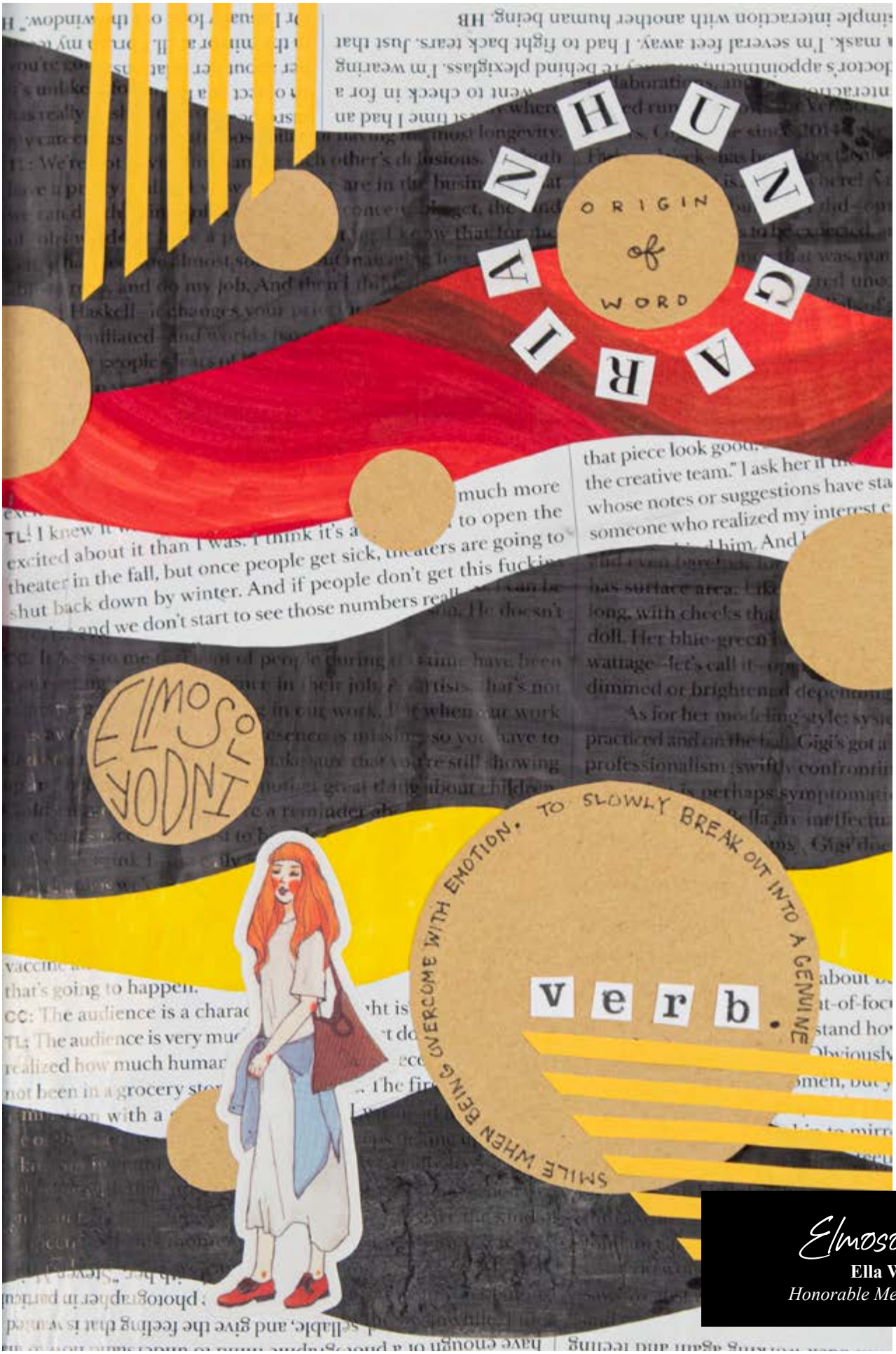
I didn't miraculously learn all of English after she said that, but I realized I needed to do everything I could to catch up and prove her right—I had something in me. When I went home, I begged my mom to take me to the library so I could spend hours reading every story until I could recount each one on the ride home. From *The Rainbow Fish* to *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, I wrapped my mind around the infinite combinations of letters forming words, and words forming the abstract ideas on the page, whether they were the depth of kindness or just block letters climbing up trees. In my room, I shuffled through flashcards until my parents had to shake me from my trance-like studying to remind me about dinner. After they set out the bok choi and egg drop soup, I sneaked glances at the labels on our food packaging, no longer needing my father to redirect my attention to the words around me.

When I started speaking, my victory tasted as sweet as maple syrup. But after I learned *how* to speak, it took much longer to *love* to speak, as well as realize how language could be a gift: I had something to offer in the infinite give-and-take of human discourse, and I didn't recognize the disservice I did to myself and those around me by not speaking my mind. After Mrs. Mei had pushed me off the diving board into a pool of the English language, the least I could do was use my voice and spit out the gulps of water I swallowed.

In later years, I pored over every opportunity to learn—and love—language. I dived through the dictionary, absorbing pronunciations and definitions to become a state spelling bee whiz. I joined the Speech and Debate team, memorizing stories and speaking extemporaneously on any topic—from the need for high-speed rails in America to *Amelia Bedelia*'s whimsical commentary—eventually winning prizes for my performances. I wrote for the school newspaper, discussed texts in seminar classes, and made a point to spread my lips wider to address my friends as "y'all."

And somewhere in the process of finding my voice, I became confident in my identity, too. Every place I traveled to, every community I joined, I thought I had to choose between my past and the future, sacrificing my accent to match others'. But accents are sticky, and they've clung to me like my kindergarten classmates' hands or Mississippi mud. My voice still carries the upticks of Chinese, the nasal elegance of British English, and vowels as wide as the Mississippi River.

Sometimes, I still fall into the trap of silence, believing my thoughts won't significantly contribute to the discussions around me. Whenever that happens, I remember the girl at the moon-shaped table, revolving around her classmates' conversations without being a part of them. I remember the girl who didn't know how to speak until she was three-and-a-half years old. I remember how far she's come, not only gaining her voice but learning how to use it well. If she could learn how to balance her identity with her languages, surely I can speak with purpose, too.



Elmosolyodni
Ella Walker
Honorable Mention, Fine Art

Rocking Chair Traditions

Savannah Massey

I am sitting on my grandparents' porch in the rocking chairs that had been passed down for generations. The armrests have been worn down by deep conversations over whiskey and cigarettes. Those were the not-so-old habits my grandfather warned me about. My eyes trace through the jagged grain of the wood. It has been smoothed by the passing years, like running water through the Grand Canyon. I splinter my fingers by picking at the wood, just to avoid looking up. I would much rather have to spend hours picking out wood chips from under my nails than look him in the eyes. I am wearing my grandfather's worn-down jean jacket with frayed ends, and it smells distinctly of the cologne he gave me. My father hates this cologne. He says it's too strong and too boyish for me, so I wear it every day with contempt.

We are continuing the tradition of the rocking chairs, though without the whiskey and cigarettes. That was lost to my dad's generation. He clears his voice, forcing me to drag my eyes from my wood-filled fingers to meet his.

"Are we going to talk?" he says. He is making his voice deeper than it normally is. This is his usual intimidation tactic, though there is nothing to interrogate out of me this time.

I look back down at the wooden rocking chair. Maybe if he drank whiskey and smoked cigarettes just like his father, then he would be less mean.

"I don't want to stay here," I say as I lift my head up to look around. My grandparents have a big yard with unruly grass my uncle forgot to cut this week, wilted flowers, and a tree half dead after being struck by lightning. I was glad when that tree got charred black in a thunderstorm. I've resented it since I fell from it. But having the wind knocked out of me as my back hit the ground was really the only way to taste fresh air. Trees half dead and grass too alive hold memories, but not good ones. There is nothing here worthy of a lifetime. "I don't want to stay here." I say it softer this time.

"Why not?" He raises his hands up like he is toasting for a celebration, but his brow is furrowed more than it should be. He motions to things I already know are there.

"Mississippi is damn good at making you realize that you don't want to stay here, and that's about all it's good for," I say back. I've never cussed in front of him before, and I can't tell if my doing it now makes him angry or sad. His face is just all twisted together and mangled with illegible emotion. I cross my arms over each other, and the buttons of my too-big jacket start rattling. The only thing I want to keep from Mississippi is this smoke-stained jean jacket, dotted with my grandfather's sins. I am fine to leave all else I have because it is all filthy and ugly love, nasty and rotten. But I can't tell my father that.

He ignores the cuss word, but I can hear something rising in his voice. Maybe it is anger, or maybe it is regret. "What happened to loving lake trips to watch the sunrise? What happened to that?"

My grandfather would take me to the lake early Saturday morning to fish. The night before would still be lingering in the sky when we got there. Every time, I would lie flat against the grass and feel cold dew drops seeping into my shirt as I watched the moon fade away into the ombré of pink and orange clouds. My grandfather would say the same thing every time: "Girl, sit up before the catfish get tired of waiting for you." He would always smile and pull out a share size bag of Skittles we got on the way there. I don't go fishing anymore and I rarely eat Skittles. The gas station we used to go to was reopened under a new name a while ago—it's not the same anymore.

"I haven't spent a Saturday like that in a long time." I stick my arms out and the buttons on my jacket rattle. "I have enough of him to take with me wherever I go." Truth be told, I have more hand-me-downs from my grandfather than his jacket and cologne. I had picked out pieces of him to weave into myself. I picked up his guitar, his button-down shirts and the keys to the Mustang he wanted to be buried with.

"What happened to my little girl?" There is more regret peeking through his voice than anger now. His face is familiar, but it shows a raw and feral emotion I have never seen before. That is the face he passed down to me. I know he can see himself in me as he blankly stares, waiting. I know he can see his nose, his eyes, and his hair. I've always looked more like him than I wanted to.

We sit in silence for so long the air feels like it is creating space between us. I go back to picking at the armrests of the wooden rocking chair. I'm tired of rocking chair traditions.

"You can't change that you're from Mississippi. It's in your voice and it's in your personality. A part of you will always be here." The anger is making its appearance now.

"I'll find a new place to be from." I get up to leave knowing

that I'll have to spend the hours I dared myself picking wood chips out of my fingers. Maybe this is the aspect of rocking chair traditions I'll leave behind, that of broken nails and splintered skin. I don't look back as I tiptoe down dry-rotted steps. I don't want to look him in his eyes again. He doesn't understand how he and I are the same, both different from our fathers.

His hands don't cradle alcohol the way his father did, his lips don't long for the kiss of cigarette smoke. He doesn't crave the sickening smell and yellow stains of death the way I don't crave staying here with half dead trees and wooden rocking chairs. He doesn't understand that maybe some things just aren't hereditary.

Stare Into The Mirror

Lila Jacks

Photography

Stop Bath

Noah Curtis Lee

I roll up my sleeves, turn up the Gershwin spiraling down my eardrums, and take a long whiff of the sharp "vanilla" scent my memory has come to love. I know it's killing my brain cells, but I guess every great artist has some tragic burden. No, mine's not alcohol, a dead family, a sex addiction, or any of those other fun self-destructive things: mine's that cylindrical bottle of stop bath, used to keep nostalgic reactions from occurring past the time they're supposed to. It reeks of vinegar or the unpleasant first bite of a lemon Warhead, but it's a smell I've conquered for my own purposes—the grease stains of a mechanical labor I can step away from and utter to myself, *I feel like it's*

Killing me, I think. I inhale and cough *killing me, I think.* Developing smells like a pretty girl framed by last year's wintry nights, when *Summertime* the cold slogged out of the earth and *the livin' is easy* nested the squirrels in their hearths. I've seen those squirrels mingling in the shivering leaves now—nothing ever dies in winter—and all under this heavy blue sun is perennial. Once, I nested myself from *fish are jumpin'* the cold in a blue-green (I'll never be able to put a name to the color) bubble jacket and pool of developer. In black-and-white photos, we mimicked those emaciated winter trees and snapped *the cotton is* a picture so near to the places life lives yet so far from any life itself.

You're gone now, and those lives we knew are hiding under that unexposed black sheath. The last pictures we have together…?

I can grasp the monochrome memories of you in my head: walking down the splintering tracks into a distance unknown *Oh, your daddy's rich* to trains, hushing the Starkville angel crying down its stale metal *And your ma is good-lookin'* tears, fleeing against the harlot shadows of a tree's *So hush, little baby* skeleton beat-up branches—we'll live, live again in this black filmy expanse unknown to men's eyes and *Don't you cry* I know I'll love you again—you, skin-clear and airbrushed not like Vogue but like the intimate graininess of a Hopper girl's dim, fading outline.

The track changes. I clean the developer off my hands with a thick purple goo. It coats the jagged underbite of my fingernails with an artificial lavender smell. I like the way it smells. I pour in the developer and watch the cloudy white bubbles suck down into the canister's bottom and start to waltz throughout the unfinished paper-mâché-bust-petrified-forest

Bring Color
Alex Gabitov
Fine Art

of the art room and turn through topsy splatters of paint and I shake the canister hard and it splatters chemicals on my shoe and absorbs into an off-white spot on my shoestrings and I fancy that I fancy yellow burns so I hobble on my feet to feel like I'm finally moving like normal people should in the vanilla scent I've come to love I shake and hobble and sway and sway and

I've been thinking a lot *I loves you Porgyy*—about us and our *Doon't let him take me* future and how we might best *Do't let m handle me* rekindle our losses *with his hot hands* Listening to your music in my ear we swayed and swayed and *If u can keep me* danced up fevers in the backseat and all of *I wnts to stay heere* a sudden I realized what a thing we were *with youu foreverr* and the window was so foggy and your breath was steam on my lips *I'v gt my maan* and I knew I loved so why is it so hard—

White specks *damn it theres the roll got caught in* last time I developed photos there were white *pulling and squeezing and hoping* specks on this background of black those white specks petrified the image into something unusable white specks on a memory a background of black my *and the dim outline of your face slowly fading* photos are useless with those white specks could try scraping them off sure but *to dark—but something gives*—to what end the photos would be scratched, and those white speckled memories would be

Condensed in tiny wet droplets. Your breath on my forehead like a child banging up against a windowsill. We parked outside of a Walmart and roamed through the unromantic white aisle lights to find Wild-Berry Poptarts. Empty shelves in C3, as if the apocalypse had come too early—or too late. I skirted the eyes of the Hopper girls we passed in the store, afraid of revisiting newly found hands in my pocket, with eyes down looking out, eyes down, but we got back to the car and I found my camera and saw you with some rough new grain and ratcheted the film across the spool and took a black sheathed photo of you and the flash made me wince

Mind played a measure from our last *night memento* you want to go back *let's stay right here* okay swayed and swayed and swayed *this music is too* lets listen to each other *swaye an sayd and swayd* your heart is beating loud *I know* music is fading *make the most of the time we still* do you still *relive this black-and-white* love *of* me *course* I *we sw ed and sw ay and sw ay ed*

I pour the yellow stop bath out and screw off the canister's lid. I hold the film up to the light and squint. There's nothing on the roll. ≋

Winterreise

Noah Curtis Lee

Honorable Mention, Short Story

His feet had been wrapped in little gray rags by his father, but the old man wasn't there, and he couldn't pin the wrappings above the ankle by himself. The rags chafed hard up against his frost-licked legs, splitting open his blistering skin and leaving little red specks behind like breadcrumbs cast away by two grim, wandering children.

A couple of words, by a thick tongue trudging across his father's gums, were slurred to him before parting. Back in the cottage, his soft unintelligible phrases intermingled with the firelit din of bark burning to wisps. Each house has its own creaking, indecipherable languages between fathers and sons: *Asshppfhuh* crackle *pshfnuhnn* crackle *helfmphh* crackle. Now their lips were frozen shut.

The wind blew, and a cold, snickering hush reverberated throughout the bramble. Two shivering black birds huddled on a branch above him. The trees cast down sneering rays of light, mocking the mortal creatures below with their beautiful gilds of ice.

His father curled his feet towards the fireplace to dry his meaty wool socks. His black leather boots dangled by a hook on the ceiling from their laces. The boots, blown by drafts burrowing into the house's tar-sealed walls, alighted two flaring, sinewy shadows opposite the fireplace. One fluttered lower than the other, and its flighty black projection sank underneath the fire's flicker, seemingly dissolving into a blank dimension of nothingness. His father took a sip from his tin cup, and his eyes drooped down into the inferno in front of him. He frowned.

The path was treacherous in the winter, but he knew it better than a thick molasses blood knows its dull arteries. This bitter morning was the second time he'd travelled in these woods alone; in the fall, he'd wandered south four miles to buy a bag of coffee beans in Ambrose. He'd saved the money for the bag himself by cleaning stables on a ranch nearby. This was his cherished manure money, and it was going to buy his father a coveted wish of his.

"Ain't a damn cup of good coffee here no more." He threw the brown sludge into the fire, and it sputtered back hot, sizzling droplets. "Not a damn cup." Later, when his father was sprawled across the scratchy wool cot the two shared, the boy ran his finger along the inside of the tin cup and licked off the last little speck of coffee. He thought it would have tasted sharp like the way his father's corked bottles smelled; it tasted like dirt.

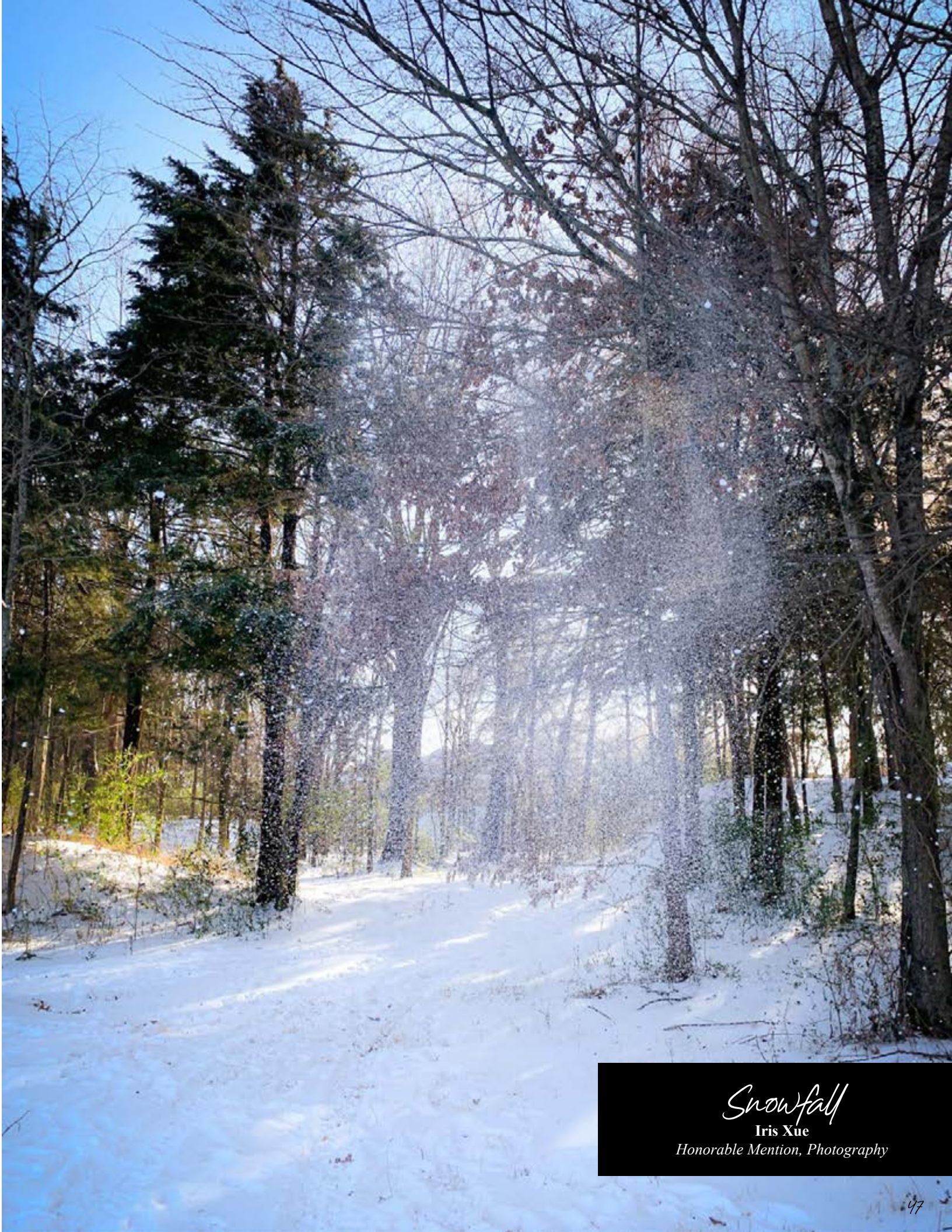
A tree in front of him lurched down to shatter the quiet of the forest floor. A snowy shriek echoed across the glassy floor of sticks, and the smell of death crept across the blue wood.

He'd fallen into a deep slumber in November. The boy traveled to Ambrose to buy him a bag of good coffee—to coax him back to some semblance of awareness. Fall was warmer. In this winter, no life knew warmth anymore.

The tree left marks of red behind, trickling out into the snow in cold, tired streams. The falling tree had gashed open a rabbit in its screaming fall from heaven. The boy, whimpering, approached the gory scene. The rabbit had been squashed by the timber and laid underneath the tree, flayed like the novice entrails of a trophy hunter. Its feet curled out from under the muscular trunk, still partially attached to its torso and skewered by oblivious flank branches. The taut ridges on the side of the animal tensed and groaned, still straining its heavy lungs for thin air.

The boy crept to the rabbit's side and touched it with the point of his pocketknife. Food was food. Its muscles recoiled. He plunged the shining knife into the meat, and a lost whimper arose from the icy trees behind him. A little cottontail, perking down its ears, hid behind him in the snow. The boy looked down at the tiny creature and dropped the pocketknife with an icy clang. The rabbit's scared brown eyes stared up and searched the boy's frosted-over soul. He motioned toward it, and the animal jolted off into the cold, cold woods.

He heaved the door closed and stood still, waiting for his lungs to stop condensing dewy wisps of breath. The tin cup sat next to the cot, filled with week-old coffee slowly slipping thin into the air. It'd be there for when he needed it. And they'd have to do without food for a couple more days. He kneeled next to the cot, jammed the closed pocketknife into the grip of his father's limp fingers, and faltered through a shattering prayer. The body didn't move.



Snowfall

Iris Xue

Honorable Mention, Photography

When Grown Men Cry

Lucianna Marquez

Second Place, Essay

Everyone thinks my dad is scary.

From the outside in, I get it. It's hard to ignore his cantaloupe sized biceps built from fifteen years of CrossFit or his hands weathered by calluses and cigarette burns from fraternity hazing. His sneezes shake the house. His English is violent, and his Tagalog is violent-er. Bowing my head to ask for help with homework makes me feel like I'm a death row prisoner, squeezing my eyes shut and turning my head away from the firing squad.

My dad is scary, but I've only been truly afraid of him once.

It was a quiet evening in December of 2020. The cool winter wind blowing through my cracked window somehow kept me awake while I rotted under two blankets and a giant stuffed duck. I resented the blinding glow of my seasonal affective disorder therapy lamp and the way it stung my eyes, but I was silently grateful I could still feel; bitterness stung better than the pins and needles that had been plaguing my insides. Late October through early March has always found a way to coax me into the murky isolation my psychiatrist calls "a mother's worst nightmare." My after-school routine consisted of smearing away the concealer hiding my vein-lined dark circles, eating pepperoni slices for midnight dinner, and answering all my family's questions with "mhm" or "oh, wow."

My phone quickly vibrated with a text from my mom, immediately triggering a hefty sigh and a weak attempt to read the message through heavily squinted eyes.

"Gab, it's time."

I grudgingly peeled my blankets off my body and climbed into the nearest pieces of black clothing I could find: a long-sleeved top and sweatpants. Pulling my hair into a ponytail, I walked out of my room to gaze at my family in the living room below. I watched Raymond struggle with the wires behind the T.V. while my mom watched my dad's face, their hands interlocked. He stared emotionlessly at our pale white Christmas tree, seated upright as if his spine was a marble column despite the pleas of the brown tasseled couch pillows behind him for him to lean back and relax. My mom wore a black dress and a full face of makeup. Raymond and my dad wore all black pressed suits.

I creaked down the stairs and slid around the corner to see the T.V. glow. Someone's phone was mirroring a FaceTime call, and I saw a man I didn't recognize standing under a tent, his face backlit by the bright Filipino sun. Our living room was pitch black except for the T.V. screen, and I was counting the seconds until I could retire back to my room and face the glare of my lamp instead. After my mom finished speaking to who I inferred was one of my *titos*, we all sat shoulder to shoulder in silence. *Tito* Unknown flipped the camera, and I saw a mass of my distant relatives all dressed in white. The static buzz of all their voices almost lulled me to sleep, but the somber looks on their faces kept my eyes open so I could attempt to mirror their expressions. I glanced to the left at my dad. His right leg was now bouncing violently, but his expression remained stone cold as he muttered "*Gusto niya na ang lahat ay magsuot din ng itim."*

It felt like we were sitting in silence for hours. I had focused my attention on a speck resting on the corner of the T.V., regretting my decision to leave my phone in my room, when the FaceTime transition of a flipping camera jolted me back to focus. There was a large, rectangular shaped hole in the ground and an oak brown casket, decorated with designs and paintings of flowers and vines, hanging above it. I didn't know my grandmother too well, but I knew she was a botanist in her soul. I could hear my heart pounding like a rapid bass drum line and feel my nose begin to sting and drip, but I silently wished I felt as melancholy as I started to look. I had never been to a burial before, let alone watched one through FaceTime. Internally, I blamed the physical distance for my emotional disconnect.

They began lowering her casket into the ground, and I watched my dad's spine crumble into pieces. In a split second he had turned from sitting as tall as a tree to collapsing into his own lap, bent over like a horribly wilted rose. His body shook like an earthquake and his sobs sounded like terrorizing thunder, reverberating off our wooden floors and leaving a ghastly echo in the room. My mom and Raymond stood up to hug him. He rose to his feet slowly and shakily, then let them hold him up while he crumpled. A boiling pool of bile and fear formed in my stomach. My dad didn't cry when he broke his elbow teaching me how to ice skate; he didn't cry after he was mugged in Memphis and they stole his heirloom watch. He survived living in a chicken coop and lived to see the

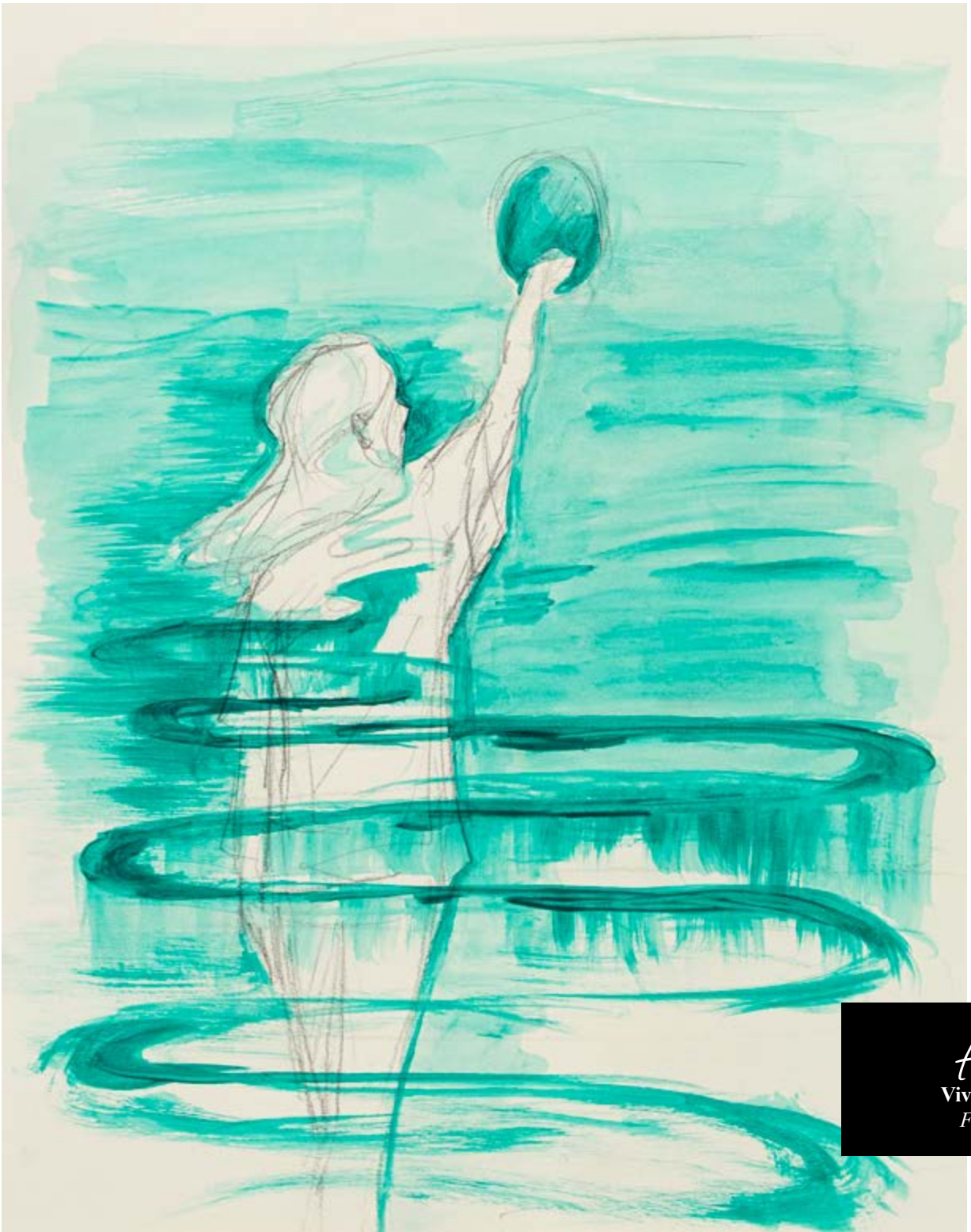
lash marks given by his dad scar, but an evening FaceTime call effortlessly ripped him limb from limb. The pool in my stomach deepened.

I stepped toward them to join in, but the second I reached around my dad's back he stood up straight immediately. He turned toward me and lifted his warm hands to grab my face. I saw his eyes flick across my face, bouncing from eye to lips to nose to brow, and all I could do was stare into his bloodshot eyes. His eyes welled as they finally locked onto mine and his brows furrowed.

"You look just like her. Too much like her, *Anak*," he whispered shakily.

He whipped around and stormed into my parents' room as my mom and Raymond followed. I collapsed. With my head in my hands, everything I hadn't felt for the past two months erupted and spilled out of my eyes into puddles on the floor.

For the next two weeks, he couldn't look me in the eye.



Hole
Vivian Peng
Fine Art

Contributors' Notes

Kaylee Alford (Indianola) believes that you can become an artist anytime you want. She is inspired by her late grandfather and her personal motto to "just keep swimming." Her creativity is fueled by random, everyday objects and turning them into something more.

Heaven Alvarado (Pelahatchie) writes to process and understand strong emotions. She says her art wasn't made for public consumption but hopes it connects with others and brings them a sense of validation. She hopes to conduct a band or choir in the future and hopes her performers will leave proud of their contribution to society.

Sydney Beane (Grenada) writes as an outlet for creativity, self-expression, and venting. She hopes that through her writing people get a greater understanding of a black woman's experience and take the time to open their horizons to understand experiences apart from their own. Her family, daily experiences, sorrows, triumphs, and shower thoughts continue to inspire her. In the future, she wants to be a data scientist and hopefully just have a simple and happy life. She wants to tell the world to not worry about competing with each other and focus on learning to collaborate and look at different viewpoints equally.

Annadele Beckman (Madison) writes so she doesn't forget all her ideas and likes the thought of occupying someone else's headspace for thirty seconds or so. She is inspired by the experiences that happen to her and her personal motto is "If the worst-case scenario doesn't involve death, it's worth trying." In the future, she wants to help solve different environmental issues ranging from fast fashion to invasive species.

Tony Bradley (Hernando) writes to express how he feels. He is inspired by DaBaby and hopes to teach English in his future. He is inspired by others' powerful words and hopes his writing will open the minds of others to form their own emotions.

Megan Colley (Oxford) hopes her photos will make people think, "Wow a bird, how nice," and hopes that they will feel happier and appreciate the world around us. She is inspired by her friends and peers and their perseverance. In the future, she hopes to keep going.

Grace Ann Courtney (Wiggins) paints as a sense of escape. She puts all her energy into producing her art, and hopes that viewers understand that art is a window into the artist's mind and memory. Grace Ann is inspired by beloved children's book character and style icon Pete the Cat. Her motto is "I don't chase, I attract." In the future, Grace Ann hopes to go to medical school and become a plastic surgeon. For now, though, you can catch her enjoying fried rice with Spam for breakfast.

Maryann Dang (Winona) writes to be more honest with herself. She is inspired by her culture and the women in her family and is a connoisseur-enjoyer of a good slice of bacon. She is an ardent believer in the saying "Hard work will get you there," and hopes to show her audience a glimpse of unique culture–as well as the pain and humanity sometimes hiding underneath. Maryann plans to become an immigration lawyer one day and have her own desk with a plant on it. What that plant will be, though, is yet to be decided.

Max Flaschka (Oxford) believes, in classic MSMS fashion, that procrastination until the night before is the best way to create a grade A story. He is inspired by settings in books that he loves, such as Isaac Asimov's Foundation novels. He hopes to continue blending mystery into something of hard rules.

Alex Gabitov (Starkville) lives by the motto, "always have a positive outlook on life." They hope in the future to become a professor in history and tell others to care about themselves. They are inspired by nature and the different ways that it grows.

Maple Griffin (Columbus) writes to express her feelings and inner emotions. Nature inspires her and is something she hopes her writing can encourage more people to get in tune with. The people who inspire her change every day, as she believes everyone has something inspirational about them. If she could talk to everyone on earth, she would tell them to "touch grass." In the future, she plans to see the world and stay close to nature.

Sebastian Harvey (Starkville) creates for fun and wants to tell the people of Earth to "chill out!" He is inspired by American Literature and Philosophy teacher Dr. Hummer and loves fried eggs with chili crisps on top for breakfast. He believes in Murphy's Law–if something can go wrong, it will. In the future, Sebastian wants to live a life of learning.

Lila Jacks (Oxford) believes that beauty can be found anywhere, even in uncomfortable spaces and, thus, is particularly intrigued by abandoned buildings and the stories each one holds. She hopes to, one day, work in the music industry, and she wishes she could make one big playlist filled with recommendations from everyone on earth. Her personal motto comes from Flyleaf: "Arise and be all that you dreamed."

Ramse Jefferson (Raymond) writes to give readers the feeling he has when he finds a story he loves. He is inspired to create by authors Rick Riordan and Brandon Sanderson, but generally inspired by our own editors Ava Grace Noe and Noah Curtis Lee. He believes that everything always works out in the end and takes this mantra with him through his future Advanced Chemistry and U.S. History tests. Ramse likes sugary cereal and hearing what others glean from his writing.

Noah Curtis Lee (Southaven) writes with a hope that it will help people become more acutely aware of themselves. He lives by the personal motto that you can never take back payment for that extra guac and is constantly inspired by the creativity of kids. In his future, he hopes to perfect his "Two Truths and a Lie" game.

Lucianna Marquez (Hernando) is inspired by others' writing and the lessons she can learn from them. She hopes her writing will give her peers a window into her experiences and passions. In her future she hopes to pay her sleep debt in full and get eight hours each night. She is inspired by Dr. Taylor Allison Swift and Jo March and hopes to share a Celsius and Oreo Thins with them soon.

Savannah Massey (Pelahatchie) is inspired deeply by late nights on Pinterest and caffeine. She hopes to double major in forensic psychology and English and enjoy breakfasts of Chocolate Chip Little Bites Muffins and cranberry grape juice. She hopes people will gain a new perspective or understanding from her work (or just think it's pretty cool).

Ava Grace Noe (Paris) started writing out of fear that if she didn't, her head might combust. Her journey started with a dog that killed her chickens, and she continues with the hope that readers will feel the warmth of the Mississippi sun through her writing. She is inspired by the memories of her past, the women in her family that empower her, and the autonomy of language. Ava Grace wants to tell the world to execute Order 66 and to enjoy a quesadilla and a cup of coffee for breakfast.

Vivian Peng (Starkville) is inspired to create by the beauty of the world, the work of other artists, and her peers who always encourage her to do her best. She likes having the ability to put her ideas down on paper and eating good food. Whether they connect with it or not, she hopes that people enjoy looking at her art. If she could say something to the people of planet Earth it would be "hello," but for now she wants to eat at Mita's Himalayan Kitchen tomorrow.

Kelvin Pool (Belzoni) is inspired by indie songs from very sad, lovesick women. And ones from equally as sad, more socially awkward, but less lovesick men, as well as the encouragement of people in his life, especially his grandma on his father's side. You can find him eating eggs, sausage gravy, and cheese grits mixed together for breakfast. Some call it goulash without ham. In the future, he plans to be an accountant and poet, or a librarian and poet, or to marry rich and write poetry. But for tomorrow, he'll probably take a nap.

Claire Rizzo (Cleveland) hopes that others can enjoy the beautiful, contemplate the abstract, get a laugh from the comedic, and realize they are not alone in the sorrowful through her writing/art. She is a natural appreciator of the world's unique details, a seeker of contemporary poetic works, and a die-hard orange juice fan. Claire plans to attend a nice east coast college, become a lawyer, and retire early to live somewhere filled with natural beauty.

Nora Ruth Scott (Columbus) usually writes for fun, but it oftentimes helps her process things. She is inspired by her mom and hopes to one day become as good at writing as she is. Through her writing, she wants to express how deep and complex people are and she believes in handling one part of a problem at a time. In the future, she wants to become a surgeon and enjoy omelets for breakfast.

Munjyot Singh (Winona) uses her photography to capture the vibes that her surroundings give off. No matter if her inspiration comes from nature or people she sees, she uses it to guide her as she takes the picture. You can find her most mornings accompanied by a stack of pancakes, which you just can't go wrong with.

Max Thompson (Hernando) wants his readers to feel the same emotions he experiences as a queer person in the South. He takes inspiration from Ocean Vuong and Ethel Cain. His personal motto is "to live and feel life to its fullest extent," which he hopes to do in the future when he becomes an actor or writer.

Ella Walker (Quitman) writes as a form of expression, and hopes her work will incite emotions in her audience. She is inspired by various things she sees in the world around her; even certain colors will move her to creating. Hannah Höch, a 20th century Dada artist, inspired her to try variations of collaging, which she has now fallen in love with. She believes in listening to more ABBA and the superiority of French toast topped with peanut butter.

Ava Wilson (Oxford) is inspired by the imperfect things that take center stage in life–as well as the perfection found within them. She creates art to help others push past their limiting mindsets and pursue what makes them happy. She, like Bo Burnham, lives to "lose that funny feeling," and at breakfast you could catch her eating any kind of muffin. She plans to attend Mississippi State University for Architecture and possibly go to grad school for urban planning.

Iris Xue (Southaven) is a senior who writes as an avenue to illustrate and translate her thoughts and emotions to others, and hopes to positively impact people with her work. She is inspired by her parents' determination and heart, which will propel her in her study of Economics and Government in the future. Iris believes in the tastiness of a Burger King Croissan'wich for breakfast, and that there is always something good to look forward to.

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