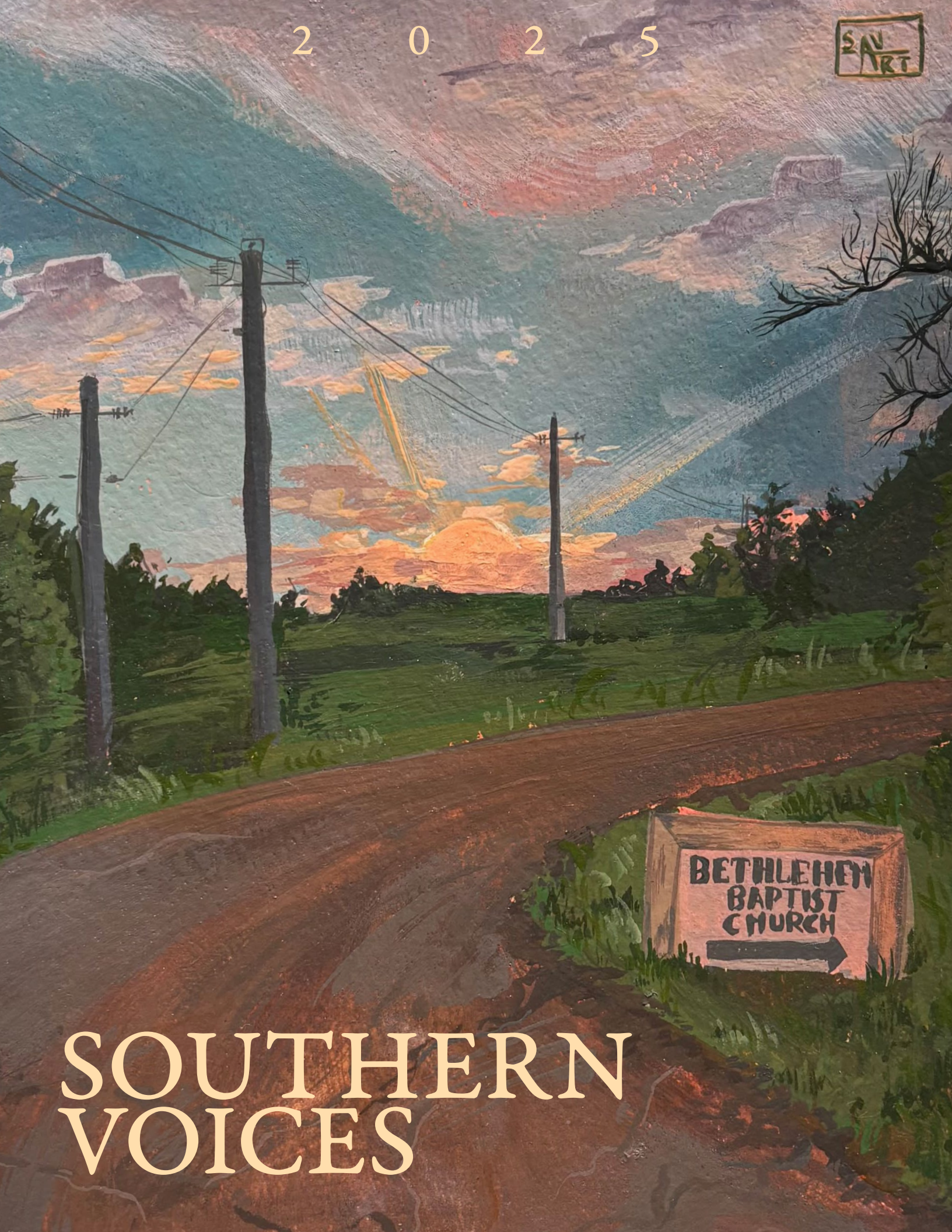


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SOUTHERN VOICES

Southern Voices

Vol. XXXVII



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Savannah Massey

Poetry Judge:

Jacqueline Allen Trimble is a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellow (Poetry), a Cave Canem Fellow, and a two-time Alabama State Council on the Arts Literary Fellow. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Offing*, and *Poet Lore* and has been featured by Poem of the Day, Poem-a Day, and Poetry Daily. Published by *NewSouth Books*, *American Happiness*, her debut collection, won the 2016 Balcones Poetry Prize. *How to Survive the Apocalypse*, her second collection, was named one of the ten best poetry books of 2022 by the New York Public Library. Her poem “The Language of Joy,” was recently included in *This is the Honey: An Anthology of Contemporary Black Poets* (Little, Brown and Company, 2024). Trimble is Professor of English and chairs the Department of Languages and Literatures at Alabama State University.

Nonfiction Judge:

Liz Egan directs the McMullan Writers Workshops and teaches creative writing at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. She holds an MFA in fiction from George Mason University and her fiction has appeared in *This Is What America Looks Like*, *MAYDAY Magazine*, *SFWP Quarterly*, *ink&coda*, and *Parhelion*, and was listed as a 2016 Gertrude Stein Award Finalist. She is co-collaborator with Kristen Tordella-Williams on the artist book *VOID*, which has been exhibited at the Mississippi University for Women and the Jule Collins Smith Museum at Auburn University.

Fiction Judge:

Kellene O’Hara has been published in *The Fourth River*, *Marathon Literary Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. Her writing has been nominated for the Best of the Net and the Best Small Fictions. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from The New School. She teaches writing at the University of Mississippi. Find her on Twitter @KelleneOHara, Instagram @KelleneWrites, and online at kelleneohara.com.

Art/Photography Judge:

Rebecca Prato is an artist and photographer whose work spans traditional darkrooms techniques, digital photography, and a variety of mixed mediums including ink and graphite, magazine paper, and embroidery. A recurring theme in her art is the natural world, particularly trees, which she often explores through fragmented compositions that, when reassembled, reveal new layers of meaning. She holds a BA in photography from Stockton University, where she graduated with program distinction and received the AI Gold Memorial Purchase Award. Rebecca also earned an MFA in photography from Indiana State University, where she was recognized as an Outstanding Graduate Assistant. Her artwork has been featured in both solo and group exhibits throughout Central Indiana.



Girlhood
Rebekah Storment

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my obituary is written on a postcard, says wish you were here

Savannah Massey

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


i. Maybe you could pull me out of the water and wrap me in your clothes one last time—please. We could pretend nothing has happened between us until I get too cold to call yours.

ii. When I was seven, I almost drowned. The hotel we were staying at had a pool, and Casey and Michael wanted to swim. I’ve been told that I managed to end up in the deep end with a pool float until I accidentally let go. Momma talks about the stranger who jumped in and pulled me to the top like he’s a hero. She brings it up a lot, but I don’t remember what happened enough to recount it, only enough to be scared of it happening again.

iii. Swimming together in the pond became so much of a habit that you were synonymous with the smell of dirty water, mud, and pollen. I stepped into the pond exclusively in your company because I didn’t like the idea of being stranded alone on water again. We started out holding hands under the surface of the pond, slowly wading through the algae and endless ripples. With each visit, we got farther and farther out: walking, tiptoeing, swimming, running and jumping in. You were my gateway drug into an ego death of sorts—leaving the seven-year-old part of me on the grass just so I could hold your hand.

iv. Three years back, the August sun set over our last afternoon together, stretching our silhouettes across the rippling water and overgrown grass. That time, we didn’t swim. Instead, we sat against trees facing each other. You told me this wasn’t going to work out while I kept eye contact with the ground, shredding poor pieces of grass between the ridges of my fingertips and nails. When the sun finished dragging her colors under the horizon, we laid on our backs in silence, listening to the hum of cicadas and the uneven pairing of our breath. Before leaving for last time, you handed me a messy bouquet of cattails and wildflowers while the chasm pursed between your eyebrows said sorry.

v. Waiting for someone three years away to come back is like treading water in the middle of a lake. It’s the kind of empty waiting that sets in before you can peel drenched clothes off goosebump skin or manage the wet hair clinging to the sides of your neck. So, I stopped swimming, cattails too far away to pull me up, to know what it felt like to have my lungs get heavy, to have my pulse lie flat, to be static. I heard that if you pretend, drowning isn’t that different from breathing in. I wanted to know if the inhale felt anything like being alive—anything like being yours again.

vi. I am at the top of the pond. Cold. Face down. Purple. Bloated. Dead. Geese and their parted feathers accompany me, buoyant and bobbing. Trees and their branches dip down and make shadows that say my condolences. We are all in the midst of waiting: for warmer weather, for the leaves to grow back and for you to stop by. You didn’t visit me over the years like you promised. 

THE CHRIS READ AWARD FOR FICTION

The Chris Read Award for Fiction, instituted with the 1994 issue of *Southern Voices*, honors a member of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science’s Class of 1991. Christopher David Read was an active leader at MSMS as a member of Emissaries, the Debate Club, and the *Southern Voices* staff. Chris’s first love, however, was writing. Southern style.

Chris often wove his Southern tales late at night. Chris would compose either on the computer or on (his favorite) the old, brown Royal typewriter he had bought from the pawn shop down 13th Street South. Faking sleep, I would watch the grin on Chris’s face as he worked out the next great story. When he finished, Chris would always “wake me” and excitedly read his new story to me. He never knew that I had been hiding, watching his creative process with admiration. I was not the only one to admire Chris’s work. This award stands as testimony to the admiration that we all held for Chris and his work and as a memorial to the Southern writing tradition which Chris loved.

Chris had the potential to become a great writer. Unfortunately, Chris never reached this potential: he was killed in a car wreck on January 17, 1993. Though Chris will never attain his dream of writing a great novel, all of those who loved and respected Chris hope that the recipient of this Award, as well as all the other aspiring writers at MSMS, will achieve their dreams.

Michael D. Goggans Class of 1991

Boston Sunset

Ramse Jefferson



How to Handle Your Very Own Crown of Thorns

a step-by-step guide

Savannah Massey
First Place, Poetry

1.
Know that the outline of your hands and feet hurt
and the insides aren't even there.
Know that they did it and did not ask for forgiveness.
Know this is what you get for wanting
only what you can't have.
When your teeth are slick red and
your spit tastes like metal,
bite the bit
and realize they never planned on saving you
the same way you promised to save them.
2.
Tear the hole in your own chest.
Hold on to your ribs like they are all you have.
Show them your heart on your own.
Make them watch
the pulsation of your beating, open chest
and confront the fact that you are still alive.
Make them watch
the collapse of your lungs following their expansion
from screaming out all of your sins.
3.
Let them know that you could have
been their dove, could have been
their olive branch.
Let them know that you could have
been the land just close enough
and the water putting distance between
you and them.
4.
Watch as they walk away
and call you nothing more than a bird
holding a stick and looking
for some place to land.
Know they are not coming back. 🌊



Untitled Saint
Althea Wells

7:00 p.m. Nightly News

Grace Ann Courtney

Citizens of America, we come to you tonight with a special announcement.

I always loved how David looked doing a serious broadcast. A wrinkle formed between his eyebrows, creating the cutest dimples on either side of his forehead. His suit framed his broad shoulders in the perfect boxy way, creating a slant that led down to his biceps.
This news might be hard to hear, so we recommend you pause what you are doing.

Whatever you say, David. He can tell me what to do all day. I can tell tonight's broadcast is important by the way his fingers fold together and his thumbs tap against one another. He unfolds his hands briefly to grip his yellow pencil. His eyes dart to the left.
Thank you, David. We recommend that young viewers leave the room.

Ugh, that bitch is back. I don't know what he sees in Amy. Her hair is dry; I can tell by the way the light shines through the thinnest parts. Her foundation cakes on her face and suffocates the pores on her nose. The lipstick she wears is too orange for her cool undertones. I sent their station a letter months ago detailing how awful her bangs looked on her round face; I suppose they do not care to listen to their most loyal fans.
The asteroid orbiting Mercury for the last four years has suddenly been knocked out of orbit and into a path of direct collision with Earth. Specialists are saying there is nothing to stop its path of destruction.

Finally! David's silky voice returns to my ears. I wonder if he knows that we're on a first-name basis. Oh, I'm sure he would not mind. I learned online that his personality type is ISFJ, as is mine. That whore Amy's is INFP. She doesn't know him like I do. She hasn't memorized how his lips curve around vowels and

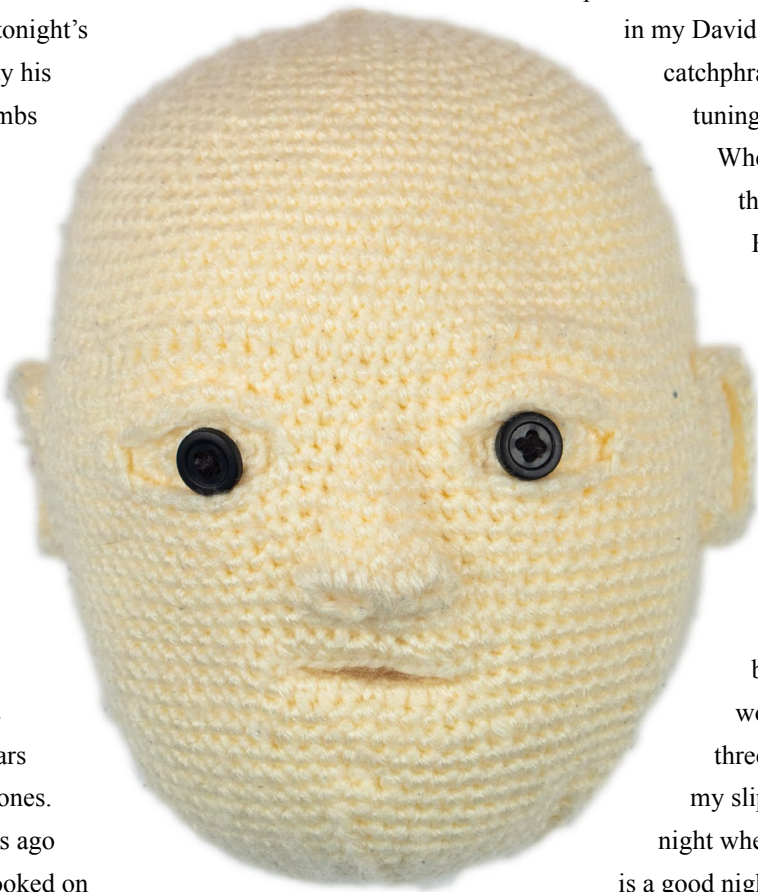
consonants. She doesn't know how a vein pops in the top right of his forehead when he speaks about things that get him riled up.
The collision is set to occur in one hour. Records were sealed until an hour before destruction to prevent public panic.

Will someone just tell her to be quiet? I'm trying to indulge in my daily David! Her nasally voice does nothing but set me off. She's wearing that awful orange pantsuit tonight. The last time she wore it, I had no choice but to throw my fork at the television. The glass ricocheted off the screen and sprinkled onto the carpet. A shard tore a hole

in my David pillow. It has his signature catchphrase on the back: Thank you for tuning in, goodnight. Custom made. When he sang those words, I felt them in the bottom of my soul. He was speaking to me.

The vessel speed due to proximity to Earth will result in the obliteration of the ozone layer, followed by absolute fatality. Thank you for tuning in. For the last time, goodnight.

Once, a storm caused my power to blink before I could hear those velvet words. I didn't sleep for twenty-three hours. I slide my feet into my slippers and trudge to bed. Any night when David is the voice I hear is a good night. I kiss the framed photo he once held in his palm to sign and allow myself to slip into dreams. I yearn for 7:00 p.m. when I can see him again tomorrow. He has such a gift to make viewers fully comprehend his news. My rest will be peaceful tonight. 🌊



Holden, Jr.
Izzy Rushing

A Path Forward

Langston Smith

Jarnathon, or “Big Jar,” as they all called him back home, was finally on his way. He was gone, never to return. The quiet air, full of the smell of trees and ants, was giving him some clarity. Leaving had been such a fuss, what with all the goodbyes and last-minute gifts for the journey. But now, out here, he saw how important this was for him. This was what his whole life had prepared him for, what growing up in that stuffy town had led him to.

The path extended before him, a dusty cobblestone road. He walked forward confidently, smiling to himself. This was his chance to make a future for himself; wherever this road led, he would go.

I’m good at something, he promised himself as he watched an orange and grey bird flap into the canopy around the road. *Out here, I’ll find what it is*. His calling, his future. He *knew* it. Ahead of him, he *thought* he could make out something in the road.

As he came closer, he saw that it wasn’t something in the path at all. The path had just split, one way going left, one way going right, and the trees began again in the middle. Still, here was his first choice. The first decision that would bring him a step closer to his destiny.

Jar leaned to the right, taking a curious look down the sloping road. A few old rocks surrounded the right path as it continued through the forest. He took a step to the left and looked down the opposing choice. Instead of rocks, the left path featured a little pond of green water before it too curved into the trees. He was drawn to the left path, for a moment, but then reconsidered. *Maybe the water means it’s muddy, I wouldn’t want to ruin these new boots*. He turned back to the right path, but the sight gave

him pause. *Well, that way could be rocky, I’d rather have muddy boots than tear up the soles on gravel*. He considered this for a moment, then felt foolish. Those little details didn’t really matter. What mattered was where they led, what grand places and people lay at the end of the road. And... *How could I possibly know?* He didn’t have a map, a guide, even an inkling of where he should be going. He felt his breath hitch. *Who even made this road? What am I doing? Where—*


He took a step back, forcing himself to breathe. He just needed to take a minute, he needed some perspective. He just had to make a decision.

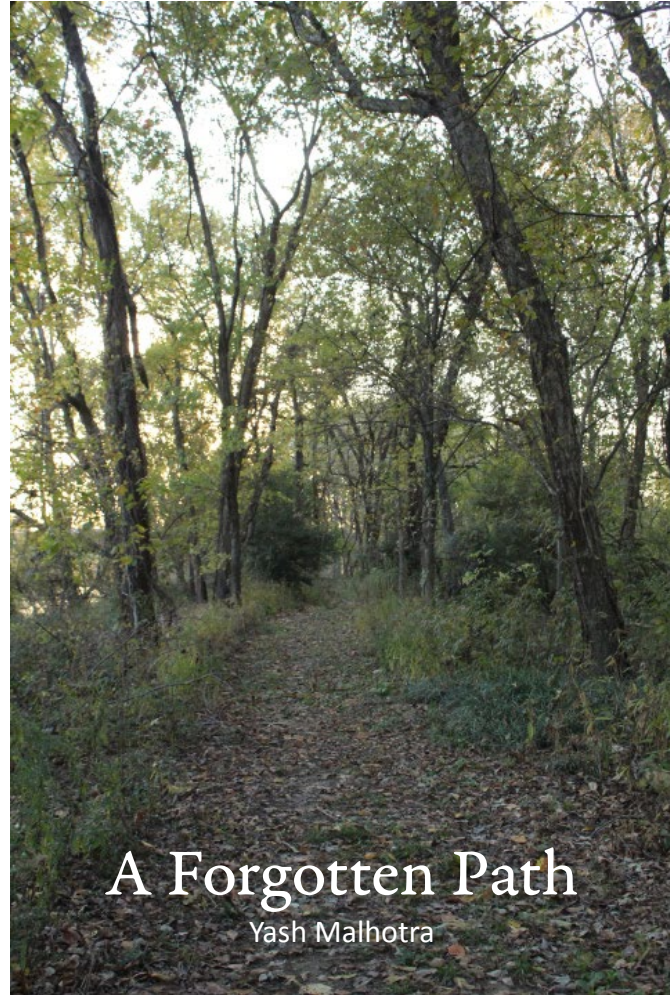
The sun had begun to sink into the trees as Jar sat on the dusty road, a notebook open on his lap. With a pen that the village elder had gifted him for the journey, he had scratched the outline of a pros-and-cons list. But... he *didn’t know any. There was nothing to know!* He let the pen drop, running his hands through his hair with a grimace.

His heart suddenly jumped, and he lurched to his feet. He had to make a decision, he had to just go. He started toward the right path, one foot after the other... but stopped. How could he just cut off half his future like that? What could be on the left side, what if that’s where he *had* to go. His stomach twisted, and he turned around and went to the left

path. He made it almost four steps before he swung back around, cursing himself. He paced in a circle, thoughts running together into a panic as a fork in the road waited for him.

After a moment, Jar recovered himself. He put away his notebook, stood equidistant from either path, and forced himself to think. *Which way?* It was such a simple thing, such a simple choice. He took a step back.

He sighed, glaring at the orange rays of sunset over the trees. He took another step back. And back, and back, and back... the fork disappeared behind him as he turned around and walked the way he came. 



A Forgotten Path

Yash Malhotra

A Delta Wedding


Claire Rizzo

The diamonds cut deep
cut my heart into strings
into ribbons I tie around half-solved problems and half-ignored prayers

Patched together from lace and leather
I rose from coffee-colored mud like a backwater Aphrodite
these hands will never know a day where dirt rings their crescent nails ruddy

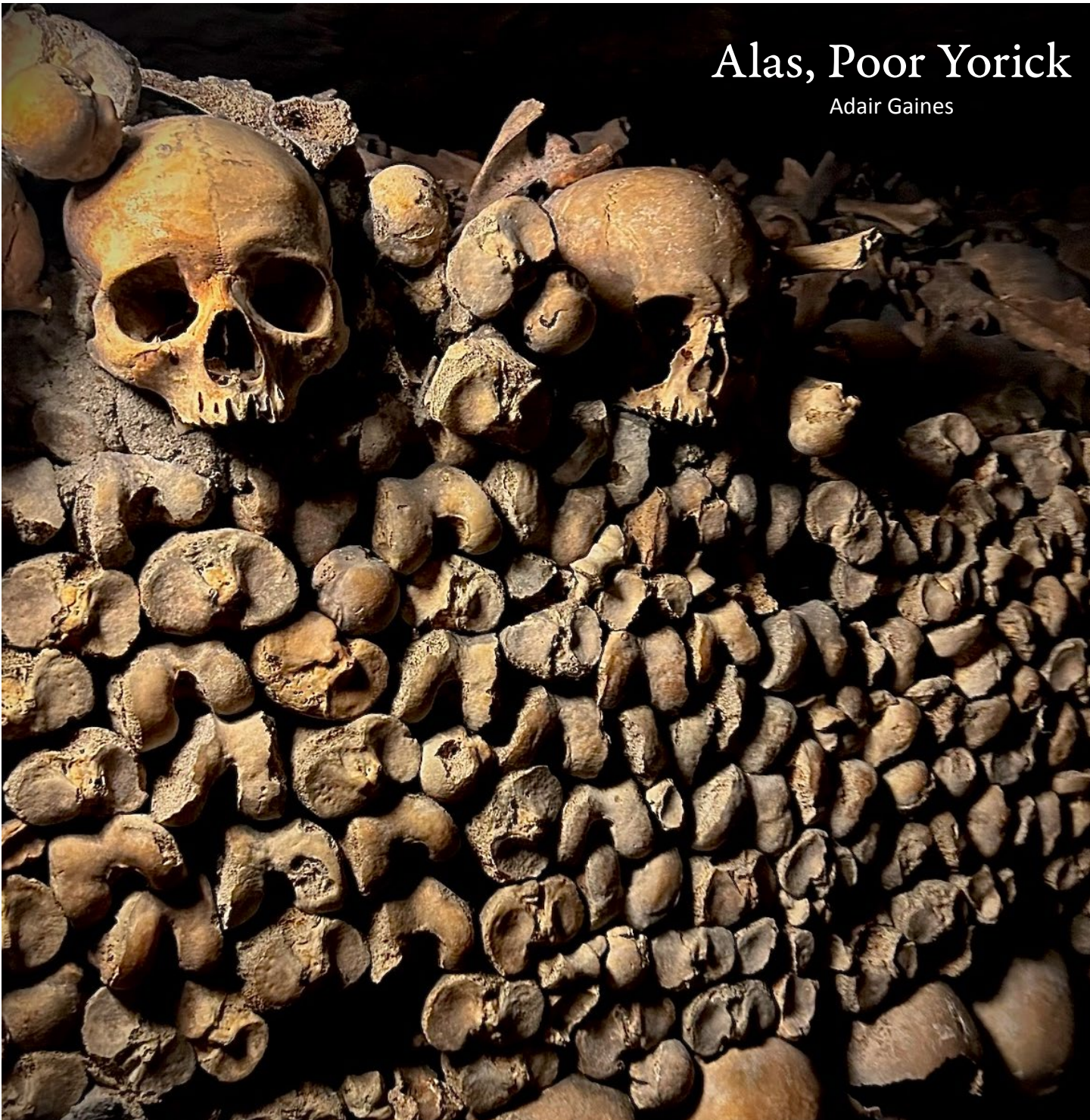
My knuckles crack like the roads back home
home, where giving up is weakness and slowing down is pride
where I was forged from shattered bottle glass and rusted wavy sheets

Half-caught words roll around my mouth like freshwater pearls
strings and strings barely escape
too much to ignore but too little to understand

The truth of it all cuts the wings off of butterflies
The levee breaks under the pressure
No ebb remains for that
without end 

Delta Skyline

Yash Malhotra



Alas, Poor Yorick

Adair Gaines

Fire and Blood

Jaidyn Bryant
Third Place, Fiction

Mother sits at the edge of the tree, carving another rib for us to eat. She starts cutting herself where she normally does, starting where the sternum meets the breast and carefully tracing the flesh with her knife down to the belly button and around the torso. She has done this many times before. We watch in

reverence as she does it again, as a queen sacrifices herself to her people. As the blood flows, its distributaries trickle down to my feet, anointing them.

In the before, I loved gas station puddles. I loved the way the water mixed with the dirty oil and bent the light into rivers of rainbows. Rainbows are supposed to be a miracle that you look to the heavens for. A mythical phenomenon with a leprechaun and a pot of gold at the end. But gas station rainbows were much more attainable, a piece of everyday magic in an otherwise ugly place. I think God wanted us to have gas station

rainbows, wanted us to look at the ground and see magic. I always got distracted by beautiful things. Maybe that’s why I didn’t notice the storm right in front of me. As the rain beat harder into the pavement, I wondered what the hell was taking my mom so long in the grocery store. Did she run into another estranged classmate or family member? How many people could she hold onto? Car time was usually my favorite time, but I was growing restless to get home now. This would be the last normal memory I could hold onto before the Great Famine. God, how miraculous was a grocery store, a place necessary for survival but also a great hangout. I understand the couponers now. Before, they seemed crazy, hoarding all the food when there was so much abundance in front of us. But I guess they smelled the storm before we did.

In the now, I love the quiet. I love the moment when Mother’s blood reaches my flesh, as unworthy as it is. The look on her face has grown tired, weary of the world, desirous to move to the next. Finally, she pulls the last rib from her chest and begins the healing process. For seven days, the entire village feeds off her while my kind, the priests, take her to heal.

The four priests including myself carry Mother back to her sanctuary. It is a grassy grave in a sacred place with healing earth. Some say it is the mud God made Adam from. Some say this used to be Eden. But Eden was a garden, a place for growing things. Here we stay stagnant, just warding off our inevitable deaths. Feeding time and time again from Mother.

This time, as I’m about to finish burying her, she reaches her hand out and calls to me.

“Nathaniel,” she says, “I don’t want to die anymore. I want to live.”

Out of the respect I have for her, I listen.
“Do you know how torturous this is? Bleeding and dying every week to settle the stomachs of this ungrateful village? You all always hunger for more. More. More. I shall put an end to this hunger.”

“What do you have in mind? Killing yourself for good?”
“No. Do you not listen? I told you I want to live.”
“Well, what do you propose? How should the village survive?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Pick a new me. A new mother. Make it an honor to die every week for others.”

“Okay. And how should we choose?”
“Do gods even get to choose their names or their symbols? Do they get to choose how their image will live on? Or do they get caught in a trajectory that they can’t turn back from?”

A destiny that can’t go unanswered...”
“So what do I do? How do I pick a girl?”
“Find one more courageous than most but also less selfish. She has to be self-righteous to want to take this ‘honor’ but also selfless enough to commit to it.”

I set out to consult the other three priests on the best course of action.

“So, what do we do?”
“You heard what Mother said. Find a new one.”
“And you don’t want to contest that? Find a way to make her stay?” the short one said.

“What if we convince Old Mother to stay and get a New Mother to join? And have twice the amount of food! We could usher in a new era!” the greedy one said. With the other priests knowing the truth now, I couldn’t turn back. So we headed to the village and went on the search for until Mother woke. The four of us search the village for a reasonable candidate. We finally stumble upon a humble cottage with a teenage girl and her father. Her father is honored at the possibility but the girl remains quiet.

Finally, she says, “I will because I have to.” We wake Mother from her grave and do the pre-sacrifice ritual once more. We wash her hair, scrub her back and the dirt from beneath her fingernails. We brush her hair until it is perfect. We take extra care in making sure she believes it is the last time. Finally, we adorn her in our own purple priest’s robes. We carry her on our shoulders until we reach the grove. The New Mother is waiting as well. I gather them in the center and say the sacred words. I hand the sacramental knife to the New Mother. The greedy priest then hands me the new knife while short priest subdues the Old Mother with rope. He ties her hands behind her back and then to the tree. I do the horror of carving up Old Mother since it was I who had gave her false hope of her new life. She could never have a new life. How could a goddess become human? How could she stop sacrificing herself? How could we stop needing her?

I plunge the knife into her chest. Tears flow from eyes, stinging like hellfire. Disbelief pours out of her body and into our world. Like a banshee, she wails over and over. As she spits fire with her dying breath, everyone takes communion in her blood.




Aging

Sasha Harvey

I ferment like a fine wine,
becoming only sweeter with age.
Wrinkle like a raisin in the sun,
etching intricate patterns onto my skin.
Scars web across my calloused fingertips,
like lightning piercing the cloudless sky.
Sunspots dot my skin, mimicking craggy rocks
scattered across sand.

The sea roars through me, beckoning me into the deep.
I dip my toes into the sparkling water,
wading through turquoise expanse;
I rest on a crashing wave.
Finally, I submerge myself,
sinking like a feather,
the sun winking above.
Fish swarm around my soon limp body;
my eyes flutter shut.

Awake once more.
I’m lying on thick moss carpet,
body sinking into the earth.
Trees sway above, dancing to the wind’s song.
Insects crawl over me;
moth legs caress my eyes, beetles pierce my lungs,
and larva burrow into bone.
Roots slither over my deteriorating body,
hugging me close.
I’ll be encompassed in ferns, then saplings.
A tree will eventually rise,
towering out of my ashes, thriving on my blood. 



Nature’s Purity

Cassie van Riessen
First Place, Fine Art

Goin’ Walkin’

Le’Baudrio Bridgeford

“Come on, boy. Try not to lag behind too much.”
I’ve never been in the woods before. It is dark out, and I
would rather be home, but Pa said we were goin’ walkin’, and it
was so.

It’s so noisy.
Chirps echo and the bushes rustle all around us. Some
sounds I don’t really recognize. In the distance I hear a “Who?”
Who indeed. I never was so close that I could hear all of this, and
I never cared to. You’d think everything would be sleeping, that’s
what I do when the sky goes dark.

Crunch.
My ears perk at the sound. I stop and look around, but
nothing is there. All I hear is Pa’s footsteps and the cracking of
leaves. I call out to him.
“Don’t you start!”

Doesn’t even turn to look me in the eye, still walking
on. He sounds like Grandma and Grandpa in that moment. They
never were fond of me, saw me as no more than a nuisance that
took up space in the house. I got tired of all their fussin’. Learned
to shut em’ out at some point—couldn’t take the noise no more.
I only listened to my Pa and my Pa only. He call my name, and I
come runnin’. When he say “don’t start!” I don’t.

Still, I would prefer he wasn’t so brash about it, raising
his voice and all.

Never seen him like this before. He and Grandpa were
so loud just before this. Arguing about sum I didn’t really listen
to. Just knew it had something to do with me. Wherever this little
trek was headed is prolly mighty hard on him, and I don’t wanna
make it no harder.

Even then, I feel my legs gettin’ weaker. Walking used
to be so fun, but I can’t really keep up with Pa.

I won’t stop, though. Wouldn’t wanna let Pa down.
We been growing apart, see. It always seems like he
never has time for me anymore. Admittedly I never have the
energy anymore either, but I wish he wasn’t so busy. I’d at least
try, just for him.

I know it must be Ma that keeps him so busy. He’s
always with her instead of me. I know they must be hidin’ some-
thing, but I didn’t really care to know long as Pa continued to be
my buddy. They’ve been complete weirdos since ‘bout a month
ago, though it feels to me closer to six.

Thud.
I fall to the ground. I really can’t do it no more. I let out
a whimper that lets it be known that I can’t keep on.
Pa hesitates, softened for the first time all night. He
stares at me kind’er blankly. No longer angry, but instead just,
guilty. Pa never was hard to read, and I always knew how he was
feelin’ whether not anyone else did. He wouldn’t change much,
but nothing gets past me. I can smell the struggles from a mile
away.


“Poor thing. Dad is a damn fool. Don’t understand a
thing.” I close my eyes, I could go to sleep right here and now.
But Pa has other plans, and scoops me up in his arms,
planning to carry me the rest of the way. I can’t remember the
last time he did anything like that, ‘least not with me. Around
the house he and Ma would carry something around in a similar
fashion. It was loud, too, the loudest of them all, whatever it was.
Even in the dead of night, though it never stopped my shuteye.

I had only gotten near it once. It sneezed and began to
make this awful wailing noise. Ma yelled at me, so I backed off.
She only yelled like that when I was feenin’ to eat something
I wasn’t supposed to. Clearly, I wasn’t allowed to be near this
thing. If I was such a danger, I knew it’d be best to keep some
distance between us.

But now, it’s just Pa and me, just like it was before. It is
nice.

I feel myself being lowered. My eyes don’t open—I just
feel the cold ground and the breeze on my face.

I look up at Pa, and somethin’ unfamiliar stares back at
me from the clutches of Pa’s hands. Can’t make out exactly what
it is, can barely see anything. All ‘cept the moon high above. It’s
a bright white light that nearly blinds me.

Bang. 



Self Portrait
When In Dismay

Grace Ann Courtney

Death Bed’s Reckoning

Savannah Massey

Honorable Mention, Poetry

Did you know
a ventilator can rattle out
God’s final words to you?

[rarely like a plea,
mostly like a demand]

Between each crackle of breath during
the artificial act of being alive,
He’s whispering his final judgment

push air in

and it is a reminder that
all you found love in
is His.

So you’d better give thanks
while you can because
He’s on His way
and doesn’t plan
on making you wait long.

pull air out

no—NO
It is mine and always was mine

[ugly white flowers, water-wilted books, dry rotted door frame, shitty break-up texts, that one strand of
hair the barber missed, overgrown grass, a printed obituary hung like a trophy, an F in the mix
of A’s, bent license plate from the ditch, one wedding ring that made it through divorce, a list of old friends’
phone numbers, stolen glasses in the wrong prescription]

and He can wait for me

[to live, to say goodbye, to follow through with the good promises and break the bad ones,
to write the Will that was useless until now, to donate the closet, to sell the guitar, to catch fire-
flies, to eat blackberries]

push ai—————flatline ≡

Mississippi Worm

Sasha Harvey

My ring-covered fingers traced across my equipment’s ridged armadillo leather, multipurpose metal, and cherry wood flanks to brush off dust. As I strolled past my French Revolution guillotine, my blurry reflection caught my eye; I glowered at my face, not quite presentable enough for the bloodshed soon to occur. I flung off the rucksack from my shoulder and rummaged through it. My jeweled fingertips skidded on blades, tap danced over guns, and waltzed on taxidermied cardinals before they finally discovered my eyeshadow kit. With the delicacy of a were-wolf mangling its prey, I yanked the vermilion makeup palette out of the overstuffed bag, somehow avoiding all sharp objects. With a flourish, I dabbed gunmetal gold around my eyes, giving them the glow of a golden eagle swooping for the kill.

“Sherry darlin’, you slower than a tortoise. Early Bill gets the kill you know,” Laura’s rough voice called from the kitchen above.

“Give me a second, you old crow,” I howled back, stuffing my makeup deep in the sack.

Chuckling at Laura’s wit, I selected my weapons for the hunt: a custom-designed barbed net to entangle my prey, a Bolshevik Revolution rifle, nightshade for potential human foes, and

my sharp silver Bohemian Broadsword. After strapping my gear to holsters and hooks on my jacket, I trudged up the basement steps feeling heavier than a rhino.

I creaked through the maze of my antebellum house, my taxidermied foes’ dead eyes tracking every step. After bidding goodbye to Laura at the door, I started up my dirt-stained GMC Truck and pattered a half mile down the gravel road to my hunting shack on stilts.

Hours in the Mississippi sun trickled by, my joints aching and my eyes bloodshot. I was about to phone Laura and beg her to bring me lunch when I spotted movement in the corner of my eye. It’s a rare sight. Something I hadn’t seen in years. Thousands of mythic stories swirled through my head. A decades-old one caught the light and drew me in. It wrapped me in its blurry embrace, familiar in its wornness.

I was five when I first saw it. Pop was there but wouldn’t kill it. “You kill a worm once, you ain’t gonna kill it again. If you do, the brother’s wrath gonna get you, honey,” Pop murmured in my ear, clasping me closer to him.

We watched it from afar, its knife-sharp teeth glistening and its lustrous body reflecting rainbows onto the canopies above. I didn’t have the taste for the hunt then, only cowered in its godliness, its perfection. Young as I was, I recognized what it was; it was the mystical, deadly, ghastly Mississippi Worm. Even then I knew that if you killed a worm, you were a labeled as a

true hunter, eventually becoming an esteemed elder when you couldn’t clutch a knife anymore.

My vision flashed back to reality. Its body slithered underneath the soil, tracing a trail of cracks in its stead. Pop’s words echoed through my head.

“Now, you can’t kill no worm like you kill another creature, you hear me, Sher? You better get you a knife and net or that worm’s gonna get you, like Papaw was got, not the other way around,” Pop had grunted out while he was cleaning his bloodied hunting knife.

With the ease of years of practice, I unfolded my net and gripped my Broadsword’s pommel.

Pop’s words of warning whispered through my head: “If you ain’t patient with a worm, it’ll drag you down faster than mama pulls out her paddle.”

I waited, hands shaking in anticipation and terror. My net was clutched in my left hand, sword in my right. Its path traced in risen dirt, creating art in its intricate patterns. It would surface soon; a worm could only go so long without taking a breath. I crept down the shack’s ladder and began tracking its path, closing the gap between us.

When it finally emerged, I was prepared. I pounced

Hanging Yellow Leaves

Cassie van Riessen

on its glistening head, like a cowboy riding a bull, slinging the hooked net over it. Its bellowing roar startled the sparrows to take off into the sky. My eardrums throbbed in time to my heart’s thuds. Its body, long as a semi truck, wriggled beneath me, almost bucking me off, but it couldn’t break free of the net’s grip despite its struggle. Its glittering ever-shifting irises met mine through the net, reflecting emotion more than any human’s gaze.

As I prayed God would forgive me for killing such a stunning unearthly creature, I screamed to the blistering sun and drew my sword from the sheath; I stabbed it deep into the eye meeting mine, my own eyes burning with sweat and the dust dancing in the air. A sense of overwhelming mourning washed over me, the knowledge of what I had done sinking in. I hummed a lullaby as it let out its last stuttering breaths, singing it to sleep as my father did before me. The worm’s body began glowing, signaling its ascension. In death, it’s even more glorious, glowing like the stars that formed it, trailing golden blood into the red clay soil. 🌊

Found Some Water

Izzy Rushing



Faded Memory

Rina Xu

Raindrops

Colin Chung

Honorable Mention, Fiction

I gingerly tug the regalio from the soil, smelling the sweet honey collected in its large, cupped petals.

“They only bloom when it’s about to rain,” you told me once.

I remember you loved to cook with the petals; if I brought back a full basket, the next morning I would be greeted by your soft smile and a plate of regalio fritters. I’m still trying to figure out how you got them so crispy.

I place the regalio in my basket and continue trudging along the dirt path. The forest is quiet today; all I hear is the wind whispering between the oak leaves and the rumbling *ribbit* of a devilfrog. As I cross into the marsh, I can feel my boots filling with water and algae seeping between my toes. I’m careful not to step on the tangles of black kudzu; one misstep and the vines won’t let go. Eventually, I splash over the kudzu groves and land onto half-sunken chunks of rotted wood. I feel a tug in my chest; me and you built this pier across the marsh two summers ago. I remember we would haul willow branches from morning to noon, singing songs to pass the time. When we finally finished, we sat on the edge with our feet skimming the water below and listened to the crickets.

“Do you think it’s going to last the flooding season?” I asked, drawing ripples with a twig.

“Yeah, as long as you’re here to fix it with me,” you said, your eyes meeting mine. I’ve never seen anything more indigo in my life.

I clamber onto the slimy remains of the pier and stare up past the drifting leaves. Grey clouds blanket the sky; I don’t have much time. Mud compacts to dirt as I find myself back on the path and under the shade of oaks. Quickening my pace, I can barely make out the dilapidated roof of Tom’s cabin through the dark. Do you remember the day we first moved in? He brought us fried lotus root and catfish. The next morning, he taught us how to weave fishing line out of the ivies nearby.

“Cross ‘em over just like that,” he said as we watched his rough hands gently thread the stalks.

Like the others, Tom left last year.

“The rain’s only goin’ get worse an’ worse,” he told me, before packing the last of his bags.

I feel icy drops of water on my body. Soon enough, torrents of rain are lashing across my skin and the wind is screaming into my ears. But I can’t turn back yet. I begin hurrying down the path, soft dirt mashing beneath my boots. As I reach the end of the trail, my foot catches on a stray stone, and I fly forward. My body tumbles down a grassy hill and I slam face-first onto the ground, the thick smell of blood, rain, and regalios surrounding me. When I finally push myself up, there it is before me: a frail apple tree sapling, clinging to drowned soil. You planted it the day before I lost you forever.

“When this tree grows up, we’ll be eating apple pie for months,” you said that day, patting the soil.

“Yeah, ten years from now,” I laughed.

“Are you not going to be here in ten years? Because I’ll still be here.”

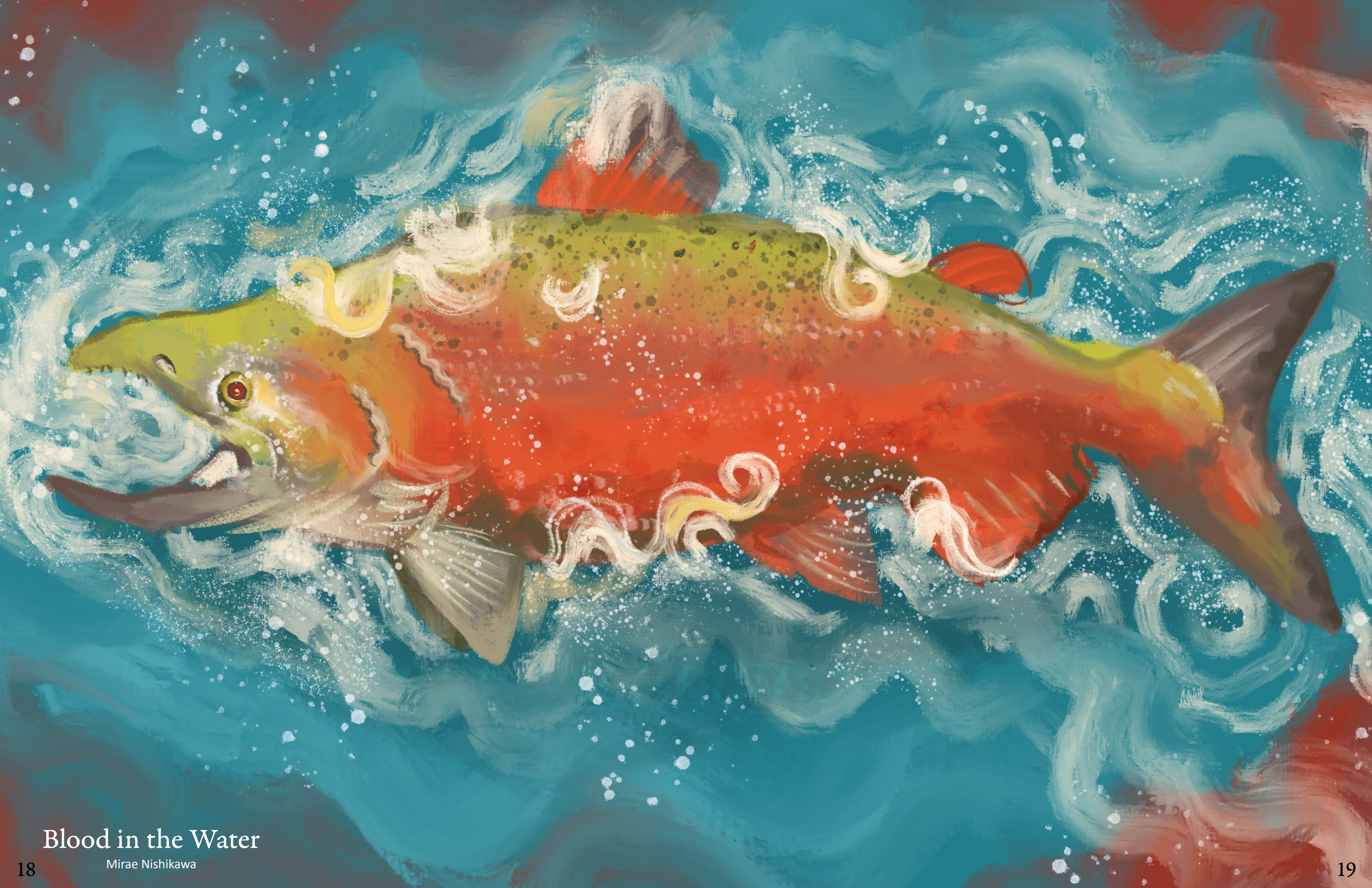
“No, I’ll still be here too.”

“But for how long, then?”

I can’t see anything anymore; maybe it’s because of the rain or the tears or maybe it’s all the same thing. All I can feel is the torrents beating down on my skull and cold water climbing above my knees. Soon it’s going to cover my entire body.

“For as long as you stay.”

I hope the water will carry me back to you. ☹️



Blood in the Water

Mirae Nishikawa

Tints of Orange

Savannah Massey

Second Place, Fiction

Upon entering the dry-rotted doorway, I am filling a third of the house. Smoke haze filters into the living room from PawPaw’s bright orange cigarette. From the sunken couch, I’m staring and wondering, just like Dad tells me not to.

My eyes fixated on the tattered arm rest a while ago, and I’m wondering if my brother learned his favorite color was orange from the butt of the cigarette hanging from the bourbon-battered lips of our grandfather. I’m wondering if PawPaw wanted to end up here, in Mississippi, and if not, where would he have gone—where else is there to go? I’m wondering how my MawMaw felt about the beer bottles littered across the side tables and counters. She used to tell me that he was a kind man, as if I didn’t already know, and that she loved him—most of him. The times I visited, there were pamphlets hung across the house like wallpaper. I wonder if those were included in that most of him. They were filled with nasty words I haven’t fully learned the meaning of:

ADDICTION NICOTINE ALCOHOL ABUSE CANCER

MawMaw never told me this, but we both knew that love falls apart under cold words like that. I wonder if orange was her favorite color too.

“Why don’t you put down that damn cigarette?” Dad’s voice cuts through the room. I’m sure that his favorite color is dark blue, and not, in fact, orange. PawPaw looks him in the eye from his place drowning in the navy chasms of his corduroy recliner. The cigarette dawdles idly between his pointer and middle finger for a second before making its return between his lips. He takes one more puff of smoke, slowly exhaling the fumes through the air.

“You know you shouldn’t say things like that, David.” PawPaw doesn’t look mad, but blue is welling up in the spaces between his iris and eyelid. With his other hand, he flips his fingers around the metal top and neon body of the BIC lighter.

The room has fallen back to its exposition: cloudy and silent, excusing the old Western playing on the box TV. I’m not sure how long we ruminated in the thick air before speaking again, but two men got shot and one woman cried. I’m not a huge fan of Westerns like that, but everything seemed to happen pretty fast.

“I’m not sure why you make those things worth more

than a lifetime,” Dad mutters under his breath. I’ve learned that usually you’re not supposed to whisper stuff under your breath to your parents, especially to your dad.

“Say it louder, boy. I can’t hear you from here.”

“I said, what makes those damn cigarettes worth more than being alive?”

Dad has told me that PawPaw probably won’t make it to my graduation, but I’m not sure I’ll even be at my graduation. I mean, I will, but it won’t be this me. It’ll be some older version: hopefully taller, with permed hair and white teeth. That is most of what I’ve always wanted. I don’t know where I found it, but there



is a picture of an older me stuck to the inside of my head like gum to the underside of my school desk.

She has long red hair curled into ringlets, mixed with strands somewhere between blonde and gold. She has a pink shirt and white jeans with rips in the knees. She is standing in the doorway of PawPaw’s house, and it has a new coat of paint.

The hum of cowboys stopped a few minutes ago, but no one has opened their mouth to talk about the ending. The frequent gunshots radiating out of the bass-burned speakers have been replaced with the twak of PawPaw spinning that BIC lighter into

his wedding band. It’s gold and thick, with scratches and nicks to the side. If I look at it long enough, all the colors blend together into something that’s almost orange. I can tell he really did love her, all of her.

PawPaw has an end table by his recliner with a glass top over the stained wood. There are elementary pictures of my cousins and me that have been under the glass for a while. Samantha is there, opposite to the corner my picture is in. Even though the photo is slightly dyed brown with what I am assuming is from spilled sweet tea, I can make out choppy black bangs dividing her forehead and chunky braces decorating her thick

taken. The mole above her lip was folded into her smile lines, a speck of brown peeking through the chasm. She’s got black hair curled in at her jaw, which is the same cocktail of color populating Samantha and her uneven bangs. I’m also sure it was taken before PawPaw got sick. He still has the mustache he was sporting in that picture, neatly curled up at the thin ends. But the freckles and creases around his eyes weren’t hanging limply off his thin cheekbones like they do now. He’s lost his hair since then, too, not in the way of it just being gone, but the orange and brown that was once cropped around his ears has faded to silver.

“I guess we ought to get going then,” Dad sighs. It isn’t the sigh of being sad to leave but more of defeat. We come to PawPaw’s house every week and every time they have some variation of that argument. But he’s not angry anymore; the red in his cheeks has cooled down to its standard beige. PawPaw gives a nod toward Dad and sets down his cigarette like it’s the same thing as a goodbye.

“Come give me a hug, girl,” he says with his arms held open. He smells like his trademark cologne and laundry detergent. As he hugs me, he whispers that he’ll come get me some Saturday. “We can go by SpaceWay again and get those Skittles you like.” When I pull away, he gives me a wink carefully out of Dad’s line of sight. That used to be our thing: SpaceWay trips. He would come get me early on the weekends, and we would get share size candy and drinks to take on our fishing trip that morning. But I know he doesn’t mean it anymore because he can’t—Dad told me he can barely carry himself around the house.

Dad and I pass the threshold of the dry rotted doorway, and I shoot PawPaw a last look. I think we have the same smile—maybe the same freckles too. We are painted in the same colors: skin peppered brown and hair tinted orange.

The air outside of the house is so much clearer, like someone pulled film off the trees and night sky. After I climb in the passenger seat of Dad’s truck and we rock down PawPaw’s curvy driveway, he lets out another one of those sighs. This time, I can almost see the thick blue polluting the car air. There is no Western to keep me company in the silence, so I decide to fill it.

“You still love him, right?”

Dad keeps his eyes set on the road and tightens his grip on the steering wheel until his knuckles pale. “You know I do. It’s just a little hard sometimes, that’s all.”

“Because he smokes? You get so mad when he smokes. If you did that, I think I could still love you like I do now. I don’t think it would be hard.” 🌊

smile. Samantha looks a lot different now— no bangs, straight teeth. There may be hope for me after all.

I have dedicated a lot of time to studying that end table. I like watching how my freckles disappear as more grime finds its way under the glass or makes a home on the surface. My skin is now a meld of sweet tea, spilled beer, and dirt. Because of that studying, I know that under PawPaw’s current carton of Marlboros there is a polaroid of him and MawMaw.

I don’t have to see it to know they were happier then. MawMaw looked like she was laughing when the picture was

Autobiography of an Open Wound

Savannah Massey

First Place, Nonfiction

i. I think there is cotton in my ears, and I'm not sure how it got there. Everyone and thing around me is muffled with white fuzz, and I can only tell you're saying

are you okay?

five times over because your mouth is drawing out each syllable. Suddenly, your lips are an artist, and each ask is its own masterpiece. My hand is on fire, and some of it is on the asphalt. The gash is carved deep down my thumb and kept company by splotches of red. Forget Jackson Pollock and whatever the hell he and these rocks just painted on my palm. Forget Michelangelo and what he just carved into my skin. I prefer my art in front of me and mumbling questions.

ii. You're asking me if it hurts,

iii. My eyes always start burning when they've been open for too long. But each time I close them, I'm seven and connected to Momma and Georgia at the knuckles at the Jackson Zoo. The air is holding the smell of animals and pollen and Mississippi in thick curtains around us. Each time, I am begging for home.


i. Maybe that cotton is in my head because, god, I can't think straight. I can see each tuft sitting between neurons like birds on a powerline—even though the world is spinning and telling me to stay down. And I'm listening—lying down like it's December, arms and legs out like the pebbles and parking lot grime are snow and I'm determined to make an angel. But the asphalt is hot to the touch even though the sun retired a while ago, and all of me is touching all of it. It's a great reminder that September is hosted by a humid eighty degrees that isn't quite like the turn of winter.

ii. and it does—

iii. Georgia and I are gawking at the spider lilies spotting the hell strips putting distance between us and concrete attempts at extravagant enclosures when the asphalt pulls me down. Each rock rips at the freckles on my knees and feels jagged against my skin. I'm crying big, first-grader tears and begging Momma to take me home. It's the last day before our summer pass expires. She says we're not leaving until we see everything, that we have to get our money's worth.

i. But now, you're wrapping cotton gauze around my thumb, index, ring finger and wrist, then doing it again. Short brown hair is cascading down past your ears as you're leaning over me. You're covering all the red so carefully: like the final touches on an art project, like I'm your art project. You're holding me tight and pressed between your chin and forearms, like it's all you've ever wanted and you just found a good enough excuse.

ii. all my memories of you being here do.

iii. My knee is raw and an ugly red. No one is asking if I am okay, only to get up and keep going. 



Muscadines

Mirae Nishikawa



Ruby Sue Under The Magnolia

Grace Ann Courtney
Second Place, Fine Art

Dirt

Kaylee Alford

Third Place, Nonfiction


The horizon stretches out like an unbroken thread. Here, the land is flat and wide, revealing every secret under the sun. The Mississippi Delta's muddy bayous weave through the veins of the earth, the water whispering secrets to the cypress trees. It's a place where time seems so slow, where you can see everything for miles—each field, each tree, each rusting fence post. The Delta doesn't just show you the land; it lays bare the soul of a place that has seen everything and forgotten nothing.

I waded in the water, my muck boots sinking into the mud under my feet. The early mornings were filled with the scent of the earth and fish; the sounds of my grandfather's steady voice mixed with the gentle lapping of the water. The afternoon heat was palpable, the July sun licking at the back of my neck. I reached my hand down in the cool, murky depths to check the net, the catfish, slippery and defiant, clamped onto me with surprising strength. My grandfather chuckled lightly, "That's the price of doing business with these critters." As much as I dreaded catfish farming, these moments taught me patience, resilience, and a connection to the land as deep as the bayous themselves.

The Delta's soil was everywhere—under my fingernails, on my clothes, in the air. It became a part of me, but I didn't always appreciate it. My spikes dug into the hot, dry soil at the mound, my ponytail latching onto the back of my neck, my sweat holding it in place. I was the first seventh grader on the Indianola Academy varsity softball team, pushing myself to my limits. I tore my hamstring at the beginning of my sophomore year, the dirt unforgivably and mockingly firm when I slid, ending my season. It forced me to slow down and reflect; that dirt had become a part of my journey, every step, every slide, every fall.

My eleventh-grade year, I entered the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS), a residential school for the best and brightest in Mississippi. The Delta dirt under my feet soon turned into Columbus soil, an unfamiliar but welcoming change. The hands that once pulled catfish from muddy waters now handled microscopes and petri dishes in biology class, and the dirt under my fingernails was replaced by gram crystal violet from staining cells. The red clay painting my clothes turned into acrylic stains from art class. And the mud smeared onto my hands turned into ink from late night writing assignments. The Delta seemed a dim star compared to the great, blazing sun I was experiencing at MSMS. The lessons here were different—more academic, structured—but no less valuable.

Yet, despite the challenge and excitement of MSMS, the Delta never strayed far from my mind. I have learned in its fields, its waters, its unforgiving soil, and those lessons stayed with me. Patience, perseverance, and humility—traits that grew deep within me—fueled my success at MSMS. The contrast of these two worlds showed me that no one place holds the answers; they complement each other.

When I returned to the Delta my junior year, it was for a different type of lesson. The same earth we had once worked together on the farm now opened up to receive my grandfather's flower-painted casket. The scent of rain and roses filled the air, but the preacher's words blurred into the background. All I could focus on was the mud clinging to the hem of my skirt, heavy and damp, as if the Delta itself was holding on to me. My warm tears mingled with the cold ground, and the soil felt softer, more forgiving under my feet, cradling the memories of all I have become. The Delta had been a backdrop to my growth, a reminder of where I came from. The soil that was once a symbol of my resistance had become a grounding force. The roots of my past will always anchor me, no matter how far I travel. 

I'm a Kid in Theater

Grace Ann Courtney

I'm not a theater kid; I'm a kid in theater. Or at least that's what I would tell my classmates when they asked what electives I was taking freshman year. I knew it was a cardinal sin at Stone High School to be associated with those freaks. I did the same with band, choir, art, or anything that allowed me to be labeled as creative.

It's interesting how an arrangement of words can completely change the impact of a sentence. The quick dog jumped over the fox. The fox jumped over the quick dog. The fox, quick to dog, jumped.

I was a kid in theater. The first time I used this excuse, I was much too eager to answer. I think I must have scared the asker, for she sat back noticeably after my outburst. We were sitting in Spanish on the first day of school and a veil of silence suffocated the homeroom. She brushed long hair off her shoulder, a junior. I knew I had to make her like me; I would be set if I could get 'in' with the upperclassmen.

"So...what class do you have after this?" Even the way that she spoke I wanted to mimic. A subtle Southern drawl, yet high pitched enough to be bubbly. I think I might have looked around when she spoke in my direction. A junior was speaking to me, a measly freshman. I say "I think" because I chose to block most of this memory out of my main consciousness because of what followed.

"I have theater. I'M NOT A THEATER KID! I just signed up." She looked at me blankly. One could hear a pin drop. I took this opportunity to keep defending myself against an imaginary accusation. "I was making my schedule, and I saw theater and I was like, 'Oh, that will cover my art credit.' BUT I HATE IT. All the people are so weird. So weird. Weirdos. Idonteven-liketheaterlikethat."

Her eyes darted once to the left at her other junior friend and a smile crept onto her face. It wasn't a 'this freshman is so cool' smile, that was for certain. "Oh," her eyes darted to the left once more, "okay..."

I could feel eyes on me. My mom always said I wasn't loud, my voice just carried. Three years later, I wonder if it would have been more nonchalant just to say "theater" instead of trying to cover every possible thought she might have had about me in one sentence.

After the incident, I picked at my cuticles until the ninety-three-minute class period was over. The junior did not sit by me the next day, the day after, or any day after that. The thing that made that outburst particularly unnecessary was that it was a lie. I sacrificed my mysterious cool girl aura that I planned to have in high school ten minutes into class, and with a lie. My voice gets louder and higher when I fib, hence the extremely loud defense at 7:35 a.m.

I was a theater kid. I was riding on a bus once in sixth grade when my friend Jaidah asked me if I had ever 'tried' hip-hop. For some reason, I did not talk about the actual hip-hop that I had long indulged in: Tribe Called Quest, Beastie Boys, The Digable Planets. This would be much too normal an interaction for me to have before the character development associated with bullying. I smiled, my lips accentuated by the metal brackets on my teeth.

"Have I?"

I gave her one of my earbuds. "How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman..." The lyrical masterpiece of Lin Manuel Miranda oozed into her ears. For some reason, the 'hip-hop' I chose to play for her was that of the hit Broadway musical *Hamilton*, the history of Alexander Hamilton told through an epic mix of ballads and educational rap.

Jaidah didn't try to talk to me about music again; I scared her away, I think. I was blissfully unaware, however. I put my headphones back in and let show tunes narrate the rest of the bus ride. Theater was my way of pretending I was someone else. I was not an awkward twelve-year-old; I was Eliza Hamilton; I was Elphaba; I was Matilda; I was anyone I wanted to be.

I don't know why the transition from middle school to high school caused a trend of not fully embracing any hobbies that I had when describing them, to underplay my interest in anything. It reminds me of a particular *Saturday Night Live* sketch with Kate McKinnon. She played a mother on Christmas morning. For every gift she gave, she doled it out with a new slew of insults about herself, apologetic for even existing. This is the role that awkward women often embrace.


Walking through the doors of Stone High School, sentences that used to be "I love to play piano" became "I'm ok; it's just a hobby. My mom makes me do it." "I'm a really good painter" became "I'm not even that good; I can just draw from a reference. Hand-eye coordination, I guess." "I love the way acting makes me feel" became "I'm a kid in theater." 🌊



In Between

Rebekah Storment

Storment
06/09/23



on friday nights, i feel like judas

Savannah Massey

Second Place, Poetry

on fridays, i take the train to see you and
in my pockets like warnings. the neon sign
greet me in a tight embrace of orange but
the faces floating around us
every one of them is someone i know
is my momma begging for sunday.
there's a space saved for me
says she'll keep saving it.

but it's not sunday and you're across from me
outside of each other
and i'm trying not to let you read me
all of me is resting on the edge of my lips
we are comfortable among the hum
knees idly bumping
i'm making these bar chairs my altar
the way you anticipate
how the road curves on the weekend drives
and the way cold comes mid-september.

last weekend, momma called to tell me
the kiss judas shared with jesus.
i remind her a lot of judas
and our hometown is a betrayal. i pray
my mom calls a wayward daughter
but i'll always be scared of him.
that hides in the crevices
while i hold you like water,
a kiss can't possibly be that bad
she's telling me she loves me. ≡

have pieces of matthew stowed away
hanging in the window of your college bar
it's never as warm as you.
cast words through dim air like kites.
from somewhere else. every one of them
she lets me know
on the pew between her and my sister,
and we're talking about our time
for the first time in forever.
like an open book but
and i'm pouring out like spit.
of conversations that don't belong to us,
upon any slight movement.
and praying you can get to know all of me
what hides under the skin of oranges,
back through hometown
about the sermon. it was about
she says
and that each mile between me
a lot for someone
because i don't believe in god
i was raised into a fear
of my cupped hands
like sunlight wrapping around trees. but,
when i have heaven in my hands and

Let's Groove Tonight

Savannah Massey



Smoke

Winson Zheng

Second Place, Nonfiction

Scrunching my nose, I looked up in disgust. My dad had gone through another pack of Marlboro cigarettes. The smell wafted through the air, seeping into our furniture. My mother always nagged him, telling him to smoke outside away from me and my brothers. He never listened, of course, the scent lingering everywhere he went. From our home to our restaurant, there would always be that foul stench I always hated. I could not remember the last time I was free from the odor. Even after showering, he still carried with him.



Spin

Grace Ann Courtney

Second Place, Photography

I confronted him multiple times, telling him how much I hated the smell those little things had. “爸爸，你为什么还在抽这些东西？你不能停下来吗？” would ask. Dad, why are you still smoking these things? Can’t you stop? He never cared what his little eight-year-old son had to say.

“别担心我，去加油站再给我买一包吧。”” he would reply. Don’t worry about me. Go to the gas station and buy me another pack.

Reluctantly, I grabbed the crumpled bills from his hands, flashed a disappointed glare towards my father, and stomped out the door.

The gas station was just around the corner, a couple of minutes away. As I approached, I spotted the familiar flickering neon sign, and the smell of gasoline flooded my nose. I walked inside, the door jingled, and the familiar smell of smoke lingered here, too. The cashier already knew what I was here for—he was good friends with my father and was familiar with these errands already. “How many packs do you need today?” he would ask.

“Just one today,” I would respond.

“Tell your dad I said hi,” he said as he handed me the pack of Marlboros. My tiny hands grasped it, shoved it into my pocket, and made my walk of shame home.

Returning home, I handed the pack to my dad, sad today was not the day I could convince him to stop. My mother, my brothers, and I always tried convincing him to stop with no results to show besides him being angered. My father was never a good example to follow. In our family, my mother was the “good cop,” showing us the kindness and traits that we should aspire to become. Our father, on the other hand, was the “bad cop,” smoking, drinking, gambling, and being abusive. Yet, he did have some redeeming qualities like his diligence and bravery. His

other toxic tendencies were also prevalent, but the one I remember most vividly was smoking. Using his hard work as an excuse, he would always say he deserved to smoke these packs of cigarettes and drink as much as he wanted. Unknown to us all, the consequences would catch up soon.

Splashing around in the backyard, my brothers and I were having a grand time before being interrupted by the yelp of our mother from inside the house. We quickly rushed inside to witness our father knocked over on the floor, suffering a heart attack. He was rushed to the hospital where he was diagnosed with lung cancer. Our nightmare was coming to life. A few weeks after this incident, he was discharged and back home but now in pain constantly. He was practically bedridden and was hooked up to a machine without being able to speak much. He must have realized it, too—the consequences of heeding our

warnings were now becoming reality. He became calmer, maybe because he felt the end approaching.

He died one morning. I wonder what was going through his mind. The morning of his cremation came in an instant; most of it felt like a blur. I remember the gloomy sky with our bottomless well of tears to match. As his body went into the crematory chamber, there was a smell—not a cigarette smell but the burning of flesh. Returning home, I was engulfed in that familiar cigarette smell again, unpleasant but oddly comforting. Before long, our family had to pack our bags, leaving behind our home and bringing the only remnants we had left of our father, his urn and the smell. The smell would return from time to time, whether entering gas stations or passing by someone smoking on the street. Though I still winced and felt disgusted, it now reminded me of my late father, a bittersweet memory of him. 🌊




Defect On The Pier

Elizabeth Brittain

River Pearls

Claire Rizzo

Can I take you
to where the hills meet the delta,
where the poplars become pines,
where the ponds become parks?
I want to fill the gaps
in our intertwined fingers
with sunflowers from the dove fields
and marshmallow from the ditches.
I want to decorate the space
between our laughter
with rusted milo
and the silver backs
of soybean leaves.

Could I lead you
down to the murky river’s bed,
where the silt meets the sun,
where sand meets the stars?
I want to share
the sweet smell of rice fields
with your shadow
melded over mine.
I want to show you
how the moon rises
above the canopy of
webworms’ nests. 



The Water’s Shimmer

Rebecca Sun

Walking the Valley

Max Thompson

“He tries, Max. He really tries.” My mother earnestly looked at me, dyed blonde hair and a deep blue stare. I, only twelve, met her with the same dark eyes. I knew there was nothing I could say, yet my mouth opened, as if some formation of words would come to save me. After what seemed an eternity of silence, she broke the stare and looked at the knot in our wooden kitchen table. She looked back up and asked a question I knew I couldn’t answer. “Why don’t you?”

* * *

If there’s one thing I knew, it was that loving never came easy. Maybe it was the suffocating Mississippi summers, or the mosquitoes that would find me from miles around, but my heart didn’t want to work. Yet I didn’t have this issue with friends, or even my sister. The real, and only, issue was with the man every young American boy was supposed to love: his father. I can’t exactly place where it began, or why, but from the age of six, I knew there was something fundamentally wrong with me. I thought maybe the right clothes would camouflage it—Under Armor, Nikes, neon shorts—but it always bled through. It was stained in the way I moved, the way I wrapped my tongue around vowels, the way I looked at my best friend in the seventh grade. And worst of all, it bled into worry tainted in my father’s eyes. I knew that my queerness was not a thing to be celebrated but extinguished. And by the Southern standards of the American family, it was the father’s duty to smother it out.

Realizing this at a very young age, I became gripped by a suffocating fear that no six-year-old knew how to handle. I became observant of any gaze of disappointment from him, any sign that what I was doing was not enough. He would ask me to come and drive with him, or talk about music, or come and throw a ball. But my response was always denial, and he recognized it quickly. I could see the pain in his eyes like mine: soft, yet undeniable. Frustrations with him were common and quick—and so were tears. I was too young to know that fathers were once boys, too.


Everywhere I looked, boys had set their fathers up on mountains that they would one day climb. But mine was stranded across a valley carved by me. I thought that if I excelled in any area possible, I could build a bridge towards him. Plank for plank, rope for rope, each accomplishment a message that I wanted to be the perfect son. I tried soccer for five years, even football

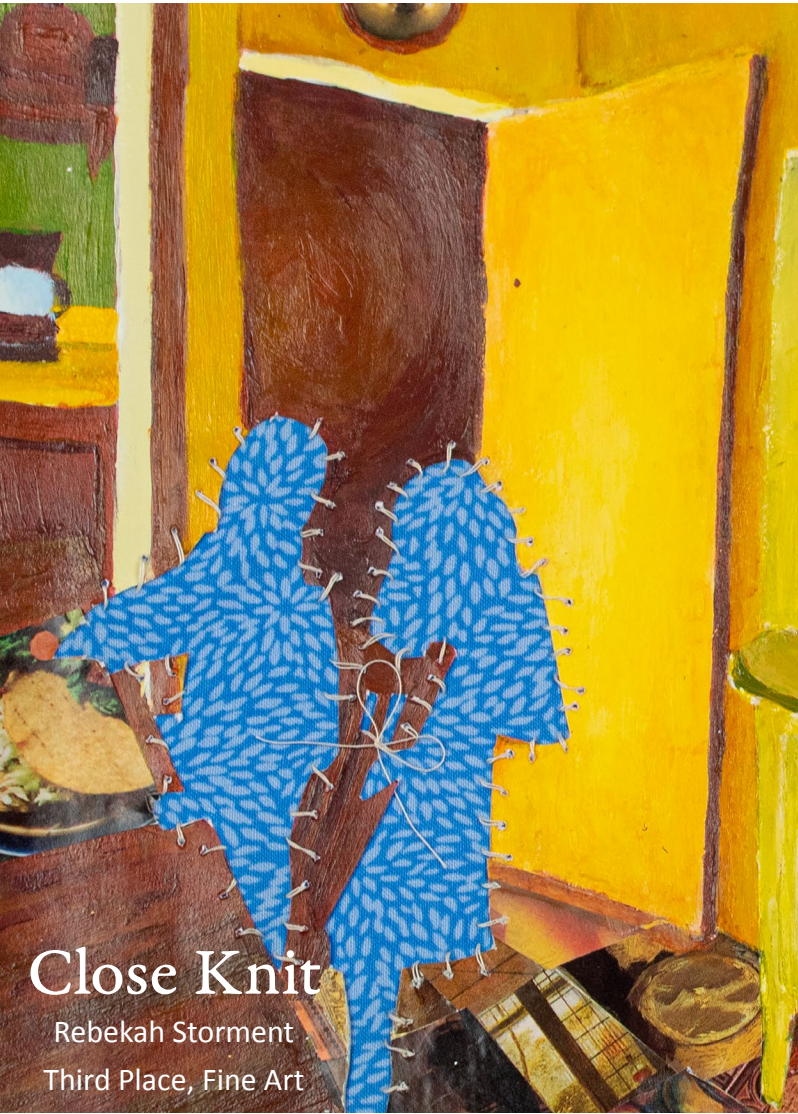
in the eighth grade. But my 5’9”, 120-pound self knew that I didn’t fit the role I was pretending to play. My greatest and final effort was in my last two years of high school: moving out to The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. I thought that maybe it was distance that could finally bridge our gap, yet it still remained.

* * *

I’m now back in our kitchen, sitting across from my mother, her gaze still holding. After no response, she stands and walks over to me. “Just talk to him. Tell him how you feel. That’s all it takes.”

A week later, we’re sitting on the couch, Mom’s eyes glistening wet, and Dad’s softened. After minutes of explaining—the valley, the fear, the praying—we sit in nothing but silence. I turn and meet him, knowing that I have the answer I thought I’d never get. “I know I’ve never shown it well. But I love you, Dad. I always have.” I know by the way his voice quavers and foot taps that he knows I’m telling the truth.

He looks with gleaming eyes and smiles. “I know.” 



Close Knit

Rebekah Storment
Third Place, Fine Art

Welcome to the Delta

Claire Rizzo

I come from a place with a horizon as long as a church service, ground as flat as a ruler's edge, and a sky as wide and round as a cake dish's dome. In this odd land of in-betweens, this ancient flatland once covered by meters of inky river and cypress knees the width of men's outspread arms, a compromise was made right at the point where the low clouds of the technicolor evening embrace the resting fields. Elephants the size of sheds and tigers as long as trucks make their treaties right below us in the silt, suspended in an eternal truce, only to be disturbed by the ebb of a biting winter's lowering of the currents.

In the odd land where the sandbanks stretch on like a cat in a sunspot, where the moon's mottled deadpan watches on as the people go through their motions, an untrained eye may mistake as many decades ago as they can count on their hands for today. Secrets are whispered by the wind that weaves over and under the silver backs of soybean leaves; it wraps itself up the cornstalks like a snake on a tree as it murmurs the region's gospel, falling upon the deaf ears of its youngest home-born children. The rain falls in thick satiny sheets and messy swaths shaped like mercury spilt on a table; the sun beats like a child on a door locked out on a friendless day.

In this world where victory is gilded in rust, this place where the river spills its contents over like a fecund animal in summer's brush, the doves clump on the telephone poles and

the blackbirds gather in the new fields like old men sitting over cups of coffee. Fire may be the devil's only friend, but it's an old buddy to the farmers, who light up the harvested dross and let the smoke carry like a bellhop as it vanishes off into the sky's miles. Let it burn, they think, so that a new attempt at prosperity may try and take root in the next year.

In this world of ditches as green with algae as skies are blue, the night sky is patched lacework with its cracks shined through by the starlight. Every weed stuck deep in the ground pays testament to the blatant refusal by the region to curl up and give in. Every oxbow serves as living reminder to what the river has forgotten, the whole region widowed by its recession from its place atop the land over the millennia. In the forests where

bucks spar like young knights and owls watch from the branches like sentinels, the silver carp and fish fly from the currents like water springing from a faucet. Outsiders may call this place desolate, forgotten by the wider world that only argues it to be a fundamental failure, but I see something else when I look to the trees clumped together just beyond the horizon. I see nearly every waking hour I've stood.



Delta Cotton

Cassie van Riessen

First Place, Photography

The Hills Have Eyes

Virgil Simpson

I listen to the creek
As it trickles and gleams in the summer sun
And the creek listens to me
As I add to its waters and wade in my woes

I call to the mountains
All my praises of their beauty and might
And the mountains call to me
All yesterday’s shouts and cries echoing back

I stand in solitude with the valley
Gazing into foggy fields and leafy lawns
And the valley stands in solitude with me
Spring spiraling with colors, then withering to winter

The hills have eyes
They know too much
And when I break
It’s them in which I lose touch
Wailing, waiting, and wondering
About when it will all be too much

Recess

Jaidyn Bryant

12:00 pm weekdays,
Time to play the games we made
Populated by kids in polos with popped collars
Backs turned from discerning eyes

En Garde!
Fencing with pencils
Newly sharpened swords
Ready to scratch anyone who came close to defeating me

But our favorite was Terminators
Tag now had a leader and
the tagged became his hivemind
a mob of forty bodies chasing you
until you’re the Last Kid Standing

After, Mama complains
At the rocks stuck in socks and the scuffs on Mary Janes
Graphite battle scars staining white polos and khakis
Says I don’t know the value of hard work
I say she don’t understand the value of play

6 years later I drive by
My hands still calloused from the monkey bars
Only useful now for gym and guitar
Nobody plays here after the gas leak
I wonder if they carried our games to the new playground
My kindergarten teacher doesn’t recognize me

I don’t either

The Mississippi Oak

Aden Byrd

Sits lopsided, hurting,
roots exposed, eroded,
Spanish moss still clinging.
Ground that’s all clay and sand
sucks at boots, nipping at toes.
Locusts sigh their not-melodies,
june bugs taunting about.

Trunk has been sliced short
to build a canoe
that sits by the river,
unused,
rotten.

The Empty Road

Elizabeth Brittain

Getting Pretty

Sasha Harvey

They taught us all young—
from birth I think.


Smile.
Express thanks.
Say y’alls and yes sirs.
Be politely passive—
transforming empty sayings
into subtly cruel jabs.

Nowadays,
old men say I’m getting pretty.

Like it’s a complement
or their Southern etiquette
needing to praise
my morphing into their slanted society.
Like a brown leaf painted red or
makeup altering a scarred facade.

If I’m now pretty,
then my form wasn’t before.
But those two forms are the same.

Only one says they’re a Boy Scout—
with short hair,
hairy legs,
and jorts.

The other is more feminine.
Adorning themselves with
thick mascara,
longer hair,
and of course
sharp Southern vernacular.
Or as those men say—
pretty. 



Graffiti on a Bridge

Adair Gaines

Time Passes Through

Aden Byrd

When time passes through you like an arrow
for the fifth or sixth time, you wouldn’t note the holes and
the bloodstains across your white polo.
Instead, you’d sit in a broken rocking chair,
smiling at the light-polluted night
off the second story of a Motel 6.
What constellations can you draw
from Sirius and Canopus alone?

If you could see
Sagittarius aimed at your heart again,
would you even stand to face him?
Or would you still read the cracks in the ceiling paint
deeper than the forgotten Spanish textbooks
under your Ford Mercury’s dusty seats?
Would you still play the creaky wood
beneath your sole-worn Nike Airs
harder than the half drum set in your trunk?
Would you glide your fingers across the worn varnished chair
smoother than the crusted paintbrush in your glovebox?

If his arrows littered your body,
and even Virgo couldn’t stare back at you,
would you still sit unshifted?
If, then, Orion lifted you
past the city’s beacon and pollution of light
where Andromeda and Canis Major
could examine your holes, see through you a thousand ways,
would you crumble in shame?


Or would you let them hold you aloft forever,
thinking of yourself as one of them?
Your blood will still drip
back to Earth,
to be found among temples and canyons and statues
as stains.

Venus and Mars only shine
when another star has lent her light,
but you would lean back in space, again alone
and dark.

Don’t you think that would happen?

When you clasp your hands,
are you praying to Orion?

When you stretch your limbs and groan,
are you singing hymns
or mirroring the bones that wish to tear from you
to find someone
more deserving?

When time passes through you again,
your Januaries will become Decembers
and your nineties dreams will have
drained from your still heart like
blood. 

Pointless Plants

Adair Gaines



YOU ARE A CATHEDRAL WALKING

Savannah Massey
Third Place, Poetry

i.
We pass a cigarette back / forth
with bodies planted in the stairwell of
your parents’ church. I pour out my sins
and you promise me I’ve done
no harm. We exchange lipstick
and spit like red wine communion:

we take both
the body and blood for ourselves / call it our own religion.

ii. [months ago // mid sermon]
You pass me a manifesto on a piece of scrap paper:
I wish
God would start over / break me
into pieces / strike down
with the crowbar / shatter me
and only put the good pieces
back together. I pray to Him, y’know,
and beg for Him to take away the pieces
of me that love you. He knows they don’t belong there.
He knows
the knees of my jeans are torn from all this begging for better.

iii.
The smoke waves between us like a thin sheet. We push it back / forth between soft breaths:

Your hands were good at holding me. I know / It still felt wrong.
Why did you come back then? I was tired of carrying around palms
that barely belonged to me. Have you had
to carry around swollen wrists? Do you know how it feels
to know your hands are shaped to hold something you can’t have?

I don’t say it but
I’m not sure there is any world
in which I don’t ache for you.

iv.
Hands intertwined, we hold the crowbar and tear down
the hate breeding under the pulpit.
Wood flies in stray splinters
toward the empty pews / nails follow.
Our fingers are blistered and bleeding
but at least they’re touching. This building means nothing
when I know you will always have me. If there is a God, we will make him jealous. 🌊



They Said
It Was Plexiglass

Grace Ann Courtney

Somewhere
Between

Kaylee Alford
Honorable Mention, Poetry

Borrowed flannels, sleeves too long,
as we wandered past crooked fences.
Sunlight snagged in his silver hair,
boots leaving trails I tried to match,
my steps always just a beat behind.

His knuckles wrapped around a hammer,
mine wrapped around him.
Rough hands, soft heart,
teaching me the language of care.
how to fix a squeaky hinge,
or mend a weary spirit.

Somewhere between then and now,
your face turned into photographs,
tracing through a pane of glass.
Your voice turned into videos,
replaying the last few seconds
so I do not forget what you sound like.

Now, I still reach for the flannel
on cold mornings,
still hear your voice,
but there’s a space where you used to be,
a silence that’s louder than all the things
you ever taught me.

Somewhere between then and now,
I lost you. Completely. 🌊



Lookie There

Izzy Rushing
Third Place, Photography

Operating Room

Savannah Massey

Honorable Mention, Nonfiction

I'm sitting in a room full of people, but I am only focused on one set of eyes and this chair rocked towards the wall. My head is dipped back as far as my neck will allow. My chest is pumped out. This is an attempt to keep the two the farthest apart they can be without tearing skin.

Here, we are cold. The AC is working too well in this classroom. 62-degree waves are the only things between us, but we don't close the distance. I feel like my sternum has just been placed back in my chest after being laid a refugee on a steel operating table. My capillaries have been broken open and poorly stitched back together with the threads of the sweater I first met you in.

My feet are tilted back, and my heels are rested on the legs of this chair. Everyone is talking in a circle, but all I can think about is us in an operating room. You are the surgeon, and I am stuck under your fingernails. I am falling out all over myself, into my own body and clogging arteries with mixed emotions. You're a face hovering above me wrapped in stale blue light. You are both the eyes in the midst of loose curls and the haze of anesthetic. Your fingerprints are etched with the way to save or sacrifice me, but I still feel like I don't have the right to look up at you. When I'm on my back, you feel like God. And I know you do not mean to be. You are breathing, speaking and drawing your hair up but that is enough for me to find religion in some fallible god who doesn't know they hold space above.

Here, I catch glances of you looking at me. From our opposite places in this circle of chairs, your eyes drag over my skin and ribs like a dull scalpel. You are making the cut between bone until my skin looks like the jagged victim of torn paper. You are wearing my shade of red like your least favorite color. But you look good in red. That is what you are wearing today. That is the color of red stitching me together. Parts of you are blending into me.

When the anesthetic wears off, I'll take the scalpel—no matter how red—and command the blade with both hands to split the skin between my vertebrae just to hold my head and heart farther apart. And I know this is the metaphor manifestation of teenage dramatics, but it doesn't make me feel any better. We are in no operating room, but you are still tearing me open. 🌊



Pomegranate Seeds

Savannah Massey

The Star Festival

Colin Chung

“Who do you think is getting picked this time?” Gil asked, his small fingers parting the skin of a tangerine.

“For selection? I don’t know,” I said, carving my knife around a plum. I removed the stony seed and plopped the halves into a jar of syrup.

“I hope that they pick me,” Gil said, “I’m so bored of this place.”

I gazed through the window beside me. Quaint brick buildings and juniper trees dotted copper-red canyons, and misty clouds swirled beneath. I heard the rattled clicks of a roadrunner and the buzz of locusts. The greenhouse on the plateau glistened faintly with the orange of the sinking sun. The same town I’ve known for years; the only town Gil and I have ever known.

“We’ve already been through this,” I said, turning to Gil, “you’re too young to be bored of this place anyways.”

“I think you’re just bein’ old,” Gil snapped back. “I’m finished with the oranges. I’m gonna go do somethin’ else, like…”

He paused, staring at the ceiling.

“…Like leave this place forever!”

Before I could say anything, I heard the door slam. A few tangerines rolled to the floor.

When I finished filling the last jars of fruit, I walked to the plateau. Balanced on the cliff railings, I drew in long breaths of the cool night air and watched the sky. There were four dots of twinkling light in the otherwise spotless dark.

“Stars,” Mr. Matthews explained years ago, “envoys of the only other civilization we know of.”

I looked down from the sky to the foggy abyss beneath my feet. Gil and I used to circle the edge of town and hurl rocks off the cliffsides. We watched them pierce through the clouds and then listened for them to hit the ground. I don’t think they ever did, but Gil said he heard it once.

“I’m gonna make a ladder that takes us all the way down,” he declared that day.

When I got back home, I found a small pair of dirt-crusted sneakers by the door. Gil snored softly from the bedroom.

The next morning, I drove to Ms. Amelia’s house. It’s the largest and most distinct house around here, with its Greek pillars, short balconies, and excess of windows. As I stepped out of the car, I caught a wrinkled face peering through one of the

windows before disappearing.

“Ah, how nice to see you Kieran!” Ms. Amelia exclaimed as the front doors flew open, her small stature in the doorway. “Why don’t you come in for some tea?”

She gestured her spiraled cane into her house. Purple petals were strewn across the living room, and a sour odor wafted from the kitchen.

“It’s good to see you too, Ms. Amelia, but I’m just here to pick up the flowers for the festival tonight.”

“Oh, of course! I’ll show you where they are,” she said, disappearing into the tangles of her house. I followed her past the living room, ducking beneath hanging ivy planters.

“How has everything been for you and Gil?” her voice echoed from above. “I know it must be hard to take care of him all by yourself.”

A petal floated into my eye.

“It’s been alright, I think,” I shouted as I stumbled up a spiral staircase, “Gil’s been getting into more trouble, though.”

“He’s just like your father!” she laughed from down the hall. “Well, if you two ever need anything, I’m always here, or somewhere else!”

Following the voice, I stepped through a pale room and a thick floral scent rushed into my nostrils. Hundreds of purple umbrella flowers hovered through the air, their wide petals pulsing like jellyfish. Ms. Amelia was swinging a net around, scooping them in clouds. I caught one by the stem.

“Are these the ones for this year?” I asked.

“Yes! They’re splendid, aren’t they?”

“They are.”

“They’re such an interesting variety! Once they bloom, all they want to do is fly away.”

After several hours, we collected all the flowers into bags, and I drove to the plateau where the festival was being set up. People were stringing lights along the junipers and turning in the foods they were assigned. My eyes wandered through the crowd before stopping on a thin, bald man clutching a clipboard.

“Mayor!” I called out.

The man looked up.

“Ah, Kieran! You picked up Ms. Amelia’s flowers, I presume?” he said as he ran up to me.

“Yes, they’re in the bags over there in my truck.”

“And how about you and Gil’s food assignments?”

“I brought them, too.”

“Perfect. You know the stars always appreciate people like you. Just drop them off by the greenhouse, and we’ll handle

the rest.”

I bit my lip.

“Yes, sir, thank you.”

“I look forward to seeing you tonight.”

The stars were only an hour away. The night sky had grown a paler shade of purple, and the locusts stopped buzzing. A hot wind streamed through the canyons, slipping its way around the junipers and the houses. The earth seemed to quiver in anticipation.

“I don’t want to go,” Gil mumbled through his blankets.

“Me neither,” I said, staring at the ceiling. Even though it was my eighth festival, there was a tight knot in my stomach. Time felt viscous, minutes seeping by like thick drops of honey from a spoon. Then, there was a knock at the door.

Gil and I sat up at the same time, sweat staining our shirt collars. I walked over and opened the door. It was Ms. Amelia.

“It’s time!” she whispered.

A little past her, a procession was moving down the trail to the plateau. At the front, the mayor carried a tall blue banner with four white dots on it. We hurried over and merged into the sea of silent people. Hot dust stung my eyes as we marched, and the wind stole my tears away. I remembered my first festival. Gil was still a baby.

Red dirt speckled my face. My hands gripped tightly to Mom and Dad’s. Hot air. A forest of legs. A pale sky.

A tap on my leg pulled me back. I looked over to my right and saw Gil. We nodded and I gripped his hand tightly. When the sky turned white, the procession made it to the plateau. Baskets of food were carried out from the greenhouse and

the umbrella flowers were released into the air. Gil and I each grabbed a basket and joined the slowly forming ring of people.

“Kieran,” I remembered my mom saying softly before the first festival, “if me or your father are selected…”

Everyone’s heads turned to the sky.

“…Promise me…”

Four blinding spheres of light hovered above the crowd.

“…That you take good care of Gil.”

Burning white. I gripped Gil’s hand even tighter.

After some time, my eyes readjusted themselves. The sky was dark again.

No twinkles of light. No wind.

The air felt cool. I was still clutching my basket. My other hand was empty.




Everyman, No Man

You’ve a good heart. Sometimes that’s enough to see you safe wherever you go. But mostly, it’s not.

- Neil Gaiman, Neverwhere

Aden Byrd

Like a single mote of light in London,
you flit about like
a firefly to fires.
Those glowing maws are smiling
brighter than a neighborhood carnie
on the corner of Oxford and Regent.
You see those snapping teeth,
allow them to tear the legs
from your thorax and smile right back.
What need are legs when children see
only a flitting mote of light?

With overworked wings, you must fly,
legless, not lightless, through these streets.
Your compound eyes reflect
a thousand flames you still aspire to.
Why does saving a matchstick
not compare to a torch or bonfire?
Why, if children cry to burning buildings,
and smile at flitting fireflies? 




Downtown

Rebekah Storment


Language is a Construct, So I Build us a Home

Jaidyn Bryant

We build the bed first
so we can dream about our future
I pick up my tools and lay the foundation
built with mutual friends and a common tongue
Forts get made, pillows thrown, secrets told
My heart in your hands
my head on your chest
The world locked out
We can finally
Rest... 

Ode to the Swarm

Claire Rizzo

My pulse pounds to the sound
of cicadas calling through the night.
The next afternoon,
I walk the sidewalks to find them mottled
with emeralds upturned on their facets,
buzzing around, spun in circles,
reflective onyx eyeballs
facing the oak boughs up high,
gossamer church-windowed wings,
flittering between orange concrete and vibrating bodies.
Lining every fallen twig and leaf along the way,
gravity-ignoring shadows of nymphhood,
caramel-spun reliefs commemorating
an upbringing underground:
two batches of segmented starbrights,
swarming together. 

Final Memory

Aden Byrd

White granite catches the day’s last sun
beside a clean cast iron stovetop.
The last greasy pan sits cold,
held by your outstretched hand.
A short walker shivers under your other grasp.
“Another dinner?”
“Making breakfast.”

You smile, yet your eyes—

Your eyes are no longer the white of a “too-small”
potato salad, shared between two “too-full” tables,
children screaming for seconds.
They do not gleam like Christmas morning grits
drizzled with too much sugar, warming up the
shivering night.
They are not the sterile whites of a head nurse’s scrubs,
standing like a regal giant, arms crossed, overseeing
the next trainee in line.

Your eyes are bleach,
blank printer paper,
and salt.

“Of course, grandma. Do you need help?”
“No thank you, son.” 🌊

Growing Pains

Ramse Jefferson

We were ants.
Every leg
was a tower.
Every day
spanned months.

*You glowed
back then,
my little star.*

We were the world.
Our laughter was
thunder shaking bones.
We woke the Earth.
Invited all to join.
Our laughter
formed mountains,
your smile
the candles in the sky.

*Whatever crushed
that radiance?*

Now we’re giants.
Pretending we weren’t ever ants.
Missing how we laughed
at nothing, everything.
How we smiled,
remember how?

We prick ourselves
on the past,
hoping the blood
flows to the future. 🌊

We’re Tired of Dying Like This

Inspired by Henry Allen’s Article “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”

Landon Strong

Then you’re looking at blood and bullet
Holes from gangster shootouts.
A little girl drinking a glass of beer
At the end of Prohibition.

Kids jitterbugging for Drugs and Sex,
And the despair of an open,
Empty,
Road.

Bathing Beauties,
Bathing Beauties,
Bathing Beauties,

And the glamour of café society
Staring you down in the middle of the night.
Rotting in our comforts,
While we send our own people out to die for us.
Glorifying our images through the faces on TV,
All the faces on our screens. WE SHOULD SCREAM.
All the BLUE light,
RED light,
YELLOW light,
GREEN light.

GO,
GO,
GO.

Another battalion of men
dropped as weapons,
Another bombshell has killed
a Mother and her Child.
Another Teenager has taken
her own throat,
With a noose.

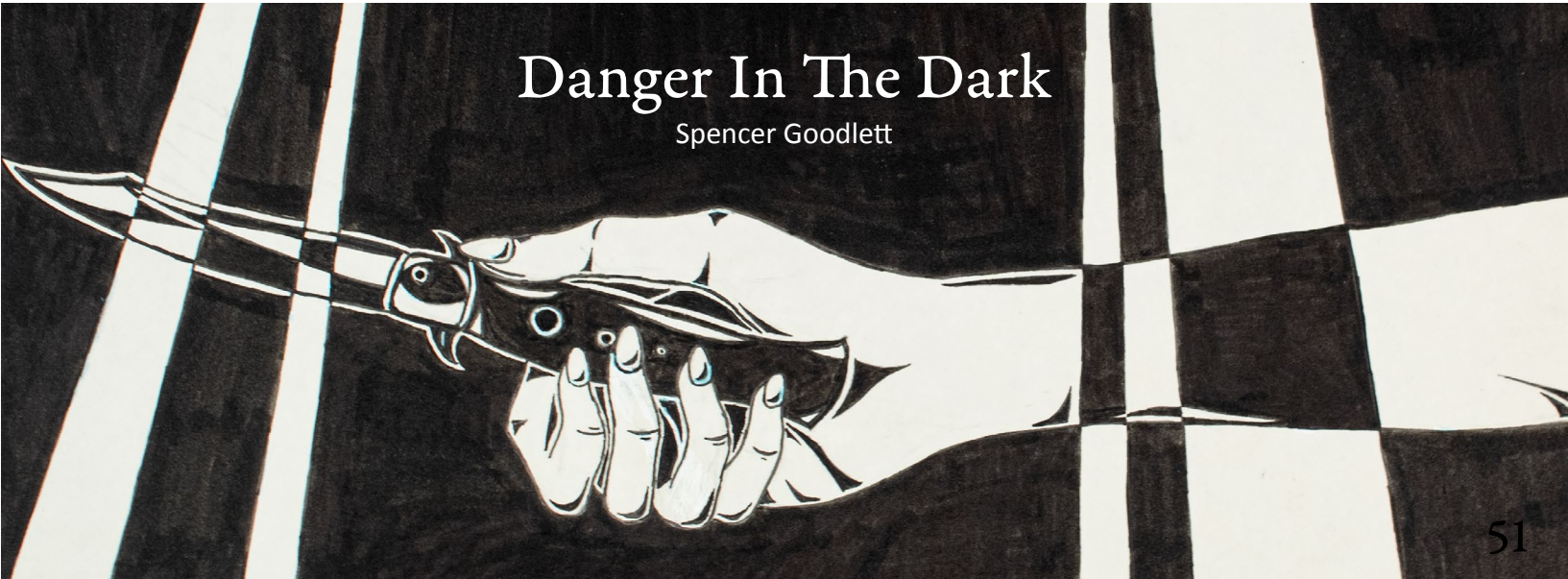
Black roses wilting grey,
We will do the same.
Decaying leftovers
In our freezers.

And soon enough,
Our battlefields will be frozen
over
With bones,
With wretched eyeballs
Loose in jars.

Flies that float by
Will be too scared to land
For fear of being mutilated by
whatever disease
We have contracted. 🌊

Danger In The Dark

Spencer Goodlett





Contributors' Notes

Kaylee Alford (Indianola) likes to write creative nonfiction and hopes her writing will give others the confidence to submit their pieces, even if they think they're not good enough. She is inspired by Vladimir Nabokov and enjoys a good Cherry Limeade Slush from Sonic® while writing. One day, she wants to be a surgeon.

Le'Baudrio Bridgeford (Goodman) writes to bring his vast imagination to life. As a huge fan of science fiction, he hopes to one day write stories that give his audience the same passion he feels for the genre. For now, he writes smaller, grounded pieces that focus on the more human aspects of life.

Elizabeth Brittain (Collinsville) enjoys finding beauty in the mundane. She often finds herself inspired by nature and wishes she could spend her time simultaneously pondering life in a cabin and exploring different ideas or places. In the future she hopes to see herself wiser and even more full of life.

Jaidyn Bryant (Cleveland) hopes readers of her work will be able to relate and see a part of themselves. Her favorite genre to write is poetry while drinking coffee. She is most inspired by Walt Whitman. In the future, Jaidyn plans to become a famous film director and work with Timothée Chalamet.

Aden Byrd (Madison) is a Southern writer who likes to point out the flaws and inconsistencies around him. From people to places to ideas, Aden writes whenever he sees one of these spontaneous inconsistencies. His passion lies in the people and images of the South, and the emotions that go along with that, all tied up in a neat, short, poetic bow.

Colin Chung (Brandon) hopes his writing will make people ask interesting questions about themselves or at the very least make them feel weird. He is inspired by the moon and all its milky greatness. In the future, he hopes to continue writing and eventually discover the secrets of the universe.

Bones Cole (Clinton) hopes that his work makes people think, makes their hearts beat faster and makes them smile. His favorite genre to write is fantasy while sipping on orange soda. He is most inspired by Andrew Rowe. In the future, he would like to be a game developer.

Grace Ann Courtney (Wiggins) enjoys writing fiction the most. Her favorite author is Tennessee Williams. She hopes her work will allow people to see her as more human. Her future plans are to pursue a degree in art and biochemistry and to take more time to enjoy the little things.

Adair Gaines (Boyle) enjoys popcorn and writing mysteries. She is inspired by David Bowie, Jerry Garcia, and Salvador Dali. She hopes her work will make the viewer question their sanity or feel a little more whimsical. She hopes to become a chemical engineer or a fire breather for a circus.

Spencer Goodlett (Cleveland) enjoys painting, watercolor, colored pencils, and oil pastels. He would like to major in 3D Animation and VFX at the Savannah College for Art and Design.

Sasha Harvey (Starkville) writes poetry and fiction to bring all her most peculiarly wonderful thoughts to life. She hopes to travel the world one day, eating her way through a myriad of unique cuisines while writing a book inspired by her (hopefully) wild journey.

Yash Malhotra (Greenwood) enjoys tiramisu while writing mainly reflective and analytical essays. His favorite author is John Grisham and when people encounter his work, he wants them to feel something, whether it is curiosity or just a deeper appreciation for the little details in life.

Savannah Massey (Pelahatchie) writes by dropping a specific emotion into a new context and seeing what happens. Her favorite genre to write is poetry. She is most inspired by her favorite author, Richard Siken. While writing, she loves to eat Junior Mints and drink white Monsters. In the future, Savannah plans to double major in creative writing and applied mathematics at a liberal arts university.

Mirae Nishikawa (Starkville) hopes her work will allow readers and viewers to be comfortable in showing off their culture. Her favorite type of art is semi-realism. She is most inspired by her favorite artist, Henri Matisse. While writing, she enjoys eating Pocky. In the future, Mirae plans to continue art as a hobby and hopefully become a psychiatrist.

Contributors’ Notes Continued

Claire Rizzo (Cleveland) hopes to show the natural beauty in the condemned. Her favorite genre to write is poetry. She is most inspired by old hymns, rivers, trees, and antique stores. While writing, she enjoys eating Delta-style cheesecake. In the future, Claire hopes to pursue law and writing, become an attorney in the Delta, run for local office, and become a senator or representative after. Then, she’d like to run for Congress.

Izzy Rushing (Coldwater) takes inspiration from Walter Anderson’s paintings. Izzy wants to take photos that are silly and make people smile. Izzy’s favorite snack to eat while editing is crab salad in Ritz crackers. In the future, Izzy wants to study Biology and become a researcher.

Virgil Simpson (Horn Lake) not only writes when surrounded by nature, but also when he faces a reason as to why the feminist movement exists. In doing so, he hopes his writing will provide lesser-told perspectives on feminism, navigate how others may experience grief, and place emphasis on connecting with the world around you. Although Virgil holds a significant passion for theatre, he plans to study international relations with an emphasis on foreign politics and diplomatic work after graduation.

Langston Smith (Cleveland) loves to sip on tea while he writes and takes inspiration from his favorite author, Tasha Suri. Within his poetry and fiction, Langston hopes that his works are both fun to read and stick in his readers’ heads, yet he mostly hopes that they simply enjoy them. In his future, Langston plans to continue writing and potentially find a career in editing or publishing.

Rebekah Storment (Philadelphia) hopes her works inspire, like her favorite author John Steinbeck. Her plans for the future aren’t set in stone, but wherever she ends up she hopes she can continue to learn and grow.

Rebecca Sun (Yazoo City) is inspired by the people around her and hopes her readers can find beauty in all things, like she does. She writes for personal joy; anything she enjoys reading, she enjoys writing.

Max Thompson (Hernando) writes to encourage emotion within his readers and finds inspiration and depth in the works of Ocean Vuong and Ethel Cain. He plans to major in chemical engineering when he gets to college.

Cassie Van Riessen (Cleveland) hopes her work showcases the fragility and innocence of nature that is pure and untampered. She likes to eat chocolate-covered freeze-dried cherries while writing her favorite genre, realistic fiction. In the future, she hopes to pursue a career in science, possibly the medical field, while keeping up with her passion for art.

Althea Wells (Greenville) likes drawing her favorite characters all over class handouts. She is inspired by the artist Giovanni, and from her artwork “Untitled Saint” she wants people to know that Saints aren’t just old, dead white people from a long time ago. Anyone can be a saint because everyone has the capacity for benevolence.

Rina Xu (Starkville) hopes her work entertains those who read or view it. She also would like to write stories that people will remember fondly. Her favorite genre to write is fiction. Her main inspiration comes from music, as she feels that melodies and lyrics awaken story ideas. In the future, Rina plans to major in linguistics and publish a book or two.

Winson Zheng (Greenville) draws inspiration from various sources such as mundane activities or random words. His favorite genre is poetry. He hopes readers come away thinking, “That was a nice read.” He plans to go to college up North and maybe be a doctor but definitely make a lot of money.





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