



SOUTHERN VOICES

2026

SOUTHERN VOICES

Vol. XXXVIII



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Poetry Judge

Originally from Mississippi, **Hannah V Warren** is a poet, translator, and scholar living between Birmingham, Alabama, and Gambier, Ohio, where she works at Kenyon College as *The Kenyon Review* Fellow. Along with authoring the poetry collections *Hurricane Pastoral* (Sundress 2027) and *Slaughterhouse for Old Wives’ Tales* (Sundress 2024), she has received support from Fulbright-Germany, the PEN/Heim Translation Grant, Bread Loaf, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

Nonfiction Judge

John T Edge, author of *House of Smoke: A Southerner Goes Searching for Home*, writes and hosts the National Emmy Award-winning television show *TrueSouth*, now in its ninth season. He has written or edited more than a dozen books including *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the American South*. Edge is a widely published magazine and newspaper writer. He currently writes a restaurant column for the magazine *Garden & Gun*.

Awarded an honorary doctorate by Centenary College, winner of the nonfiction prize from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, and twice winner of the MFK Fisher Distinguished Writing Award, Edge is a fellow in the Georgia Writer’s Hall of Fame. At the University of Mississippi, he leads development of Greenfield Farm Writers Residency and serves as Writer-in-Residence for the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. Edge lives in Oxford with his wife, the artist Blair Hobbs.

Fiction Judge

Melanie R. Anderson is an assistant professor of English at Mississippi University for Women. She co-authored *Monster, She Wrote: The Women Who Pioneered Horror and Speculative Fiction* (Quirk 2019), which won the Bram Stoker and Locus Awards for nonfiction. Her academic research and publications are focused primarily on the work of American women writers of gothic and horror fiction. In addition to teaching and writing, she co-hosts two podcasts: *The Know Fear Cast* and *The Monster, She Wrote Podcast*.

Art Judge

Michelle Houston is an art and architectural historian with a B.A. in Art History, minor in Studio Art from Millsaps College, and a Master of Arts degree from the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment. Originally from Shreveport, Louisiana, she now resides in Atlanta, Georgia. Over the course of her 15-year career as an art and architectural historian, she has evaluated hundreds of buildings, sites, objects, and art for eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places.

Her research interests include Native American art and architecture, Southern women artists, and traditional folk pottery. In addition to her academic and professional work, she is a practicing watercolor and pen-and-ink artist whose drawings are influenced by her background in architectural study and observation.

Her work can be visited on instagram: @michelle_houston_fine_art



Star Eater
Mirae Nishikawa

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When the Ants Left Kansas

Sasha Harvey

First Place, Fiction

The Chris Read Award for Fiction

The ants were the first to leave Kansas. I noticed them when Barbara and I cloudwatched together on the front porch. She pointed up at a cumulus cloud, her wrinkled hand shaking from arthritis. My eyes darted from her to the ants. They marched in perfect rows through the corn stalks, as if a compass guided them north. I clung to her sagging shoulder, my fingers digging a little too hard.

“Gran, have you ever seen something so strange? The ants, they’re leaving,” I said, gesturing toward them.

Barbara turned slowly to the fields and pushed her glasses to the bridge of her nose. “No, hon, I don’t think I have.”

“What...what do you think it means?”

She turned her face back to the sky, a breeze fluttering through her hair. “I’m not sure, Camryn. I just know that this ain’t right.”

Over the course of the next day, the rest of the insects buzzed, scuttled, squirmed, and flew after the ants. Barbara said if the Dust Bowl had been made of bugs, it would be like this. We were trapped inside the farmhouse, shutters drawn. The radio was always on. But despite our growing fears, the reporters seemed unconcerned. “It’s just Kansas being Kansas,” they joked, their voices wavering. “If it were like this all the time,” Barbara quipped back, “nobody would live round here.”

I would often peer between the shutter slats. Clouds of insects polluted the sky, choking the sun from sight. Kansas was a pyre about to ignite.

I needed to talk to someone—anyone. I pulled out the address book and spent hours dialing every residential number down the row. Most didn’t respond. But a few did.

Mrs. Margaery told me to “Pack your bags, boy, and leave while you can.”

Fleetwood, my friend from school, said, “Mom and Pop already left. They took Meg, too. I don’t have a choice anymore.

Cam, I’m running out of food and time.”

Mr. Dennis, his voice gravelly from cigarette smoke, went on a ten-minute long rant about politics. At the end of his spiel, he proclaimed, “Take your grandmother and get out of this damn country while you can.”

One by one, they hung up. I redialed them again and again, my hands fumbling over themselves. No one responded a second time.

Soon after, our phone stopped working. It would ring sporadically, but nobody was ever on the other line. We didn’t even bother to pick it up anymore.

The next to leave Kansas were the cattle and horses. They stampeded over our corn fields, trampling them to the ground. The house rocked on its foundation, pushed and shoved from all sides by the beasts. Barbara watched through the shutter’s slats, her eyes growing wet. I tried to turn on the radio. No matter what station I dialed, it was static.

The last creatures to escape were the birds. Instead of fleeing South as they usually do, they followed the rest of the animals in haphazard Vs. Even the chickadees flew in lines, as if they were migratory birds. When the last stragglers disappeared from the horizon, I searched for Barbara. It was easy to find her. The front door was wide open, and I could hear her softly snoring. She sat

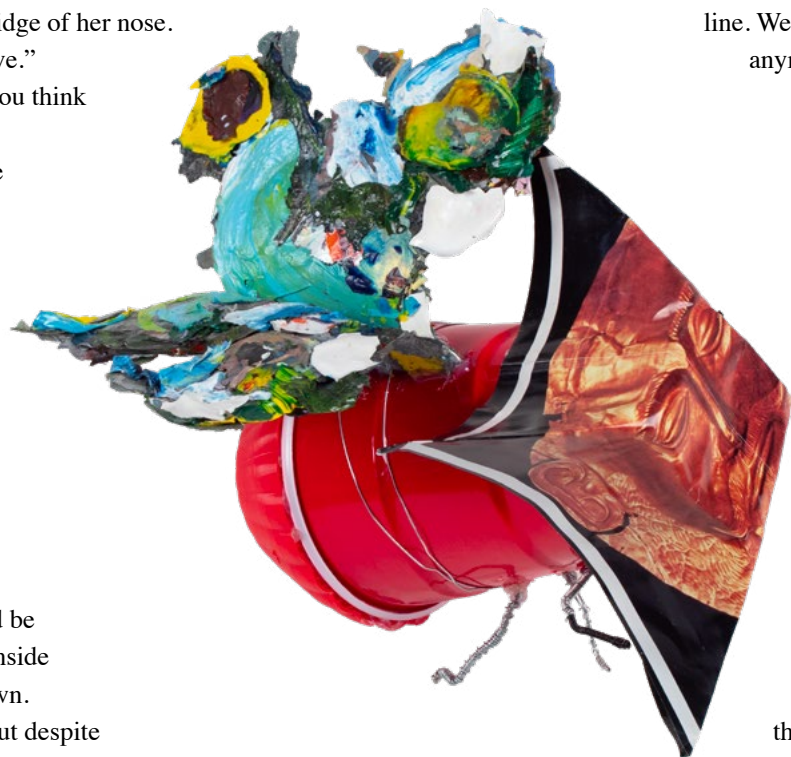
on her rocking chair, her eyes closed.

“We gotta go. I know this place is home, but we can’t stay here no more.”

She opened one eye, then the other, and said, “Boy, if you ever disturb me from my afternoon nap, I will get you. Mark my words.”

“Gran, this is serious. Pack your bags. It’s time.”

She stared at the sky and said, “My knee’s been hurting worse and worse. Camryn, it’s coming. And we can do nothin’ to



Hernando My Child

Izzy Rushing

Southern Snow

Maya Venkat

First Place, Fine Art



stop it.”

Barbara’s left knee aches before it rains. She told me it felt different this time, the pain a twisting suffocation instead of a gentle tug. The air was still, too still. I told her that she had nothing to fear. I was here beside her.

“You’re right, of course. Go on, pack your bags and get enough food to last you a month. I’ll be there real quick,” she said, smiling with her teeth.

I left her there, on the porch, still watching the sky for an omen. My throat felt raw, as if I had breathed in too much of Kansas’s dirt. I walked through the house, trailing my hand through layers of dust and straightening Barbara’s antique doll collection.

I packed, stuffing clothes and trinkets into my travel duffel. My hands were surprisingly steady; even they knew it was time to leave. I raided our emergency food supply, scooping the dozens of cans into a trash bag and picking out the least stale loaves of Wonder Bread.

I found her where I left her, rocking contentedly on the porch. The sky had turned a strange, greenish gray. The air felt like it did before a tornado, heavy and foreboding. My heart sped up—it began to beat hard and rhythmically, like a bird trying to escape its cage.

“Gran, I know you’re not ready to go yet. You haven’t moved an inch since I left.”

“No, you’re right, I ain’t ready.”

“Well then, get a move on! We need to get out of here. The

clouds are darkening.”

For a long moment, she was silent. Her knuckles were white, and her once hazel eyes looked almost green in the light. She finally spoke: “What do I always tell you about my death, boy?”

The words fell from my lips easily, just as she would have said them, “That this house is your tomb and Kansas will be the pyre.”

She looked at me, dead in the eyes. She never looked me in the eyes. “I’m not leaving this place. Not for nothing. Not even for you.”

“But Gran, I can’t just—”

“I will not budge on this, sonny. You’re still young, your future ripe for the plucking. Please, don’t stay here. At least not for me.”

I kneeled in front of her and grasped her hands tight.

“But if I leave, I won’t be by your side to help you,” I said. “The food will run out eventually. You always forget to take your meds. Then, what are you going to do?”

She let out a long sigh and whispered, “I’m gonna stay here, as I always have. I’ve felt it for a while. My time is running out. I think the land knows it, too.” She smiled wearily.

I stared up at her, trying to memorize every wrinkle and stray mole. I felt her hands shake from arthritis or nerves or a bit of both. Barbara steadily stared back into my eyes. I couldn’t save a woman who was bent towards death.

“Please,” she said, “live enough for the both of us.”

I packed my bags into the back of our truck, tying them down with the ropes from the garage. Barbara leaned on the front door, clutching her knee and watching me. I walked to her, held her bony shoulders close, and kissed her cheek. Her familiar fragrance washed over me, like charred pie and soil warmed from the sun.

“Next time you find a landline that works, call me. Swear it to me, boy,” she said.

My eyes burned. We both knew that would never happen.

“I swear I’ll call when I can, Gran.”

I walked to the truck, climbed in, and turned on the ignition. It rumbled to life, engine stuttering and heater blasting.

I rolled down the window, the warm, too-humid air caressing my damp cheeks.

“I’ll see you on the other side, Barbara,” I yelled, winking even though I knew she couldn’t see it.

She held up her hand in farewell.

I bumped down the gravel road, glancing over my shoulder only once. Barbara stood, unmoving, on the porch. Behind her, the sky was dark. An aurora borealis of grayish green lines drew claws across the clouds, tearing them wide open.

I could smell it—feel it—tainting the air. The storm was coming. Maybe Kansas was finally taking back what we owed. ☰

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 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



Butterfly

Colin Chung
Honorable Mention,
Photography

kids of nature

Harper Hipp

past the engines
with the keys locked and loaded

past the paved trail
for those whom the sun has forgotten

past the tree with a remedy
that has long been missing

you’ll find us there
along the sandy bank

searching in the water,
searching through the woods

we don’t know what for
I don’t think we ever will

our feet tread alongside
the tracks of some deer, long gone

but we duck, weave, crawl
through overgrown thorns

dirt sticks under our nails
plastered on our knees

nature treads into our hair
making its home in curls

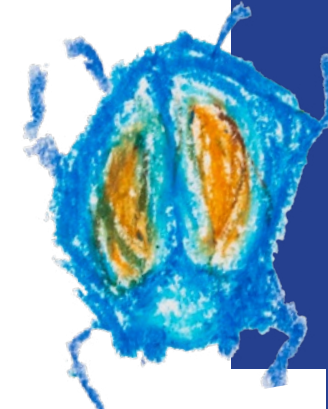
but we are still ducking, weaving, crawling
through overgrown thorns

cursed to forever search
what for, we’ll never know ☰



Pinto Bean

Izzy Rushing



Jerry

Izzy Rushing

Todd

Spencer Goodlett
Second Place, Fine Art



The Mandolinist

Rina Xu

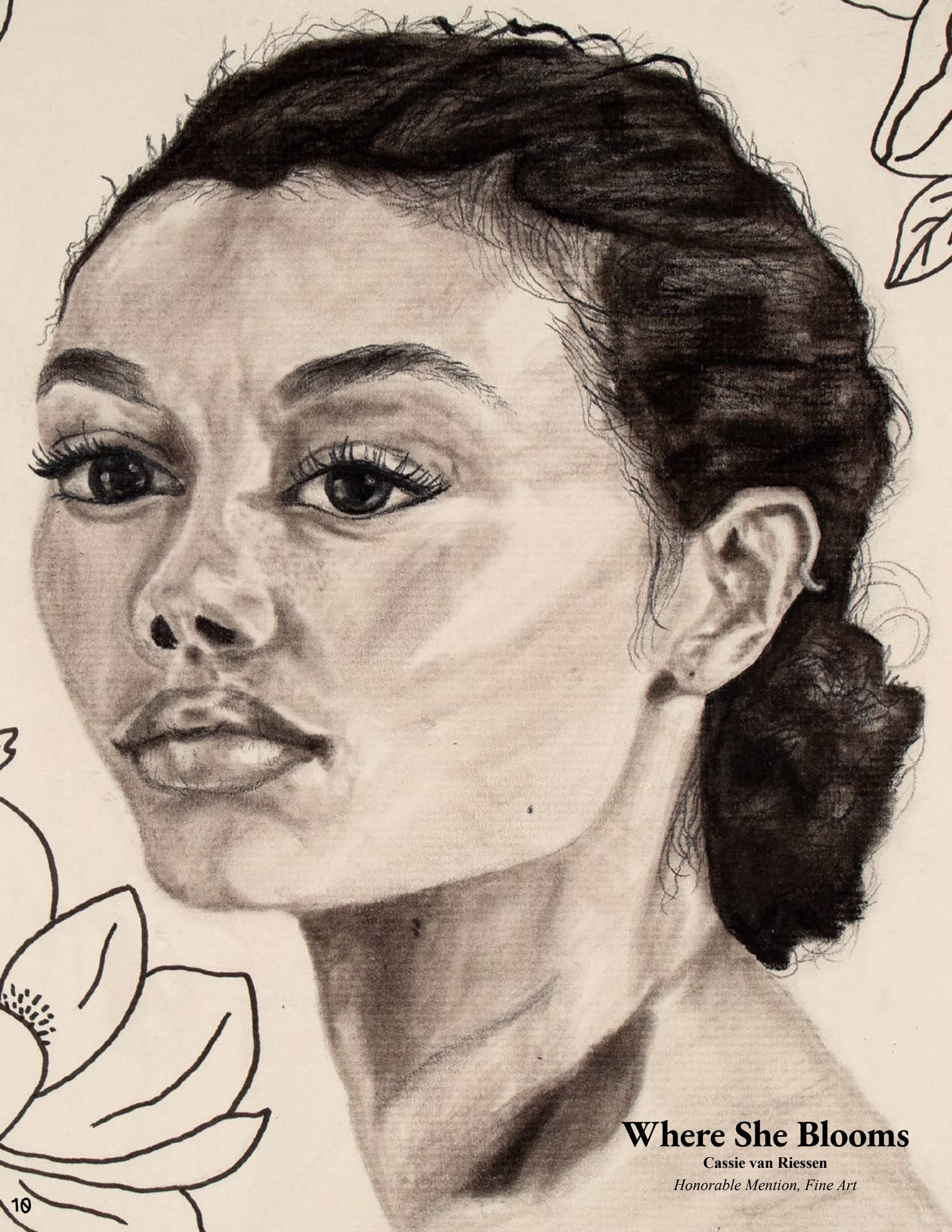
The mandolin is sitting on the front porch
It is made of maple, light brown in color
The wood is chipped, copper pegs corroded
Yet after all this time
the strings still stand
An antique, they said it was
It is the one Mama used to play
to the sky,
to the insects,
to me

Till the hours grew tired
and soil could no longer sleep
It is the one that has kept my soul alive
after all this time
It is here
It is always here

The rest of the house is empty

Yet still it seems I can hear those melodies again
from deep beneath the Earth
The Earth who’s tormented me in rest,
whose children have made home in my skin,
still wishes for one last song
Maggots dance across my scabs
Ants journey into my mouth
and out the eyes
impatiently
Everything except my body is alive
Yet still,
I can feel the dirt on my face
as the sun kisses me
once more

The mandolin sitting on the porch
is the only thing familiar
It is the part of the house not missing
Unlike the pulse that echoed in me
as I ran across these hills
Unlike the skin that
had once touched this maple wood
Unlike the pools of red
where my nails should be
Yet still,
I strum those strings
like Mama always did ☰



My Mother Has Taught Me

Cecelia Buehler

My mother planted me as a seed in the rich Mississippi soil. She tends to me with fertilizer and water. She fends away the rabbits and squirrels. She checks on my progress day after day. Sixteen years of this, and my roots have grown. I've finally sprouted. Little green leaves reaching for the sun. My mother's voice coaxes me up and up and up.

My mother's hand has guided me all this time. Her palm is a compass needle, and my morals point in its direction. My mother dragged my little hand to the garden all the time when I was younger. She still does. First, though, we always go to the Oktibbeha County Co-op, where we pick out herbs, fruit, vegetables, flowers, and seeds of all sorts. I love that place, with its humid greenhouse, plastic toy horses, and fall pumpkins. I drag around a metal wagon filled with shades of green until it's full, following my mother all the while.

Once home, we drag out bags of dirt and fertilizer, the very stuff that feeds my roots. There's something about feeling dirt with your bare fingertips, like you're touching Jesus Himself. It's healing. My mother has taught me the importance of connecting with the earth, of growing real food in your own backyard. As we planted, she taught me the names of wildflowers and herbs. "What's this one called?" she asks.

I stare at the cluster of green leaves and examine the shape and smell. "Lemon balm," I say.

"And what's it do?" she asks.

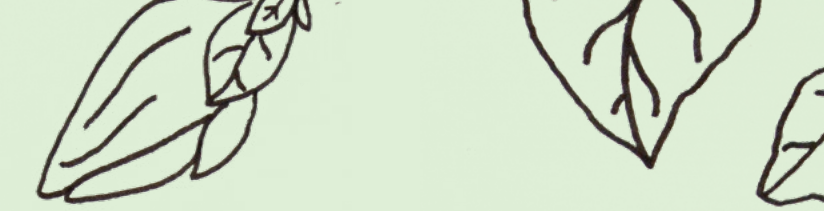
I don't have an answer to that most of the time. One time, speeding down a highway, my mom asked me, "What's that white plant growing out there? Remember?" I looked out the window. The beautiful white flowers grew in bounties near the tree line.

"Queen Anne's Lace," I answered.

"Close, it's Elderberry." I vow to be able to tell the difference one day.

Kneeling in the rows between the garden beds, my mother and I pull each weed from the earth, each root that clutters the soil. We make room for the fruits of our labor.

"Why do weeds grow?" I asked my mother a long time ago.



"Because the Earth loves to be covered in green," she answered.

God fills our world with weeds, I've learned, because the world must be packed with emerald, sage, lime, jade, forest, sea green and all the rest.

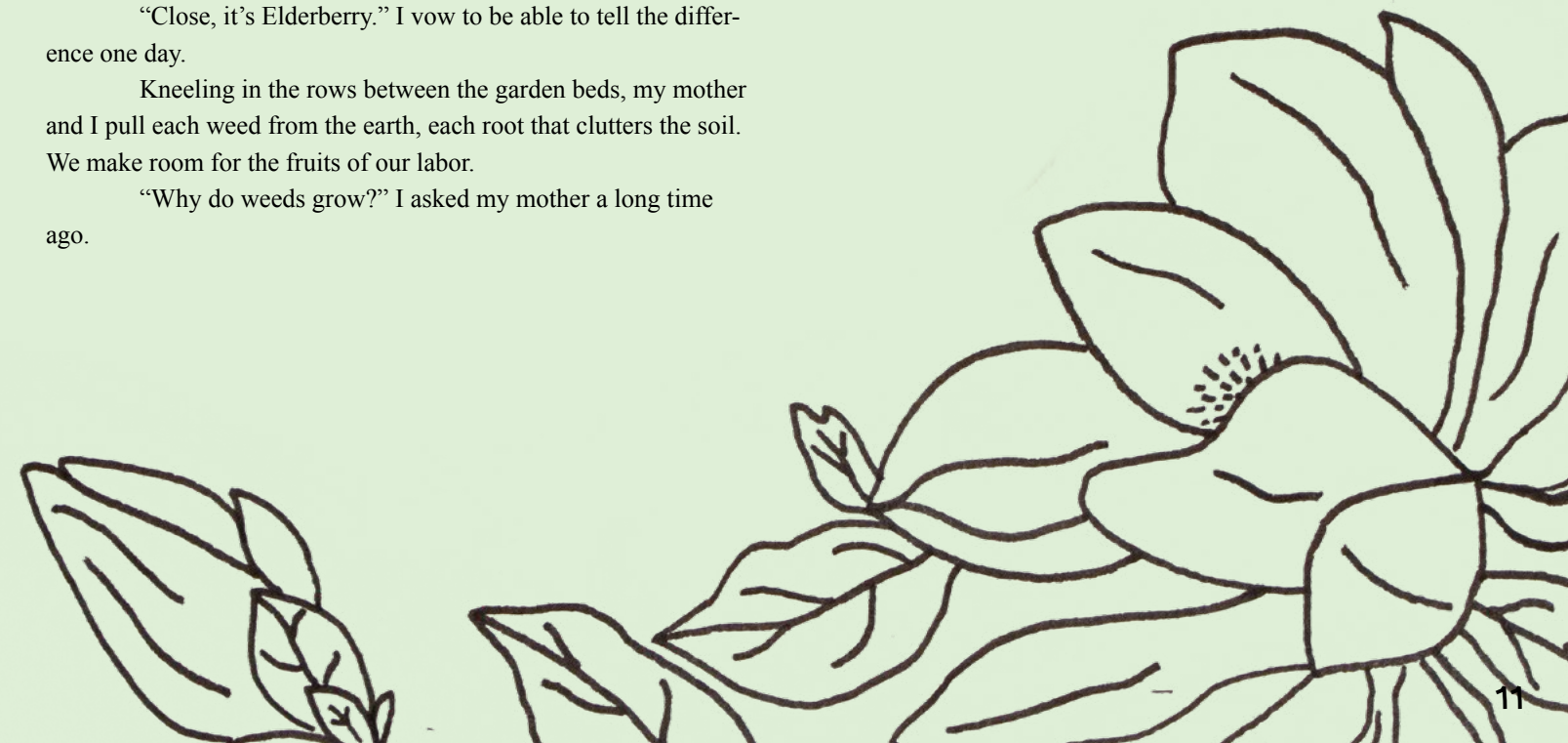
Just like Mother Nature covers the Mississippi dirt, my mother covers me in green. The times my mother has been most disappointed in me are the times that I, in her eyes, have been unkind. According to her, I must carry the weak of the world like we placed strawberries and mint in the dirt of our garden. With care. My mother and I are as different as snap peas and blackberries. Our personalities couldn't clash more. I'm the introvert to her extrovert. Yet, my mother has molded my soul in her image. I must sprout to help others, just like her.

I am a dandelion. I was a seed that blew into the air from a wish, and I floated to the ground and stayed there. My mother and I love dandelions the most out of any flower. We love them because no matter how much humans spray them with pesticides and try to kill them, they still grow everywhere. Resilience. The most important trait to have in nature. My mother has taught me how to make mistakes. How to bounce back. How to reach for the sun again after being wilted. How to be reborn. You do so by sharing seeds of love. By blowing on a dandelion, thinking a prayer, and watching the fairy-like seeds drift away. Or by digging little holes in beds of dirt and placing sacred seeds in each. I have learned by example. I learned from my mother, and she learned from her mother. Dandelions passing down the wisdom of nature. All of us are dandelions in the world, made out to be weeds. Attacked for simply trying to cover the world in our shade of green. 🌿

Where She Blooms

Cassie van Riessen

Honorable Mention, Fine Art



Little Preacher in Mama's Phone

Ainsley Dew

Honorable Mention, Nonfiction

There it was in all its glory. My mother's iPhone 5, sitting on the kitchen counter like forbidden fruit from the Garden of Verizon. No one was around; the only sound came from my new puppy clawing at the trash. My tiny feet crept forward, quiet but determined. I couldn't get caught. I never did.

I snatched the phone and bolted up the stairs, each thump echoing down the hallway. Almost there. Almost safe. I dove into my room and slammed the door. For a seven-year-old, closing my door was an act of rebellion. It meant privacy, power, independence, and a short-lived career in broadcasting. I typed in the password wrong twice, nailed it on the third try. Victory. The screen lit up like a stage light. I swept everything off my desk—books, markers, whatever—and the crash made my heart stop. No foot-steps. Good. I propped the phone against a stack of notebooks, hit record, and smiled.

"Hi kidss! This is Ainsley Kate Dew. And today, imma talk to yuu about Jeeesus."

My speech impediment was bad back then, and the accent sure wasn't helping. I was one year into speech therapy, which somehow turned into six. Despite all that, I talked constantly and loudly. I had things to say. So, I started preaching to a congregation that existed only in my imagination.

"That man that went to Hell! He asked for some waata, but Jeeesus said nuh uh, you ain't listen to me."

I was referencing the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke. In the story, the rich man, burning in Hell, begs Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water. I didn't know Abraham wasn't Jesus, so I gave the poor man's plea a harsher outcome.

"See, I would never askss for wata while I'm burning in Hell, cuz if I was there, I deserved it! That was very disrespectful of him, he don't deserved a drop!"

Clearly, I was raised in a Southern Baptist church. Nothing says "Jesus loves you" quite like a sermon that ends with, "you deserved it." Nobody does condemnation quite like we do. That video was filmed on a Sunday night, straight after my Sunday school lesson. I was fired up on Goldfish crackers and the wrath of God.

"See, what yuu kids needa do is pray and say, 'I'm sorry Jeeesus, I'll listen,' and you won't end up in fire begging for wataa. I get really thirsty all the time, so I make sure I pray."

There sure isn't Capri Sun in Hell. So maybe I was on to something.

I'm sure there are dozens of these masterpieces floating around in my mother's iCloud. Hours of me preaching stolen Sunday school lessons with my own commentary. I thought I was practicing for my future talk show. Fame felt inevitable.

Then I found a different kind of video.

"Hi kids..."

Sniffles. Snot bubbles. Genuine despair.

"Why is the d-devil so meannn?"

I sighed. Oh boy.

"They had the devil in them, I kneeew it. Those girls said my head was too big."

Instant flashback. The playground. The same slide I went down fifty times in a row. I wasn't antisocial; I just preferred my own company. Two girls wanted a turn, but I was busy mumbling to myself about heaven, probably.

"Ainsley, your head is so big, you must be so smart."

Giggles.

"Maybe not so smart."

Kids are cruel. I don't remember their exact words, but I remember the sting. I didn't struggle in school, exactly. I just didn't care. About grades, the alphabet, small talk. But maybe I cared more than I let on.

"Why can't nobody be niice to mee?"

The video stops there. The silence afterward feels heavier than the crying. I remember that feeling, loneliness stretching out inside me, far too wide for my small body. My thoughts were always too loud, too many, and the only thing that ever really listened



was that near-death phone.

Maybe that's why I loved preaching so much. The phone didn't laugh. It didn't interrupt. It didn't tell me my head was too big. It just waited, patient and blank, like it believed I had something worth saying. In those little sermons, everything made sense again: loneliness, cruelty, confusion, all softened by the sound of my own voice.

I clicked on another video.

"Hi kidss! This is Ainsley Kate Dew, and today, imma talk to yuu about Jeeesus."

There I am, beaming like I just discovered salvation.

I don't preach into iPhones anymore, but I still talk to things that can't talk back: blank pages, prayers, and the occasional wall. And when I think about that little girl with her big head and even bigger faith, I don't roll my eyes anymore. I get it. She thought her words mattered.

And maybe that's all I was ever chasing—the belief that they still do. ☹️



Dress Up
Margaret Parker

The Origami Horse

Lani Carter

Hunched over the desk,
she worked—
folding, creasing, uncreasing, repeating—
to make something, anything
worthy of pleasing
the person that brought her to life.

Then came a horse,
dressed in white,
with thin, printer paper legs,
strong enough to stand.

With glee, its creator
picked up a brush
and dipped it in
brown watercolor paint.
Then black—
and then pink.

Brown for its coat,
the same as her skin.
Black for the mane,
just like her hair.
Pink for the nose,
soft like her insides.

But with one drop too many,
the horse lost its balance,
collapsing
on thin, printer paper legs. ☹️

Au Bord du Regard

Simeon Barnes

Third Place, Fiction

“The morning drifts in like a soft bonjour,
spilling pale gold across the cobblestones.
The river hums its quiet chanson,
carrying secrets beneath its slow, deliberate waves.

Shadows linger like lovers who missed their chance,
hesitating at the edge of the light.

And Paris — ma vieille muse —
breathes warmth into the cold corners
where longing curls itself to sleep.”

“*Mon dieu*, listen-listen,” Étienne slurs, grinning like
a Cheshire cat and waving the paper as if it’s offended him on a
personal level. His eyes are glassy and as rouge as the lobster he
ate earlier that evening, yet full of that artistic, dramatic conviction
he never failed to achieve after a glass of rosé and a cigarette of
“whatever-the-hell” on the balcony.

He clears his throat and reads over again with a pretentious
tone, as if he’s performing some slam poetry at the local bar.

“The morning drifts in like a soft bonjour...”

He couldn’t contain his laughter any further. “A soft

bonjour? *Mon ami*, you’ve missed the mark entirely. What even
is that, huh? A shy tourist greeting the Eiffel Tower? *Bonjour*,
monsieur, may I take a picture of your baguette?”

He collapses into a fit of laughter that makes him burst into
tears.

“*Et ma vieille muse*? Old Muse? *Mon frère*, Paris is not an
old muse; she’s a complicated harlot who steals your cigarettes and
maybe twenty euros out of your wallet, all to never call you back.
She’s not sleeping in the corners like a cat with existentialism.”

He takes another drink, misses his mouth slightly, and
promptly wipes his chin with the back of his sleeve. Doesn’t he
know it’ll stain?

He groans, switching his playful banter for a more serious,
critical tone. “This is not poetry, it’s... it’s a postcard written by
someone who’s never been heartbroken in the rain or their balles
still haven’t dropped yet. Shadows don’t linger; people linger. The
shadow can’t linger without the people! Regret lingers. *My salope*
of a landlord lingers outside my door because I forgot to pay rent
again.”

Eh bien mince. No need to shatter my measly confidence.
My pride and my ego are assaulted and feel as if I should be
offended.

“But the worst part? The worst part is that it’s almost good.
Almost. Like it wants to be something real, something with teeth.”
He taps the page. “But it’s too pretty. Too clean. Paris is not clean.
Paris is... messy. Beautiful because she is messy.”



Prayers Hang Over the Wall

Rebecca Sun

»—————★ ★ ★—————«

People think the Seine is the heart of Paris, but they’re
wrong. It’s the readers.

Chaque matin, around *dix heures*, the same soft bell rings
above my shop door. Inside peeks Claire Rosseau, like a child
that’s wandered to the nearest *confiserie*, even though their Maman
clearly instructed them not to. She moves through the aisles as if
the books might bruise if she touches them too quickly.
She’s dressed in a floral print Mirae dress that just accentuates her
figure astonishingly. Oh, how it reminds me of my former beauty
when I was her age. She brushes her hair behind her ear, scanning
the shelves with that look she gets, the one that says she’s searching
for something she can’t quite name.

“*Bonjour*, Claire,” I say, attempting not to alert her of just
how closely I’d been watching her.

She smiles, small but warm. “*Bonjour*, Madame
Madeleine. Might I trouble you for anything new in poetry?”

“Always,” I tell her, though it isn’t strictly true. I simply
just adore the way her eyes light up when she believes it.

She drifts towards the back, where the sunlight cascades
in thin, golden bridges across the floorboards. She basks in it like
she was born from it—a girl made of soft and quiet brightness. I’ve
witnessed her lose herself in the many chapters of a book standing
upright, with no regard for the world around her. *Mon dieu*, if I
didn’t know any better, I’d swear she’s waiting for something to
happen, though she’d never admit it.

While she peruses the seemingly never-ending pages of
the book, I pretend to straighten a perfectly straightened stack of
articles. “You know,” I interject casually, “you could stay and read
here. *Ça ne me dérange pas*.”

She shakes her head. “I prefer the river. *Ça semble...
honnête*.”

Honest. That’s a word only young people use to describe a
place that lies such as Paris.

She chooses a book — Rilke, of course — and tucks it
under her arm. “I’ll take this one.”

As I ring her up, she glances out the glass toward the Pont
Neuf, as if checking whether the world is still waiting for her.

“You’re going to your bench again.”

She blushes, which tells me more than she intended to.
“It’s quiet there.”

True, but she isn’t going for the quiet.

“Be careful, Claire. The river has a way of showing you
things you didn’t know you were looking for.”

She laughs softly. “I think I’d like that.”

»—————★ ★ ★—————«

The studio smells of fixer and stale coffee; the usual
perfume of Étienne’s afternoons. He’s hunched over a contact
sheet, (granted, with a pounding headache due to a hangover from
the night before) squinting at a row of faces he doesn’t have the



Backyard Gate

Maya Diaz

slightest recollection of photographing.

“Étienne,” calls Luc, his printer, carrying a stack of freshly dried photos. “You’re wasting daylight here.”

Étienne grunts without looking up. “*Ça signifie de la merde*. Daylight is overrated.”

Luc drops the prints on the table with a soft thwap. “Not the kind that’s happening right now. It’s that strange light you like. The one that makes everything look like a memory.”

Étienne finally glances up. Luc is already gathering his things, shaking his head.

“It’s that strange light you like. The one that makes everything look like a memory.”

“You know that bridge you’re always muttering about?” Luc says. “The Pont Neuf? Anyways, the light’s hitting it in that... what do you say... ‘melancholic gold’ way. Thought you might be intrigued.”

He rolls his eyes. “I never said melancholic.”

“You did,” Luc argues. “Twice. You might’ve remembered if you weren’t blackout drunk both times. *Mais qu’est-ce que je vais bien pouvoir faire de toi?*”

“You do know I speak French as well, right?”

“Maybe it was for you to hear.”

Étienne opens his mouth to argue, but something in the air shifts. It’s a quiet tug, a familiar itch in his fingers. The kind that means a photograph is waiting for him somewhere, and if he doesn’t go now, it’ll vanish.

“Go,” Luc says, halfway out the door. “Before the sun changes her mind.”

Étienne hesitates only a moment before grabbing his Leica from the table. He slings it over his shoulder, muttering, “Fine. But if the light is terrible, I’m blaming you.”

Luc waves him off. “If the light is terrible, you’ll pretend it was intentional.”

»—————★ ★ ★—————«

The walk to Pont Neuf sobers him a tad. The wine lingers in his bloodstream like a warm echo, and the smoke from earlier still clings to his shirt. Luc wasn’t wrong. There’s something strange about it this evening, something that feels like a half-remembered dream tugging at the edge of his vision.

By the time he reaches the bridge, the sun is slipping low, turning the Seine into a sheet of molten brass and gold. The air is tangible, tasting of both river mist and old, stale stone. He lifts his Leica automatically, framing the curvature of the arches, the

silhouettes drifting across the span.

Then, he sees her.

At first, she’s just a figure sitting in solitude on a rusted bench near the river. Folded over a book, hair catching those strays of light that seem so persistent to cling onto her. Yet, something didn’t allow him to look away. Her demeanor... stops him.

He lowers the camera.

He never lowers the camera.

The world seems to narrow into that one space, the lane between him and her. All other sounds of the surrounding seem to drown out, and he can swear he hears “*La Belle Vie*” playing softly in the background.

He takes a step closer, and then another, drawn by this tug. It feels as though she has her own gravitational pull on him, and he’s oh so willing to follow.

He raises the Leica again, hands trembling just enough to annoy him.

Click.

The shutter breaks the quiet like a whispered confession.

She looks up. Her eyes meet his. Not startled, not offended, but curious, as if she’d been waiting for him this entire time.

Étienne freezes, the camera still halfway to his face. She tilts her head slightly, studying him with a calm that makes his pulse stumble.

“Did you take a picture of me just now?”

He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. The river keeps moving. The light keeps fading. The moment stretches, fragile and electric, suspended between them like a held breath.

She closes her book.

Stands.

Takes one slow step toward him. And just as she’s about to speak—just as the air tightens, just as the world leans in—a cloud slips over the sun, dimming everything. Claire stops mid-step, her expression unreadable in the sudden shadow.

Étienne’s heart kicks hard against his ribs. He doesn’t know what she was going to say. He doesn’t know why it matters so much. He only knows that whatever it was—whatever was about to happen—is hanging there, unfinished, waiting for the next breath.

≡

On A Bed of Magnolias

Althea Wells



Our Lady of The Delta

Althea Wells

Third Place, Poetry

The Joyful Mystery

I didn’t think you’d make it
through the marsh.

I pulled you from the alligator’s mouth
from out under the water rotted roots
right out of the basket
and held you to my chest.

The hospital lights like lightning bugs
on your gentle face.

The Luminous Mystery

You were always a peaceful child.
Tender in mind and spirit.
Eyes so deep they cradled the future.
Skin so black I dared to believe in you.
Mind so full the snakes couldn’t help but
slip through the reeds
from under my feet
and steal you.

The Sorrowful Mystery

When I drive on these roads
that don’t stop for nothing,
the fields call out your name.
Clouds of mosquitoes hang low over it all,
drawing blood from the wet air
with the same greedy thirst
as the day they found you
scattered in the shadow of the magnolia.

The Glorious Mystery

My hands refuse to stop digging
into palms and offerings of
holy water in the spring flood.
Their hands refuse to drop
the trigger that takes a doe’s fawn
before he has time to confess.
My God draws him in
by the thousands. ≡

Can You Understand

Althea Wells



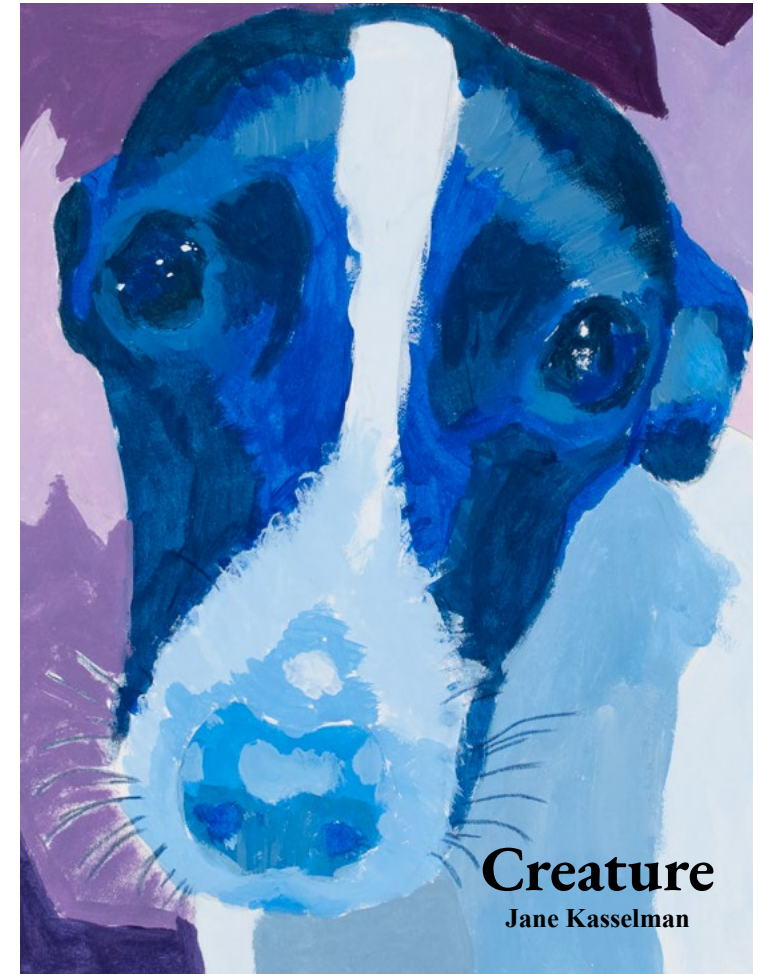
The Field

Kami Patrick



Creature

Jane Kasselmann



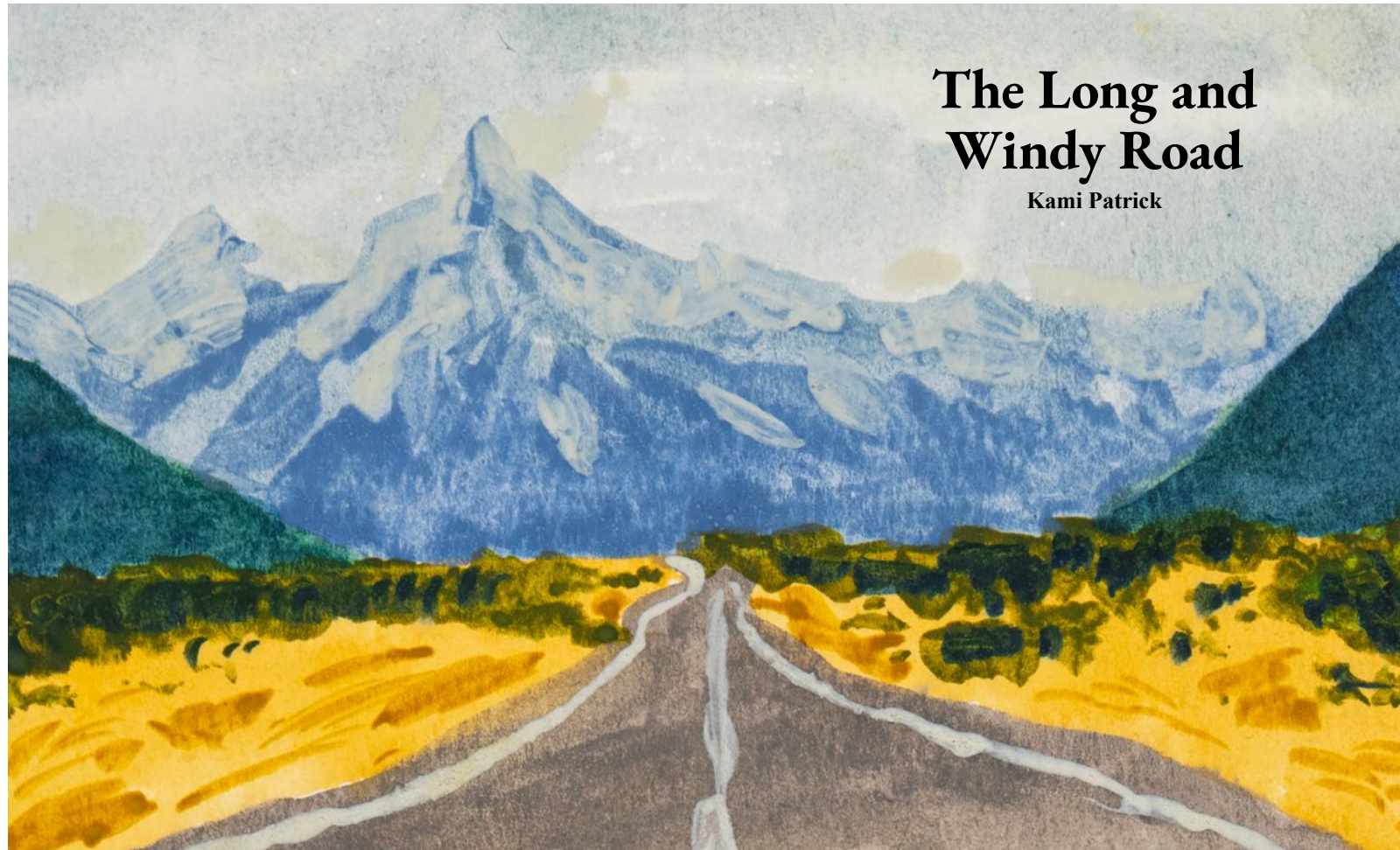
Quick Draw

Izzy Rushing



The Long and Windy Road

Kami Patrick



Creek

Kami Patrick



Nature's Religion

Sasha Harvey

Honorable Mention, Poetry

Oh how I long
to thrive off the spoken word,
the harmonies of stuttered breaths,
cadence of speech,
and murmured prayers in alcoves.

When I sit in the pew,
back straight and hands on Bible,
their conviction is not mine.

I finally resonate with their faith
with a breeze caressing my spine,
crescents of tree bark jammed in fingernails,
light playing across wind-kissed cheeks,
and chills of awe skidding into skin.

I pray with hands coated in Mississippi mud,
eyes on a cardinal fluttering above,
and trees' shadows painting
inky art onto flesh.
With every rustle of leaves,
I invoke a god that isn't human
while sinking into sun-drenched earth. ≡

Eyes Under The Surface

Cassie van Riessen

Eating the South

Christopher Chen

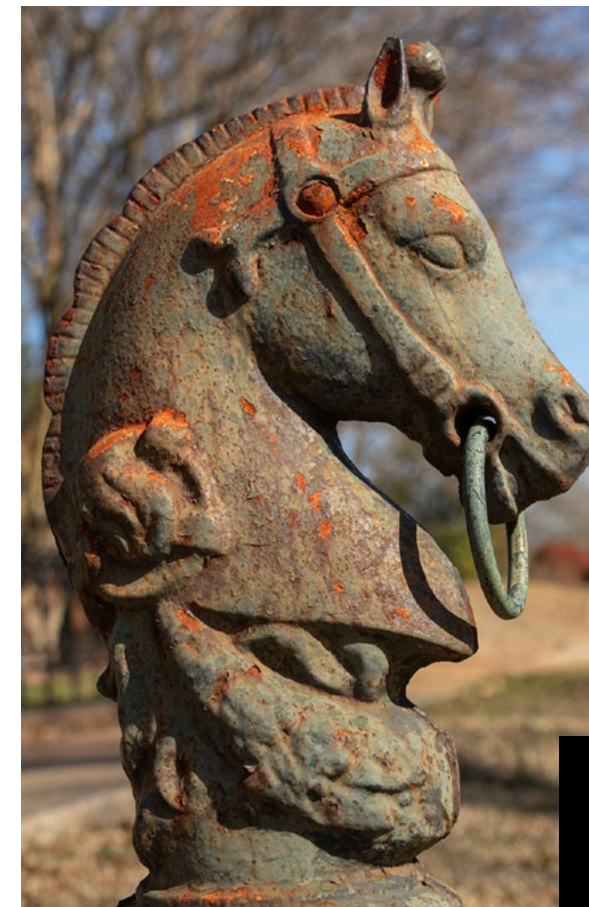
An upbringing has started.
Tugging on the walls
and tearing down the foundations
of my home.

Bony, deciduous clusters
of purple flowers hang from the
thick, woody stalk of a kudzu.

Creeping
Creeping slowly
Creeping slowly towards a low hanging fruit.

Hairy stem and lobed leaflets
climbing—clinging—to
other shrubs and trees, robbing them
of moisture and smothering their sunlight,
engulfing the surface of every flora,
invading the balance of life,
resisting the attempts to eradicate.

Spreading its roots and breaking the soil,
it encroaches on my home
that is Mississippi. ≡



What is a Woman's Honor?

Ainsley Dew

What is a woman's honor?
Is it the length of her wavy locks,
the blush of her rosy cheek?
What is a woman's honor?
Is it the design of fabric on her skin,
the warmth of her smile upon you?
If honor is how she appears,
then many will suffice.
The beautiful woman is a common woman—
you will find many like her,
women of honor.
Is it how she appears,
or perhaps what she does?
What is a woman's honor?
Is it the capability of her hands,
the steadiness of her mind?
If honor is how she performs,
then many will suffice.
The capable woman is a common woman—
you will find many like her,
women of honor.
What is a woman's honor?
Is it the beating of a different heart,
an outlook none have seen before?
Oh, women of honor,
where are you?
Are you as common as a daisy,
or as rare as violet dye?
Flowers fill the meadow.
Each appears beautiful to the eye.
Yet each is sold at a different price.
Is price determined by the flower,
or by the one who looks upon it?
The meadow is full.
Flowers bloom without instruction,
without knowledge of their worth.
Some are gathered.
Some are passed by.
I still do not know
what makes one chosen.
I only know
someone is always choosing. ≡

Rusting Away

Sasha Harvey

Third Place, Photography

Dusty Roads

Maya Diaz

Third Place, Nonfiction

I still remember the way the bright, blaring yellow sun shone through your tousled curly hair, standing straight up, stuck in place from the cool wind that hit us with such profound quickness as we sped down the dirt road on the side of the highway. That evening lasted forever, it seemed. Until I blinked and I was walking up the dusty stone steps and back into my own house, before driving back to Columbus, Mississippi, for school. We were so excited for that day, restless and jittery to finally be reunited. You picked me up and we drove the hour to your house, laughing at each other and singing along obnoxiously to Billy Joel and Alice in Chains. You opened the truck door for me and let me out into your neighborhood, the place I was a stranger in, a neighborhood I didn't understand.

Those long, winding roads of dusty farmland and lakeside houses standing on their flood-proof legs with their looming Confederate flags always caught me a little bit off guard. I felt a strange tenseness; I still do sometimes. The people had stickers on their big trucks and threatening signs in their front yard that announced who



Patch of Flowers

Margaret Parker

they supported. They were announcing that they didn't want my type of people there, too. My father's type of people. I wondered if your family would accept me. I remember feeling nervous the first time I went to your house, my stomach twisting into itself as I fidgeted with my necklace and fingers.

"Dad doesn't like mixing," you told me.

I didn't know what to say to that.

I remember when we went inside your house, up your cobweb-cloaked wooden stairs and through the scratched-up sliding glass doors covered in mosquitos left over from the nighttime. In the big, blue, brightly lit living room, your mother welcomed me with loving arms. She truly cared for me. To her, I was good for you. It was thanks to me that you were no longer joining the Army. I was glad, too. Later, for dinner, your mom cooked us Beef Stroganoff, a meal I'd never tried. I doubted it at first, but the buttery, toasted bread and twisting noodles with beef in a strange-but-flavorful orange sauce won me over. Your little sister also liked me—she called me pretty. She looked up to me, asking for my hair routine and what brand of shoes and water bottle she should get for school. I told her to get herself a good pair of Converse.

That day while I was over, your dad told me he was going to teach me to mow the lawn, leading me onto your home's lawn mower and showing me how to drive it. He seemed to think it was the most hilarious thing in the world. I felt uncomfortable and awkward, not understanding why he needed his son's girlfriend to do such a thing. You helped teach me how, and we tolerated your father's teasing, because "that's just the type of guy he is." After I mowed a short strip of the already-cut lawn and the strong scent of your yard's green grass had invaded my nostrils to the point where I could no longer tolerate it, I told you to get on and finish it. You joked about how your father was going to go tell his work friends that he made his son's Mexican girlfriend mow the lawn. I didn't like the sound of that at all.

The four-wheeler came after that. None of what happened before mattered in the moments where it was just you and me. We rode your dad's shiny new four-wheeler for hours, testing out the gears and doing donuts in the cornfields or stopping in front of the lake to watch the sunset. I'd hold on to your navy blue shirt tightly as you drove, listening to you laughing when we went over bumps and I sucked in my breath and shut my eyes tight, afraid we were about to flip. When I wanted to learn, you'd calmly guide me as I drove it, too. I always loved how gentle you were with me. You looked at me with nothing but pure adoration and love—I know you did.

Dusty roads, a bright sunset, your kind-of-racist-but-just-jokes-around father, and your welcoming mom. This is what I remember when I think back to the lake and my memories there. Your family likes me now. They invite me over all the time. Your dad told me he loved me the other day. I earned his approval, though I shouldn't have had to. He reminds me of my Nanny, my mom's mother, who also "didn't like mixing." Her daughter then married a Mexican immigrant, my father, whom Nanny loves now. I guess that's our situation, too. ☺

Cow Bovine

Izzy Rushing

Honorable Mention, Fine Art



Rotten Seeds

Sasha Harvey


Second Place, Poetry

- i. Churchgoing Women
gossip like mockingbirds.
- ii. Dolled up
girls meander through slander
every mundane Sunday morning.
Weaving through probing embraces and
pausing to clasp scandals before they go rotten.

iii. Like a pew's
decades-old rot,
nobody notices a church girl turning indecent
until the wood splits beneath her.

iv. Instead of wading
into the chatter as she used to,
she now listens for a soft whisper of intrigue,
praying that her name won't fall
like rotten apples toppling to seed soil.
Her pleas go unanswered
and those seeds take root in the churchyard.

v. Decades
don't heal wounds—
they ferment until they fester.
She is a bloody gash
rocking under the oak's shade
painted with sun-smears and wrinkles.
Like birds, girls flitter around her,
collecting her tokens of age—if not wisdom.

The ancient woman basks
in the apple trees' chatter.
She tends to her crooked branches,
scorning those she helped sow.
She pitilessly watches which girl will be planted next—
knowing her wicked fruits will fuel the congregation for years to
come. 



**Deconstructed
Mockingbirds**
Colin Chung

An ode to those who look past the fireworks

Sasha Harvey

Jazz thrums through our sinew—
a guitarist plucks at our muscles' cords,
tugging the throng to a frenzy.

The wide-eyed children
haven't steeped in Southern civilities
to dance as proper folks dance—
moving limbs in stiff four-four time
and clinging to a partner's
sweat soaked Sunday best.

Instead,
they move for themselves:
clambering over fences,
toppling down hills,
racing across imaginary lines,
and sparring with glow sticks.

Some parents watch from the sidelines,
silently counting down
to when they'll succumb to stillness.

Others jog after them,
rewinding time and playing
as if they were reborn again.

The floodlights extinguish—
dousing the dancers in darkness.
The jazz band bids adieu,
the youth are wrestled into laps,
When silence engulfs the crowd,
a *bang* cuts through the night.

The children burrow deep into nearby skirts;
they only emerge when a collective epiphany strikes them—
it is not a gun calling for death.

When their tear-streaked faces face the light,
the skeleton of a firework slashes the sky. ≡

Silent Workings

Kamdyn Patrick

The old lady, lying by her husband for the last night,
The middle-aged man, heart stopping from the weight it pushes
The woman whose lungs are clouded with smoke
The child who slipped out of their floaties, duck covered tube still floating in the water
The sad ones who wanted to fly, feet not touching the ground anymore
I have held them all,
Safe in my arms
I hold their hands, wipe their leaking eyes as I lead them
They cripple over, stooping lower and lower, all the strength leaving their body
Freedom washing over them, taking the weight that lies heavy over their heads
I walk slowly with them
Give my coat to the shaking children
Wrap it around the shoulders of the confused elderly
I let them stop and smell the flowers they passed by while they were awake
I let them see faded memories of their loved ones, the ever-loyal husband, the mothers
The sleeping dogs and cats, still curled around their quick chilling feet
I wave them off as they step into that peaceful black sea
Waves lapping at endless shore
Sparkling as the moon hits just right
It laps at the feet, pulls deeper and deeper
Washes over them, soaks through their skin
Letting their faces sink with eyes closed,
Ready for a taste of sweet peace
Of eternal quiet
I return to that world of beauty and light only to bring more
There's always more to fill that cool, dark water
Always more to join my land of darkness and calm ≡

Mother Mother Mother

Izzy Rushing



Little baby

Colin Chung

I always see you
Snuggled in your hanging cradle,
Body cocooned in a pale blanket
As if one day you'll bud
Pearly wings of baby fat
And flutter out this bedroom forever.

Your eyes are blue,
Glassy like a sardine's
And worn out as Mom's denim,
But sometimes when the morning light
Crawls into your pupils,
I think I see your eyes shift
Just a little.

And so I wave when I see you,
Wave like there's a
Little cotton heart beating
Beneath your skin—
Wave in case you see me,
Little plastic baby. 🌊

Foie Gras

Colin Chung

Honorable Mention, Fiction

Rocco tells me he is leaving for Paris in a week.

"I'm going to a culinary school there. It's called Ferrandi. I'll be gone for at least a year. Maybe longer. Chef Hebert is paying for the whole thing."

We're slicing apples in the kitchen. The room is silent except for the thud of our knives and the honk of geese outside.

"She must really like you, huh?" I say. "She already buys so much foie gras from us."

"I guess she sees something in me. And Pa's okay with it."

Rocco and I live on Pa's foie gras farm. Pa tells me the story behind it often—about living on the Serrano family farm in Madrid, the secrets he pocketed across the Atlantic, the last of his fortunes haggled for a barren slice of Georgia.

"It was winter, and I saw the geese in the sky. Beautiful white feathers. Something in my heart told me to follow them, so I did, and it took me right here. Every time I think about it, it's a miracle."

He built every inch of the farm by himself, made his own geese-Eden from the red Georgia clay. It really was a miracle; Rocco tells me there is no other place in the South where the snow geese stretch over the sky like clouds.

"Stella, could you go feed the geese?" Pa shouts from the window. "The basket is in the usual place!"

"Okay!" I shout back. I scoop my apple chunks into a mason jar and place my uncut apples by Rocco's cutting board.

"Do you think Ms. Hebert would pay me to go to Paris too?" I ask, leaving before Rocco can answer.

Every fall, forty or so snow geese will come down to our orchards, and we'll feed them—dried sweetcorn, apple chunks, nuts. Pa says one of the secrets to good foie gras is acorns.

"These come straight from Madrid. It makes their livers richer, the color brighter."

The geese come and go as they please, but many will stay. I throw sweetcorn across the grass, and they come waddling in feathery, white waves. Their stomachs bulge a little. Pa once told me the other farms in the States don't feed their geese the same way we do.

"Some stick tubes down their throats. They call it gavage. The geese don't want to eat so much, but they force them to. Makes for fat livers, doesn't make for good foie gras. We don't do that here."

That's the other secret to good foie gras: happy geese. We don't build any cages, clip any wings, or stick any tubes down a goose's throat. We let the geese eat freely, live freely.

When Rocco and I were young, we used to pretend we were geese. We waddled with the flock and made honking noises. We tried to catch crickets in our mouths. On December nights, we'd huddle next to them in the cold and whisper, "fly away, fly away," into their earholes. We thought that if Pa never got the chance to turn the geese into foie gras, they could come back next year.



A Lone Feather

Sasha Harvey

Celestial Reproach

Rebecca Sun

I throw the last handful of sweetcorn from my basket, flicking my hands the way Pa explained. With Rocco leaving for culinary school, Pa has been teaching me the ways around the farm more carefully. Last month, he pulled me aside after dinner to talk.

**“On December nights,
we’d huddle next to them
in the cold and whisper,
‘fly away, fly away...’”**

“If Rocco really wants to be a cook, then fine, we’ll let him,” he said, “but Stella, understand that the farm is my life. One day it’ll be yours.”

I’ve become okay with that, I think. I’m happy to collect the acorns, slice the apples, and feed the geese, and maybe a little less happy for everything else. Pa kept the farm running all by himself back then, but I don’t know if I could do it without Rocco. I know Rocco will miss me, but I also know that Ferrandi is the opportunity he’s wanted his whole life. Not even Pa can stop him anymore.

I wonder if it’s too late for me to want something different.

* * *

The moon is absent tonight, and the wind whistles of winter. Pa is going to teach me how to catch the geese for slaughter. I wanted to get Rocco to come with me, but he was fast asleep in his bedroom.

We find the flock clustered by the tool shed, snapping at the crickets in the grass. Pa clicks on the LED lantern in his right hand and shines it at them.

“The light puts them in a trance.”

For a few minutes, they wander aimlessly around us in circles, the light reflecting off their beady, onyx eyes. Gradually, their gait slows, and finally, they stop. Pa puts the lantern down and scoops one of the geese into his arms. It doesn’t resist.

“You get one too,” he says.

I wrap my arms around a goose and gently heave it to my stomach. He’s like a pillow but softer, half-melting against my body. Even in the dark, I notice the dark tips of his wing feathers and little splotches on his beak. His webbed feet graze my waist ever so slightly. As I follow Pa up towards the slaughterhouse, I peer into the goose’s eyes; they are kind, dark eyes, and they shine a little, even without the moonlight.

I lean my head by his ear and whisper, “fly away, fly away.”

Moon Blocks

Colin Chung

Honorable Mention, Poetry

My mom is about to forecast
My older brother’s future employment status.
She cups two red cashew-shaped pieces of wood,
Bwa bwei,
In her hands, and whispers to them, eyes closed:
“Will Steven find a job?”
Before flinging them into the air and onto the dinner table;

The future is served.

They rock on their rounded back with divine laughter,
Before settling like two moons in the night.

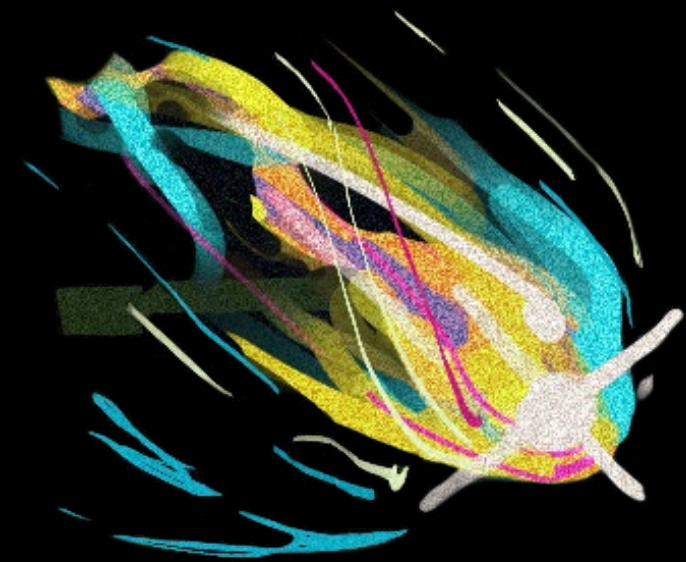
“This means the Gods are unsure,”
My mom says in Taiwanese,
“So let’s try again.”

She scoops them from their oak sky
And tosses them once more
Onto the dinner table;

The future is re-served.

This time, one falls onto its flat belly,
Still and certain as a mountain.
The other skids to a stop,
Lying on its back once more.

“This is a ‘yes,’”
My mom says,
And I sigh in relief,
Grateful for Heaven’s gentle hand. ☸



The Comet

Natalia Elmore

I see your chest rise and fall with each breath.
Silence fills the space between us,
but we are comfortable without words.
You grab my hand and bring it toward your face.
I always loved running my fingers through your curls, dark
brown or grey.
David Bowie’s “Lady Grinning Soul” plays quietly in the
other room,
your favorite song and mine.
I hum along and stare at the freckle next to your left eye.
It’s hard to see now—your smile lines hide it.

We watched the news earlier today.
Evacuate. Evacuate. Evacuate.
The city is empty now. Just you and me.
I think about the time we wasted,
arguments that lasted days, nights spent apart.
You see the sadness in my face
and brush your fingers over my cheek.

It’s midnight but the sky lights up.
Almost our time.

Please hold me now. I don’t want to go alone.
You grab my face and kiss me
as if we have time.
The room gets louder. David Bowie drowns out.
All is quiet. All is you, my love. ☸

A Big Ditch

Kami Patrick

New Moon

Althea Wells

Honorable Mention, Fiction

“Moons always come full.”

We sat at the Prioress’s feet, leaning into her words like the tides to the shore.

“Never do they wax nor wane. Never do they chisel themselves into crescents,” she sang, her voice deep and precise. It echoed on the chapel walls, reaching from the stone feet of previous Lunamaries to the open dome gaping over us.

Pressed to her side was one of us, a servant, soon to be a Lunamarie, adorned in rich violet from veil to hem. Her shadow leapt across the rock behind her, dancing, reveling, taunting against the candle’s fire tongue, much unlike the petrified tree of a woman in front of us. The lady stood so still it was as if she had joined the statues on the wall. Yet soon, her trembling voice gave away her nerve as she joined the Prioress in song, and we in succession, until the chapel was flooded with the goodness of the moon.

“To free her, we bring to the blank sky a woman for the stars.”

“Moon hue, clear us of sin. Reveal to us reality.”

Voices young and old held each other close, not yet ready to let go of the ritual hymn, not prepared to let the dust slip through our fingers. I turned my head to the woman sitting beside me. She hugged her knees tight as if they’d dissolve if she didn’t hold each muscle in place. A deep frown troubled her face. Tears begged to pool in her lap; her trembling lips threatened to cry out.

“The ceremony is cruel to us all,” I whispered to the woman, rubbing circles on her shoulder. She kept her gaze forward; moving her eyes would surely betray her efforts. Two young women at the ends of the altar dressed in navy cassocks and pale blue surplices shook their handbells, our signal to stand, to forget our sorrows in the surf. And when the Prioress spoke, we forgot, just for a moment.

“In the time of great despair, the world shook under a starless sky,” she shouted, recognition washing over us. “Beasts! Of soil and soot roamed free. Devils rested in black clouds of sulfur. Hell! Earth was.”

The whole of us seemed to tip towards the Prioress. We’d heard the tale before in childhood, but straight from the Prioress’s mouth, it gained new life.

“But one day, a maiden arose from the ashes of beasts fallen! Her flesh! Was scaleless and soft. The Earth had never felt anything so tender. And from the maiden’s feet, water began to flow.

An ocean! Surrounded her, sweeping the scroungers of dirt into her righteousness. Her voice commanded the waves, and with that, she reached into the sky and grabbed the devils from the air. The pure waters cleansed the clouds, and our lady created the heavens!”

She paused as we bowed our heads.

“Beaches formed, and new life clung to the sand. She smiled upon it, for it was good! However, when night came, the beings she loved so dearly lived in terror. A temporary darkness fell once again and broke the good beings into chaos. She couldn’t bear to watch her creations fall into disarray with every turn of the sun, so she gave herself to us. The waves pushed her into the sky. Her beauty lit up the night so that we may see even in the darkest hour.”

We pressed our fists into our sternums.

“But she missed her creations so very much. Our lady wept and wept! Yet, even her sorrow was a gift to us. Her tears formed the stars! So, we may see even when her grief steals her away.”

We silently turned our attention to the lady in purple, her knuckles white over a dagger’s silver hilt.

“And she has been gone for such a long time,” the Prioress sighed. I took a sudden glance at the woman beside me—her cheeks wet and face flushed—then to the statues lining each wall. None of these women had been strong enough to bring the moonglow overhead, and as my eyes met the new Lunamarie’s once more, doubt sank into my stomach.

“Please,” the Prioress began again.

Woman, bring us holy light. A moonless earth weeps until taken in.

The new Lunamarie hung her head low, the two altar ladies guiding her to her glory.

Moon hue, clear us of sin. Reveal to us reality.

She lay on the altar, her purple robe cascading over the wooden ends. The woman next to me sobbed into her palms.

Woman, take us in.

The altar ladies joined hands on the hilt of the dagger, the thin blade slicing into the Lunamarie’s robe. They pressed between the gap in her ribs, tearing sinew and hope apart as the woman’s last breath slipped into the air.

We dropped to our knees, every pair of eyes stuck to the mosaic floor, silent aside from the dripping of fat droplets of blood.

Woman, take us in.

“Rise,” the Prioress commanded.

Through the maw of a dome in the middle of the chapel’s spine, only stars shone down on what we had done. ☸

Mother Board

Althea Wells

Third Place, Fine Art



Orion

Christopher Chen

Second Place, Fiction

You felt a wetness like muddy earth clinging to your back, seeping into your t-shirt. You realized you should've brought a picnic blanket. The grass stung, but it was bearable. Being next to Ma seemed to have that effect on you.

"Look," you whispered, pointing towards an agglomeration of stars, "can't you see it?" They glimmered slowly, like pairs of eyes flickering—winking like they'd just told a secret. "1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6—"

"7. 8," Ma continued, nudging your shoulder. "You'll miss this," she whispered back, reaching for your hand and holding it firmly. Her eyes were watery, but she used her shirt sleeve to pat them dry. Allergies, she would always say. But not this time. She loosened her grip and checked her phone.

The air was moist and humid, with nothing to cut the silence. You started counting again and plopped a grape into your mouth. "Twelve of these," you said, offering the vine to Ma, "and you'll have all the luck you could ask for."

She smiled faintly. "Only on New Year's. And we're not under a table." She took a grape.

There was nothing except the sound of crunching grapes. Green grapes that Ma knew you would like. The ones specifically from the bottom shelf of the fruit section at Walmart. She took a heavy sigh.

"You were seven," she started, then stopped. She was

never good at these conversations—the ones that mattered. "You were seven, and you would keep asking me when dad would come home." She paused, rolling a grape between her fingers. "Only I never knew. Next week, maybe. Six months. Years. Your father wasn't gone on some business trip."

You stared. You'd asked her, once or twice over the years. She'd never wanted to talk about it—until now. She sniffled and turned so she didn't have to meet your gaze.

"He went to Turkey first. To help the Uyghurs." She picked off another grape. "Four months, he said. He used to call every Sunday. He'd make sure you were asleep, then call my phone in the middle of the night. He would talk about the children. Always the children. A little boy, probably ten, that reminded him of you. He'd lost his parents fleeing Xinjiang and came with his neighbors. He had nightmares every day from the camps back home."

She picked off another grape and began peeling the skin. "One more month, he would say. I waited. Four weeks without calls—he must be busy, I thought. So, three months I waited, and he called. There was a family stuck in Kazakhstan. There were resettlement applications he had to file and testimonies he needed to document." Her voice caught in the wind. "There was—always another reason to stay."

Crickets chirped in the distance. You wanted to speak, but you weren't sure what to say.

Ma looked up at the stars, as if it were a dictionary, for words. "He assured me he was safe. Months without calls. No emails."

Her eyes were watery again, but she didn't bother to wipe them this time. "Your eighth birthday. Remember, we tried baking cupcakes for school the morning after, and they burnt." She laughed

awkwardly. "My mind was elsewhere. I was up all night—waiting for a call, an email, anything that meant he was okay."

"You stopped asking when you were eight. Just stopped. Like you also knew he wasn't coming back. But he came back, remember? When you were nine. For two weeks. But you didn't recognize him. He was thin. Tired. And all he would talk about was the children." She laughed, this time with no humor. "He'd stare at that laptop all day. Reading the news and watching families being torn apart. It was all he could think about. The ones that were still waiting in Turkey. Or hiding in Kazakhstan. And how they had no one to help them. You remembered him. Barely. The bearded stranger with scabs all over his body. He came into the house carrying a soccer ball."

"Ma—" You opened your mouth, but she started speaking again.

"You searched for words in the chirping of the crickets that might somehow offer you comfort."

"He left again. But he promised it would be different this time. Six months, he promised me." She choked on her words, holding back tears. "That was eleven years ago. He emailed for the first few years. Then nothing. It went black." She was holding three grapes now. "I don't know if he's still in Turkey, or if he's moved

to Kazakhstan. Or—" she stopped herself, shaking her head. "It doesn't matter. He chose to stay. He chose them."

Her words lingered in the air. In the chirping of the crickets, you searched for words that might somehow offer you comfort. Ma squeezed your hand again, tighter this time. She looked you in the eye, expecting you to say something, but you could only look back.

"I know," she said quietly, "those families need you. But I do, too."

"I'll call every week," you said. "I promise. Every—"

"Sunday," Ma interrupted, "like your father did. Until you can't. Until the work is too important. Until there's another family." She nodded to herself slowly.

It was silent for a while. You laid in the wet patch of grass. You wanted to tell Ma that she was wrong. That you wouldn't disappear like he did. But holding her hand in yours, you knew you couldn't make promises you couldn't keep.

"Six months," you finally managed to say. It was all you could offer. Your flight was leaving in eight hours.

Ma let go of your hand and grabbed the grapevine. She stood up, her shoulders rounding in from an added weight. She had heard it before. "Come inside," she urged, "let me make you some food before you go."

Four years later, you're lying in the grass again, beneath the stars.

"1. 2. 3. 4. 5—"

You stop. You hadn't meant to start. They flicker the same way. The air is still moist and humid. August, maybe. Or July. Summers blur together now.

You reach for the grapes, but there's nothing beside you.



Only flattened grass where something—someone—used to be.

The space next to you is empty.

Your phone vibrates in your pocket. A flight notification. Departing tomorrow morning, back to Istanbul. Three weeks home was all you could manage this time. Those three weeks became two, then ten days, and now you're leaving tomorrow because there's a family waiting, because there's always a family waiting.

You look at the empty space beside you again.

Ma isn't there. She hasn't been there for two years.

The grapes—she bought them the night before you left the first time. The green ones from the bottom shelf at Walmart. You ate them together in this exact spot when she told you about your father as you promised six months.

You'd meant to come back after six months. But there was a family stuck at the border. Then winter came and the camps flooded. Then a crackdown happened and everyone went into hiding and you couldn't just leave them. Then it was a year. Then eighteen months. Then Ma's voice on the phone started sounding smaller and farther away.

Then your aunt started calling. Ma's sick. Pneumonia. She's asking for you. Can you come home?

But you were in Kazakhstan. There was a hearing you couldn't miss: a family who'd been waiting nine months for their interview. You'd been documenting their case, and you needed to be there to testify.

You told yourself you'd come home right after. One week, you said.

Ma died three days later.

You're lying in the grass alone now, trying to remember the weight of her hand in yours. Trying to hear her voice in the crickets. Trying to relive a moment you can never return to, with a person you can never get back.

You stayed. Just like your father.

The stars wink above you, and they still keep their secrets. You count them anyway, as if someone were still there to finish. ≡



Metamorphosis

Cassie van Riessen

An Untitled Rant: Trees

Simeon Barnes

The street hums low tonight,
like it's remembering something it swore it buried.
Wind drags its feet along the avenue,
kicking up dust that tastes like old stories
nobody wanted to tell twice.

I walk past the corner store,
neon buzzing like a nervous witness,
and the trees;
Lord, the trees still stand there,
branches bent like they're carrying
more than leaves.

Some nights,
you can feel history breathing down your collar,
warm and unwelcome,
whispering names you never learned in school
but somehow already know.
Names that hang in the air
long after the syllables fall.

And the fruit,
no, we don't speak on that,
not directly.
We talk around it,
like elders circling a wound
too deep to press.
We say *the times were hard*,
or *the South was hot*,
or *the world was colder back then*,
but the truth still stains the soil.

I never knew a man could be fruit.

I swear the sky flinches at dusk,
as if it remembers
what the ground had to hold.
As if the moon refuses to shine too bright
out of respect
for the shadows that once swung
where sunlight should've lived.

Mama, how is that man hanging from the tree without his arms?

But we're still here,
breathing,
walking,
writing our names in chalk
on the same sidewalks
that tried to forget us.
We rise like stubborn prayers,
like seeds that refuse to rot,
like tomorrow cracking open
in the hands of children
who deserve a softer history than the one we
inherited.

And maybe that's the miracle,
that the trees still stand,
but so do we.
That the wind still carries stories,
but now we answer back.
That the fruit once hung in silence,
but now the whole world listens
when we speak. ≡

There are Faces in These Trees

Sasha Harvey

The Cherry Man

Sasha Harvey

Second Place, Nonfiction

The market bustles, heaving with city folk tasting fruit and vendors bargaining in French. I weave through the brightly colored stands, my mouth watering at the sight of apples, potatoes, spices, and freshly baked bread. My mom pauses from time to time, craning over goods and mumming contentedly. This market is relentless compared to the tiny one back home. We pass a fruit vendor, its line stretching around the block. Mom stops at their samples tray and pops a cherry into her mouth. She makes a noise of approval at the back of her throat, gesturing me to the back of the line.

“Could you save our spot? I’m going to take a closer look real quick,” Mom says.

The people waiting in line beside me tap their feet, impatient for their turn. I listen to an older gentleman speaking softly on the phone, his voice raspy with age. A father cradles two bawling babies in his arms, shushing them periodically. My mom is craning over the vendor’s produce, staring intently at the lush fruit.

“Scarlet stains the whorls of my fingerprints, casting them in stark relief.”

Someone grabs my arm—fingers bruising. I jump, turning around to face a middle-aged man speaking rapid-fire French. He’s balding, gap-toothed and sun spotted. I stare at him, his smile widening. Like he’s presenting me with something priceless, he holds out a handful of cherries. I place my palm facing up. He drops them into my hand. They shine in the sun, unblemished and ruby red. I place one on my tongue, piercing its flesh with my teeth. The taste of summer fills my mouth: sweetness, a slight earthiness, and then tartness. As I chew, he watches me.

I close my eyes—breathe in and out. The roar of the city surrounds me, so different than Mississippi’s chirr of insects. I roll the pit around my tongue, trying to capture every last bit of flesh. I open my eyes, spitting the cherry’s stone into my hand. Scarlet stains the whorls of my fingerprints, casting them in stark relief. When I glance up from my hand, I see the cherry man’s back, sweaty with exertion, as he walks back to the bag stand.

Once again, my eyes search the crowd until they land on Mom: she’s chatting with a stranger, gesturing broadly and smiling widely.



As if they are averting their eyes, the other people in line are enraptured by phone calls and crying children. My gaze slides to the cherry man. His eyes meet mine. I stare him down, silently begging him to turn away. The last of my uneaten cherries falls from my hand. My stomach contorts into knots. Time seems to slow. Something brushes my shoulder. I jump and swiftly turn around. It’s my mother. I let out a breath. She smiles down at me.

“Thanks for saving our spots. I just had the most wonderful conversation,” she says.

“Mom, I really, really want to go now. It’s just, I feel tired and—”

“I know dear, but we may as well wait it out now. I’m sure it’s just a couple more minutes before it’s our turn.”

Every minute drags by, the walnut-brown eyes of the man piercing holes into my dress. My clothing—a jean dress, sandals, and a sunhat—which had seemed so innocent, now feels overly exposed. My arms wrap around myself, trying to cover vast expanses of skin. Phantom ants crawl over me, skittering over my back—burrowing into my softest tendons.

We finally make it to the front of the line, my mother pointing out what she was buying to another, younger worker. Something brushes my arm. I turn around slowly. There he is, leaning across the fruit, his gray stubble outlining his grin. A pile of cherries sits in his hand. He offers them. I hesitate, my arms prickling. Mom elbows me, silently ordering me to take his gift. I hold out my hand. He winks, then drops them like stones into my red-stained palm. I feel nothing but the breeze catching on my hat, trying to blow it away.

Arm in arm with Mom, I hold the paper bags overflowing with fruit and walk back to our apartment. She eats my cherries as we walk, claiming they’re sweeter than the ones in Mississippi. The bustle of the city envelopes us, swallowing us whole. As we round the street corner, the market disappearing from sight, I can still feel the cherry man’s gaze piercing me—sliding over my skin. My mother walks beside me, oblivious that her lips are now stained red.



Nightmare of David Bowie

Izzy Rushing

Shadow of a Doubt

Bones Cole

Countless knickknacks from ages past cluttered the towering piles of pallets of the Lost and Found. Plum wandered through the familiar maze in search of a wedding ring belonging to Ms. Calum, the deceased wife of Madam Calum—Plum’s current client.

10 p.m. The rows of industrial high bay lights overhead shut off one by one, each with a satisfying ker-clunk. Abandoning the empty aisle for a gap in the shelves, Plum crawled on hands and knees through the jumbled jungle gym of lost things and stumbled upon a soft cubbyhole. Like any Finder worth their salt, she could find shelter anywhere in the Lost and Found. Plum could continue through the pitch, but the tall tales other Finders told of things that went bump in the night never left her mind.

Plum pried open a can of candied plums—her favorite snack for which she named herself. Lost at an early age, she had spent so long in the Lost and Found that she had forgot her name. Hazy memories of her past life—memories she had mistaken for fever dreams—had begun to slowly bubble up after her rediscovery of the outside world only three months before. Plum slept poorly, unable to parse the muddy memories she felt forced to process.

As Plum followed her Finder’s intuition, the towering shelves of an industrial warehouse morphed into twisting homely halls with closets so packed that the clutter they contained would pour out if opened.

Advancement was slow. Each fork presented a difficult decision, and hours of trekking with her nose to the grindstone amounted to pitiful progress. Plum’s time in the Lost and Found had forged a bond between her and lost things, gifting her an innate instinct that led her to whatever she desired, but she was receiving mixed signals. She tried her best to push down the distractions that clouded her path forward.

As Plum walked, she meditated on the image and significance of the wedding ring she was searching for to refocus her Finder’s intuition. She focused on her desire to bring it back to her client—the emotional relief it would grant Madam Calum. Plum had no need for money—the Lost and Found would always provide—she did it to bring her clients peace, opting to take the sentimental jobs. But she knew it was just to keep herself busy.

Finding the outside had only left Plum lost. When it was just her, all she had to do was survive, but the wider world complicated things. Everyone she met expected her to be overjoyed, ready to rejoin society, but the expectations it placed on her and the questions it asked were overwhelming. Her broken English made adjustment challenging. Taking commissions allowed her to microdose the real world without abandoning her comfort zone.

10 p.m. The incandescent bulb bathing the shady hallway in warm hues clicked off softly. After a short stretch of searching, Plum came to rest in a somehow familiar child’s bedroom. She dragged the dresser before the bedroom door to remedy the lack of a lock. The cramped halls and short sightlines had her on edge.

Exhausted, Plum curled up in the child sized bed that still fit her quite comfortably and drifted into fitful sleep interspersed by incoherent dreams. The hazy fog her dreams left behind lingered throughout the next day.

Plum punched a wall out of frustration before instinctively whispering an apology a second later. The cramped hallways were walking her in circles—tighter and tighter circles. She had been trapped for days. No matter how hard she resisted, she kept losing ground. She felt like the Lost and Found, her very home, was betraying her.

But Plum could tell that beneath her rage was the fear of finding what laid at the center of the labyrinth; beneath that fear was the heavy feeling that she knew exactly what she would find, something she couldn’t put it into words.

The Lost and Found had never betrayed her—it only led her to what she wanted to find. Desperate for the maddening ordeal to end, Plum caved, allowing the deeply buried desire that broiled deep within to guide her, following it to the center of the spiral.

At its center, she found the place she kept seeing in her dreams: her childhood home. It was exactly as she remembered it—as massive as a tiny child would perceive it. In the living room, amongst the masses of clutter that made the Lost and Found look organized, Plum found a family photo. It showed Plum’s mom cradling her as a newborn, and the arm of a man reaching around her mom’s shoulder, but the rest of the man had been ripped off with one half of the photo. It wasn’t a clean tear; her mom’s face had clearly been torn and taped back together.

Just like a kid, Plum could not see over the kitchen counters, but she could see the massive pile of dirty dishes that had spilled out of the sink and the empty orange pill bottles that sat on the windowsill. The fridge and the lower cabinets that Plum could reach were barren aside from a few canned goods, including candied plums.

Walking down the gloomy hallway whose lightbulb had never been replaced, Plum knew exactly where to step so that the floorboards wouldn’t creak. At its end, she found two doors, one that was perpetually locked—her mother’s bedroom—and one that had no lock: Plum’s bedroom.

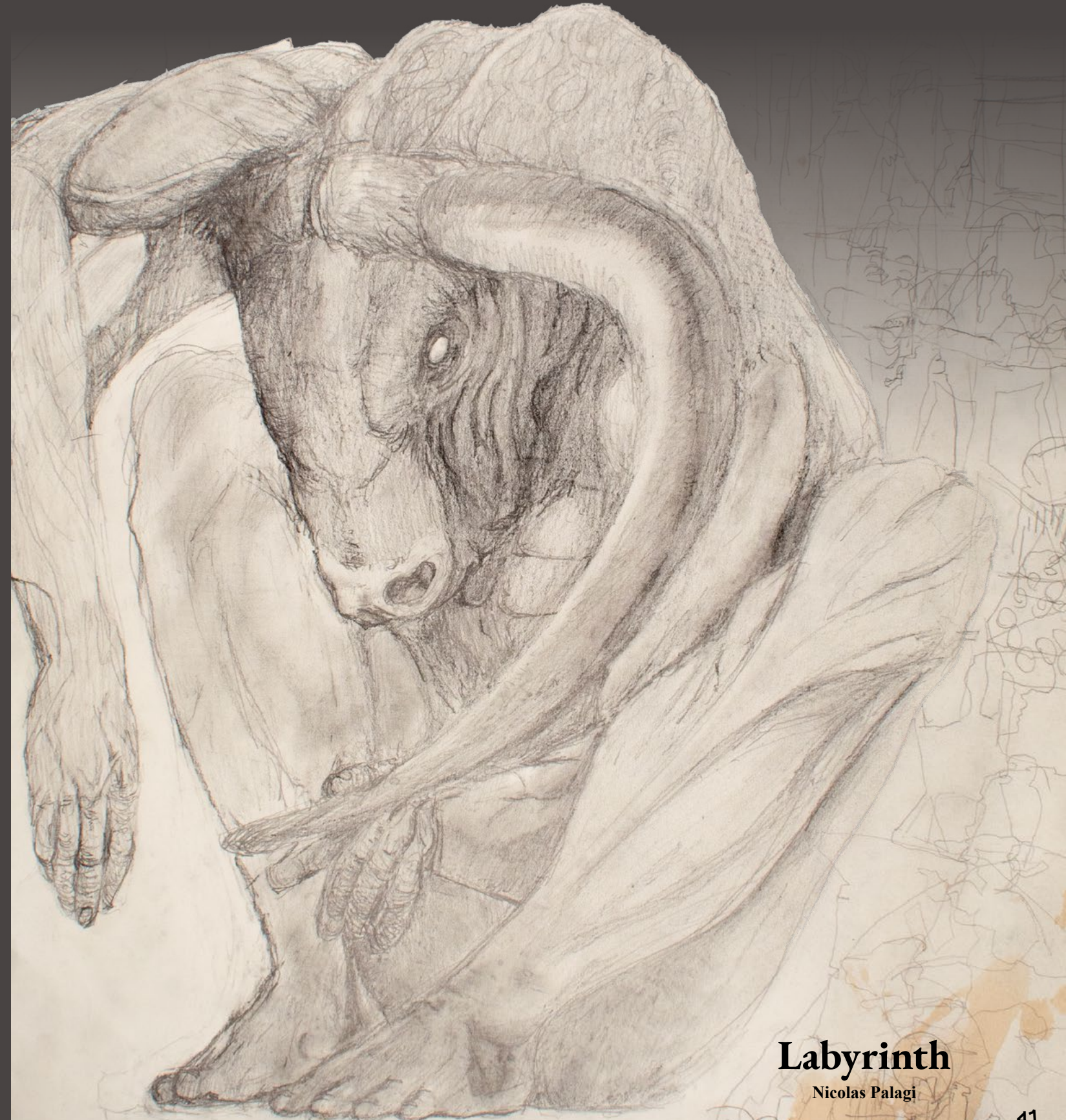
The sight brought her no emotion, but her hands tremored and her eyes wept on her behalf, feeling what she could not. Her chest grew tight, instinctively keeping her breaths quiet.

10 p.m. The only source of light in the house, Plum’s bedside lamp, which just barely painted the crack under her bedroom door with dull orange, clicked off. Plum flinched. She stood still in the hallway, her mind clear, but her heart beat quicker in anticipation.

Her mom wasn’t healthy, there was some sickness that lived in her head, but she was mostly stable during the day. When night fell, she would cry, and she would scream, and she would turn the house upside down. Plum would cower in her room, desperately hoping her mom would pass out from exhaustion before she came to Plum’s room next.

Plum was exhausted. Too tired to process her old feelings right now, she let the numbness shelter her and walked out the front door. For the second time, Plum left her childhood home behind forever, but this time, she wasn’t running blindly into the unknown.

Guided by her Finder’s intuition, Plum embraced the inky black, dead certain it would bring her somewhere soft to lie down.



Labyrinth

Nicolas Palagi

Speakers Push the Air

Landon Strong

A chamber of ceramic sound and convulsive conclusions.

Do you remember?

Crossing off subsections without crescendos.

When we couldn't put it away?

Forgetting tempo but not time signatures.

For when we would

Breathe every measure,

Like we weren't supposed to.

Life's complications and frustrations,

They'd disappear when the music started playin'.

Forging not a remembrance of scales,

But how our duets sounded so beautiful,

We felt the essence above.

We were shackled to visions,

Of accented bliss and dancing in the streets.

Do you remember?

How it would all go wrong,

When it'd rain.

We'd scream 'cause,

Wood rots in summer showers.

Even if the wood splintered.

We wouldn't care for even a minute.

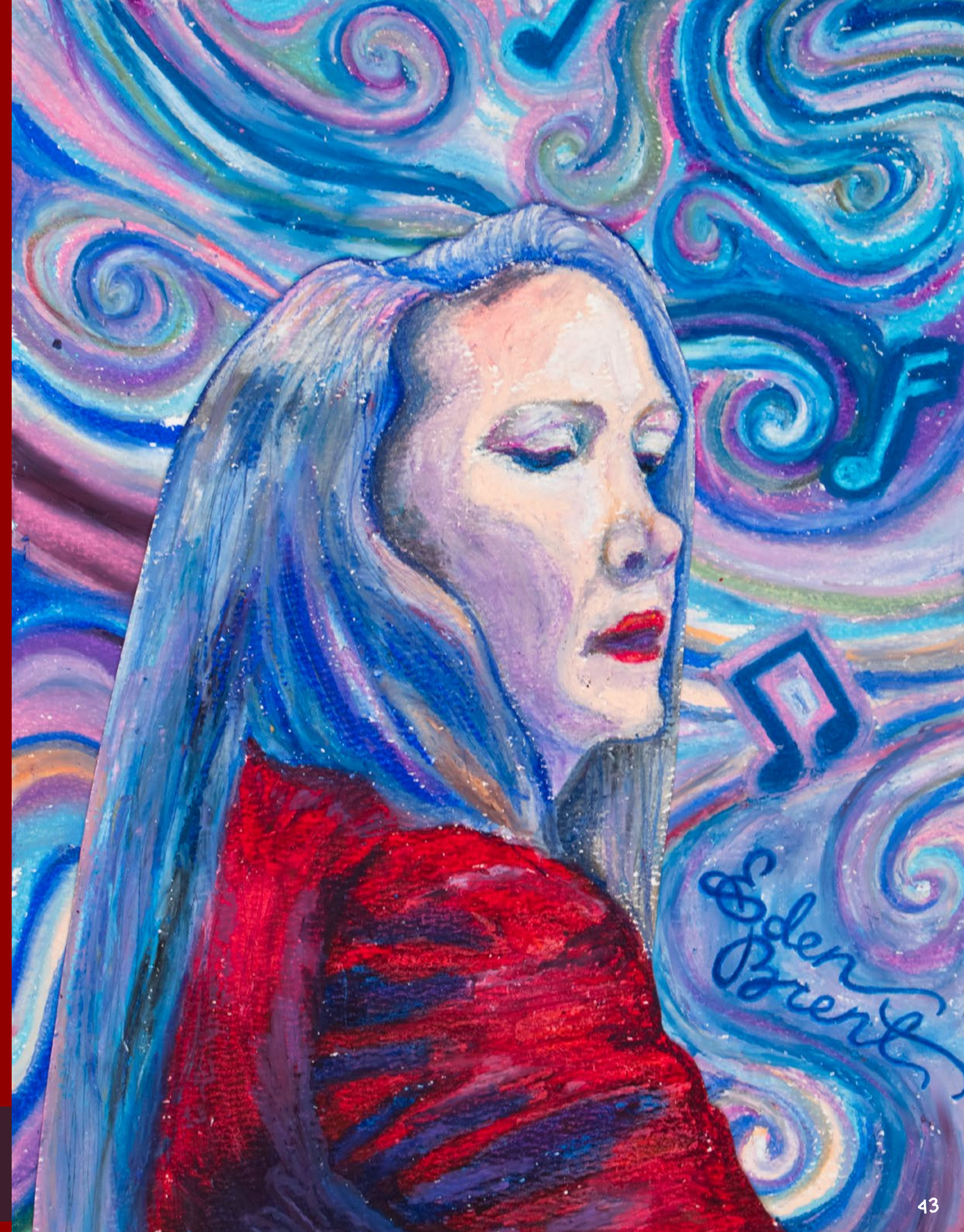
Because we loved dancing there

In the rain . The palms of

Our hands didn't waver

Through the change,

Our sound prospered. ≡



Heart and Soul

Cassie van Riessen

She Has A Secret

Rebecca Sun

Honorable Mention, Photography



The City of Tomorrow

Ainsley Dew

I'm walking through The Now with my eyes half-closed. My mind keeps looping the same longing: The City of Tomorrow.

I've lived in this town my whole life. The cracks in the ground have memorized my footsteps; they seem to widen whenever I let myself dream. The Now always mocks people like me. Tomorrow wouldn't.

The sky stays gray and fuzzy. The air smells of rot. Everyone wants to leave. Everyone hates this place. We all look toward the city, hoping the day of travel will finally come. The city promises color, work, wealth, and life. A place that would finally feel like mine.

I need a suitcase. Everyone's been packing lately; you can tell by the frantic street markets, the hurried feet, the way people grab at any object they think they'll need for Tomorrow. They tuck each object away, carefully and untouched. Perfect for their new lives.

We're all certain the train will come soon. It has to. I've seen the signs myself; the city glimmered brighter last night. That must mean something.

With a determined glare, I march through the market, knocking shoulders with familiar faces I don't bother greeting. I won't know them in the city anyway. I'll be polished there.

Worthy.

Nearby, an auctioneer shouts prices for sealed ham. My stomach twists. I can't wait to finally eat when we arrive.

"Young lady!"

I turn. A man, about two inches shorter than me, leans heavily on a cane. Fresh produce is scattered across the dirt, the paper bag limp beside it.

Shoot. Must've knocked into him.

I start to turn away but—

"Come back."

His voice carries a strange mix of sternness and something almost... paternal. I groan and turn around.

"No point using that produce now," I say. "You didn't get it sealed. It'll rot in a few days."

Instead of thanking me for this revelation, his face reddens.

"Help me pick this up."

I raise an eyebrow. He cannot be serious.

"Sir, I really don't have time—"

He shoves the empty bag against my stomach. Hard.

"Oh yes, you do. Pick up the fruit."

I grit my teeth but obey. Arguing would take longer.

When I finish gathering the bruised apples and wilted greens, I look up, but the man is already hobbling away from the market.

"What—HEY!"

He doesn't hear me.

To Understand Who,

Althea Wells

First Place, Poetry

You have to know where.

Where the glass of church windows
is just as segmented and stained
as the souls shouting
Bless It!

Where one can go from
the flat of Gaea's midback
to the round of every vertebra
and find rest between her shoulder blades
from Silver City to Yazoo.

Where soles kick up earth
fertilized with the rot of
strange fruit.

Where the family pulls its branches back in.
Children of the trunk returning to the roots
choked by kudzu.

Where Mimi has fixed breakfast, lunch, and dinner
every day for fifty years
with little thanks but the monotonous rhythm
of the grinding and gnashing of teeth.

Where Ma proclaims
I'm not finna be cookin for yo daddy like that
And laughs and laughs
like sunbeams while rain fills the potholes.

Where it's undeniable.
A beautiful, terrible thing
shaping from clay
blackness. ☰



Daybreak

Rebecca Sun

I chase after him. The crowd bruises me with elbows and shoulders, but I push through until I spot his shiny bald head bobbing like a beacon. Good Lord. Does this man polish it?

Finally, the crowd thins. It seems the man has led me somewhere. I lower my eyes to the ground and freeze.

A soft crunch under my shoe.

“It’s grass,” the man’s voice says behind me.

Grass? Here?

“We have that here?” I ask. “I thought only the city had grass.”

His laugh is weathered and warm. Annoyingly warm.

“No, no,” he says. “We have it here. This is my land. I water it every day.”

I kneel, rubbing a blade of green between my fingers.

“Why doesn’t the rest of the town have this? You live close.”

He flinches as I pluck at the grass, then forces a smile.

“Nobody waters their ground no more.”

Old men and their riddles. No wonder Tomorrow means nothing to him.

I toss his produce at his feet.

“You wasted my time. And now you’re leaving garbage with me.”

A snarl rises on his wrinkled face—ugly, scrunched, almost amused.

“I’m not the one wasting time here, missy.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I need to prepare.”

“Prepare for what?”

I stare at him. “The train for Tomorrow is coming.”

His expression twists like I just slapped him.

“It ain’t ever coming the way you think, sweetheart.”

I blink. Oh, great. A town conspiracy theorist.

“Did you not see the city glowing? It’s practically begging for us.”

“That was the reflection of the sun,” he says flatly. “Ain’t nobody ever teach you that?”

He leans closer.

“Y’all all waitin’ to go to that city. And none of ya’ ever gonna get there. Know why?”

I cross my arms. “Humor me.”

“Because none of ya water the ground you standin’ on.”

I might actually hit him with an apple.

He motions for me to follow him through a small wooden gate. Past it, the hill overlooks the city, still shimmering, still calling.

“You watchin’ the wrong thing,” he says, pointing lower.

I follow his hand.

A field stretches open, wide and breathing. Sunflowers sway like dancers. Wildflowers bloom in accidental harmony. A few animals graze in the tall grass.

The sight hits something soft in my ribs.

“How did you get all of this?” I whisper. “Did you... bring it from the City?”

He shakes his head.

“I tend my land. I work the ground I step on. I feed what feeds me. It ain’t complicated. I just don’t let that Tomorrow blind me.”

Strange.

If I lived here, with this view, I’d stare at the city all day.

My eyes feel...open. Fully open.

I step through the gate and into the tall grass. It brushes my knees as I walk, then run, then laugh. Insects buzz. Animals scatter.

The flowers breathe around me.

So pretty.

So alive.

But I’m losing time.

He calls after me, but I run faster. I don’t want his voice rearranging my thoughts.

Back in The Now, the crowds swallow me again.

Booths blur past: sealed tins, gray paper, colorless goods. Nothing like his field. Nothing growing. Nothing alive.

Maybe that’s why my breath feels so thin.

I end up in the junkyard.

Rows of rusted cars. A metal shed. A graveyard of things no one bothers fixing because Tomorrow is supposed to fix everything.

Something hard touches my foot.

A suitcase.

Finally. My lucky ticket out.

But when I crouch to grab the handle, I notice writing scrawled across the fabric.

For Tomorrow.

I pause. My fingers find the owner’s tag—the date is from

“Old men and their riddles. No wonder Tomorrow means nothing to him.”

years ago. A whole generation.

I lift my head and look around the junkyard again.

Notes.

Diaries.

Never-worn shoes.

Crates of sealed food.

Enough luggage to fill a train station.

Why would people throw away everything they saved for Tomorrow?

“People waited here, before you.” The warm, weathered voice drifts from behind me. “This was where the old market once stood.”

The old man looks at the suitcase like it’s a gravestone.

Maybe it is.

My throat tightens.

“If all their waiting meant nothing...” My voice cracks. “... what does that mean for me?”

“You felt alive out there in the field, didn’t ya?”

I know, instinctively, whatever he says next is going to split something open in me.

“That wasn’t Tomorrow,” he says softly. “That was Now.”

The suitcase slips from my hands.

I accuse him of lying. Of giving up. Of not understanding hope. Words spill out, frantic, desperate.

But then I see it: the suitcase’s bottom, torn clean through.

My knees hit the dirt. The junkyard is silent, not peaceful. Just emptied. A cemetery of dreams that never left the ground.

“What do I do now?” I whisper. It sounds like someone stripped bare.

He sighs the way people do when they’ve lived this moment too many times.

“Well,” he says, “you could help me water my field.”

He extends his hand.

It’s a small offer. No glow. No promise of a city on the horizon.

But it’s real.

And it’s the first thing today that hasn’t rotted in a suitcase.

I think about the field. The wildflowers, the clean air, the feeling of being awake. That place wasn’t waiting. It was alive.

My hand lifts slowly. Not a leap. A choice.

I take his.

His grip is steady. Not comforting, certain.

No revelation. No miracles.

Just a beginning.

And for the first time, it feels like it actually leads somewhere.



The Memoir of a Dying Fish

Christopher Chen

First Place, Nonfiction

“Tài mànle.” *Too slow.* My father takes my sticky, dough-covered hands and places them in the pot of water. Matching my pace, which he describes as ‘snail-like,’ he dips his fingers in the pot, careful to break only the surface. Ripples form and instantly disperse across the surface like the final twitch of a dying fish beneath the surface. My father guides my hands back into the pile of dough, instructing me on the significance of making the rice noodles for a special dish: Crossing the Bridge Noodle.

My father tells me the story of the noodles for the hundredth time. In the Yunnan city of China, a man was studying for exams on a small island surrounded by towering bamboos and trees reaching towards the heavens. Every day, his wife would bring him food, but by the time she crossed the bridge to reach him, the food would be cold. So, she had an idea: a hot soup with a layer of oil to keep it warm and raw ingredients to cook in the soup once she arrived, famously known now as Crossing the Bridge Noodle.

My father is not disappointed at my failure to make the noodles perfectly thin or round; in fact, quite the opposite. My growing frustration almost calms his expression: his eyebrow is furled to the top of his forehead, and he has a curved smile—the special one he gives when he is thinking extra hard. I’m not sure what he is thinking about, but in this moment, my mind is fixed

on perfecting my noodle technique. After dousing my fingertips in water, I pick out a piece of dough once again, set it flat across the table, and roll it into a thin strip. The dough breaks. I try again.

In the meantime, my father works on prepping the fish. I gaze as he reaches elbow-deep into the bucket and pulls out a two-pound tilapia. It thrashes wildly, and I get splashed by its feverish tail. He lays it flat against the cutting board, and with one hand gripping strongly around the tail, uses the blunt side of his knife to crash down onto the middle of its head. A chill flies through my body as the fish goes completely limp. He quickly runs the fish under cold water before returning it to his cutting board. “Loosens the scales,” he huffs, noticing my expression. Still using the knife’s blunt side, he slowly begins scraping the knife from tail to head, making piles of scales beneath the fish. He does the same from the other side. Then, using his hands, he scoops the scales into a bucket to be used for compost.

After a quick rinse of the knife and cutting board, my father lays them flat on the table. “It’s your turn,” he says, opening the refrigerator and setting out ginger and scallion, “watch closely.” He peels the ginger with his knife, keeping his finger over the blade. He cuts off the white parts of the scallion and slices only half of them before holding the knife out to me. “Go.” I grip the knife tightly and approach the board. With my other hand on the ginger root, I begin cutting it into thin, rectangular slices. Moving on to the green onion, I use horizontal cuts for thicker rings. My father stands over the stovetop’s boiling oil, waiting for me to finish. I lay the finely chopped vegetables neatly over the scaled tilapia, and he pours the sizzling hot oil over the top. He walks over to the pantry and pulls out a thin sheet of Saran Wrap to cover the fish while it

steams. “Allows for even cooking,” he explains.

I open the lid of the rice cooker into clouds of steam and scoop the grains into two porcelain bowls. I set the bowls of fragrant jasmine rice on the dinner table and horizontally lay a pair of ornately designed chopsticks on top. My father opens the lid of the steamer, removes the Saran Wrap with his bare hands, and carries the steamed fish dish onto a brown, circular coaster on the table. We dig in. The soft, tender flesh of the fish falls apart on contact. Each bite of the fattening fish follows a heaping chopstick-full of rice. Soon, I am filled to the brim, and despite my father’s urging to eat even more, my stomach cannot afford another bite. We finish eating and begin bringing the dishes back to the kitchen. I laugh, and my dad quickly follows—the sheets of dough and piles of flour from the half-made noodles remain on the counter, waiting for me to try again. The noodles are far from done, but somehow the bridge has already been crossed. ☰



Stained Glass Goldfish

Cassie van Riessen



The Sea

Kami Patrick

The Morgue Nurse

Natalia Elmore

“Allison Walker. Fourteen years old. Date of death December 18, 2081. Ryder Fulton. Thirty-four years old. Date of death February 11, 2082. Delores Torres. Forty-seven years old. Date of death April 6, 2081. Mr. Edmondson, do these names sound familiar to you?”

Victor Edmondson glanced up though his crooked glasses frames into the Jackson Police sergeant’s eyes. His hands were handcuffed to a metal bar in front of him, and he still had marks on his arms from the officers’ grip. They had picked him up from the University of Mississippi Medical Center a few hours ago. The Sergeant hunched over the metal investigation table. His voice wobbled with fear when he answered.

“Yes sir.”

“Good, good. Would you mind explaining what these names mean to you?”

Victor rolled all their bodies into the cold basement morgue of the UMMC hospital. Every day he inhaled formaldehyde fumes and cleaned up the juices people left behind on the autopsy table once the doctor was done determining their cause of death. His friends and family pitied him daily for working around the dead, but his job would bring him closer to God for preparing

bodies for their “heavenly ascension.”

He didn’t mind the job; rather, he considered himself one of the lucky ones, allowed to still have any involvement in medicine. Two years ago, when Victor was still in the UMMC Medical School, President Palmer was elected, a radical right-wing Christian determined to return the United States to biblical teachings. Since then, it’s been hard to even find new articles from the CDC that didn’t mention the Lord’s Holy Plan for us.

“Well, I work at the mortuary and watched their autopsies. Allison died from a seizure, Ryder a gunshot wound to the left temple, and Delores from asphyxiation.”

“Mr. Edmondson, as you may already know, we are dealing with a case investigating an underground market. And all of the people I listed here—lil’ Miss Walker and Ryder and Mrs. Torres—they all came out of your designated body cubbies. Now, I’ve done talked to the funeral home in Ridgeland that they came out of, and they gave me your name, so I know you got more to tell me.”

Victor cleared his throat and scooted his chair closer to the sergeant. He was almost forehead to forehead with him. The sergeant’s breath smelled like dip and coffee; Victor examined the prominent vein running between his eyebrows.

“The emails started coming in only two days after President Palmer signed his new medical bill banning some practices. They first started trying to get my information, you know, about my job and where I lived. The email address was just numbers with no name, so I ignored it thinking it was one of those scammers that

try to steal your Social Security. Then, it started asking about my patients; somehow, they found out about my position at the mortuary. I swear I never got a name or any face, and I did my research. I emailed back one day asking who it was; he replied with an inquiry and a large number that would take weeks for me to earn at the hospital. And I know, I know I have to keep patient confidentiality, but the lines get blurry once they’re dead.”

“And what did the email ask you for?”

“They started asking about bodies of recently deceased people in the mortuary and causes of death. He said they were looking for special corpses like ones with wounds that didn’t penetrate internal organs or deaths from medical conditions that didn’t affect the organs. He specified no type of cancer because it spreads through the body. So, I thought no harm in giving out their information since money is tight and the patients were, well you know, dead. I set up an anonymous P.O. box with him, Box 1257, in the post office next to the Kroger off Frontage Road. Every week he would send money to it, and I would drop off the patient files of special corpses he was looking for. But, God, after a while he just kept demanding more and more and it got hard to keep up. I mean, the money was good—it was hard to say no.”

“You’re a little fish in this story, and I only catch big fish.”

The sergeant shook his head and looked down at the boy. Victor was wearing dark green scrubs and had unkempt curly hair. He looked like the type of person to spend any extra money he had on a new video game. Shoot, the sergeant thought he might find another way for money, too, if he had to work around dead people every day.

“You seem like a good kid that goes home and reads President Palmer’s Prayer every night before bed, so I assume you know about the sin of organ transplants. We have to be born and die with our God given parts. Transplanting is some devil science, not Christian at all. I know you might have just thought that you were selling harmless information—the funeral director thought the same thing when she got the emails. However, when Allison Walker’s family gave her one last goodbye before she was buried, they found fresh stitching across her lower stomach. The girl had had her liver removed after she left your mortuary.”

Victor froze and his eyes started to well up. The nervous tapping of his foot stopped abruptly.

“Sir, I swear I never knew about any organ harvesting. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I swear to God I never knew the guy. He told me it was just the patient files he wanted. I’m sorry but please I didn’t know”

“Calm down, that’s enough. I’m letting you go for today, but you better know your ass is on the line. You’re a little fish in

this story, and I only catch big fish. I’m giving you my number if there are any more leads you can give me for the case. I’ll get Mrs. Shay to take down yours. You make sure to answer the damn phone when I call you. You don’t want my boys to come up there with handcuffs again. You’re free to go back to the hospital; we can arrange an officer to take you back.”

Victor declined the ride, nervous to stay in the presence of the intimidating officers that were all taller and stronger than he was. He made his way out of the cramped Downtown Jackson Police Station with the Sergeant’s phone number on a yellow crumpled up Post-it. The Sergeant went to the office break room to sit after hours of interrogating (he likes to stand over people the whole time to make them feel scared). Mrs. Shay, the secretary, had just ordered Newk’s for him. The sergeant took his sandwich and propped his feet up for a rest. Shortly after lunch he was woken up by the phone line ringing. The sergeant answered.

“Hello... yes, sir...we’ll be there soon.”

Another ring.

“Officer Lancaster... I’m bringing my unit... see you there.”

He grabbed his jacket from the back of his office chair and called over the walkie talkie for the boys in the station to be ready to leave in the next ten minutes. Mrs. Shay looked up from behind her desk and asked the matter; she’d never heard the sergeant sound so concerned.

“Three bodies have been found inside an abandoned warehouse off State Street. They are cut open and missing their livers. Officer Lancaster identified each of them as patients at UMMC with diagnosed terminal medical conditions. The demand for livers has gotten high, and they’ve graduated from targeting corpses to the living. Someone has been feeding these damn black-market members the information of patients that are alive. I better call that son of a bitch Victor—hand me the number he wrote down.”

The sergeant’s face got red as he pulled his phone from his back pocket. He typed the number Victor left on Mrs. Shay’s desk. 601...555...1287. You better pick up, son. Pick up the damn phone.

“You have reached an automated voice message. The number you are trying to reach is no longer in service.”



Bones For Sale

Sasha Harvey

Pappo

JD Miller

I walk into the living room and see my dad watching the Astros.
Next thing I know, all I can see is your face.
I hear him cheering as the batter slams the ball into the night.
Now all I can hear is your laugh.

I don't know why
I moun you.

You and your insulin.
You and your yells.

I hate the way you ran to Texas.
I hate the way you left a broke college student with a toddler.

And sure, you let him stay with you in Houston every now and then.
And sure, I believe that you loved him the best you could.

But I still don't know why my dad kept you in his life.
And for a reason I don't know I'm glad he did.

It feels like you tried to somehow
"Fix" what you did by being my granddad.
And I want you to know that, selfishly,
I enjoyed the attention.

Because when I think of you, I don't think of those things.
I think of getting cookies at the Rouses where you worked,
I think of watching SpongeBob on your living room floor,
I think of sleepily watching the Astros with you and my dad.

I remember standing at your bedside,
Hearing the doctors talk of you going home soon.
Making plans to watch another game that fall.
And thinking maybe you weren't so bad.

And when we got the call the next morning,
I didn't think of you leaving my dad.
I didn't think of you snoring on a ventilator.
I thought of my Pappo. 🌊



Clinging To A Fallen Branch

Sasha Harvey
Second Place, Photography

Elegy for a Drawl

Ainsley Dew

That sweet melody,
a twang that once hung thick in the air,
is fading—
a hymn gone quiet.

Children no longer catch
their Mamaw's soft drawl—
that cradle-song of syllables—
gone with her breath.

Neighbors once shared the same slow song,
but their voices are hushed, scrubbed clean,
smoothed into glass.
Now they speak like screens.

Ole Ron is Ronald now,
Sue insists on Susan.
Even cornbread makes cheeks burn red,
As if shame were seasoning.

But that lullaby lingers.
And my lips refuse to change their shape,
because if I do,
I lose the day I leapt across hay bales,
and my home of music and manners.
This land's history isn't clean
But neither are our mouths.
So, I'll keep this drawl
and carry it past the South—
the well-known hymn on my tongue. 🌊



Don't Feed Ducks Bread

Catherine Shao

"Don't forget the bread!" my grandma would remind me before we left the house every Sunday afternoon, when we had a weekly ritual of going to the park.

Before those afternoons, I never realized how alive a park could be. To me, going to the park had always meant walking point-less laps around a pond or competing with the other eight-year-olds on the playground for a turn on the swings. My grandma would gently remind me to let the little kids go first, which felt unfair since I was only a year or two older than they were.

Still, I waited.

I waited in the same way my grandma waited for me to grow up. Her favorite spot was the weathered wooden bench enclosed by the falling leaves of a willow tree. She'd sit there watching me with a familiar, patient smile — the kind that was simply happy because I was. While I frustratedly waited for an open swing, she taught me how to look beyond the playground to the other hidden corners of the park.

On each visit, my grandma and I stopped by the pond to visit the little ducklings who began to paddle faster after spotting us. My grandma always remembered to bring a bag of bread from home, though it was never the fresh kind. To her, good bread was too precious to waste. She had grown up in a small village where

every grain of rice mattered, and a full stomach was never promised. Through the stories that she told me on those afternoons, I learned she hadn't even tasted bread until she married my grandpa.

When we first began this ritual, I thought nothing of it. The ducks seemed perfectly content, inhaling every crumb we tossed their way. My grandma would carefully tear the bread into tiny eighths each time. She'd hand me seven pieces and keep only one for herself. She knew how much I loved feeding the ducks, and though she didn't verbally express it, I understood that each piece she saved for me was her way of showing love.

Taking her single piece, she flicked it gently toward the ducks, and I followed soon after. Together, our breadcrumbs flew through the air in unison before landing on the pond's rippling surface. When my aim was off, the crumbs scattered onto the grass. A few ducks would clumsily waddle to shore, squabbling over my misplaced offerings.

"Keep tossing the bread. But don't scare them," my grandma would tell me.

We carried on our little ritual for years. Sundays became my favorite day, marked by the sounds of a bread bag crinkling in my grandma's hand and ducks calling from across the pond.

Our tradition ended the day I overheard my classmates talking about how feeding ducks bread could hurt them — how it filled their bellies but starved them of what they truly needed. Their words clung to me like wet clothes, heavy and uncomfortable. All I could picture were the ducks we had fed for years, paddling toward

us with their utmost trust as we unintentionally poisoned them.

That afternoon, I ran home, and the motion of my shoes hitting the pavement raced ahead of my thoughts. I busted through our front door that was already on the verge of breaking and told my grandma everything while trying to catch my breath. I expected her surprise, but instead, she only nodded.

"I know," she said softly, her eyes drifting toward the window instead of me.

"To her, good bread was too precious to waste."

The silence that followed was louder than any scolding. My grandma — the woman who used to slice grapes in half so I wouldn't choke, who taught me to wait for my turn on the swings, and who showed me how to be gentle to the ducks — admitted to feeding them bread even after knowing it was bad for them. For the first time, I saw stubbornness beneath her love, and realized she wasn't always the flawless figure I had always imagined.

The next time we went to the park, she didn't remind me to bring the bread. I waited for her to begin talking on our walk, expecting her usual reminders, but they never came. I broke the silence when I asked her why we had started the tradition in the first

place. She smiled faintly and said she had seen how much I loved feeding the ducks, that if we stopped, she feared I'd lose interest and stop coming with her. What my grandma didn't realize was that it was never about the ducks. What I loved most was spending those quiet Sundays with her.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, not an angry silence, but one heavy with understanding. As we reached the pond, she reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a small sack of freshly bought rice, the food she had cherished the most growing up.

"Grandma, we can't feed them this," I blurted, "I know how much rice has meant to you since you were a child."

She pressed the bag of rice onto the palm of my hands and tightened her grip, giving me a reassuring smile.

"Our new tradition." ≡



Three Mirrored Birds

Sasha Harvey

First Place, Photography

Goodbyes Aren't Final

Sophia Dean

There was a brown mahogany box on a green velvet platform. It was above a six-foot hole and was being lowered into the earth. I was six. Looking down at the box, I thought about how my feet felt squeezed and pinched in my Mary Janes. I thought about how wet grass was sticking to the bottom and sides of my shoes, and how it would stick to my hands later when I tried to get it off. I glanced behind me and saw my grandmother, normally poised and regal, looking as if she was going to disappear with the light breeze that was blowing my blond curls.

My grandfather and I had never been particularly close, but I loved Papa Dino. I loved him because I could see the respect he gained from my family. The way my father and his siblings would stand up straighter when he walked into a room, and how, when he was in the kitchen, it was like magic was happening in the pot of red sauce. I liked how my dad seemed boyish around him; he called Papa Dino 'Dad' the same way I call my father 'Dad.'

Papa Dino was skinny with deep, dark brown Italian skin, from years of working in the sun, and a head full of thick grey hair that always swooped back. He wore jeans, a cotton shirt, and cowboy boots. He had rough and calloused hands from making frames and sculptures out in his shed behind the house. He made the frames for my grandmother, for her watercolor paintings and pencil sketches. He molded his grandkids the same way he molded the frames. He would always make sure we held onto our manners. During Easter, he would sit and watch us hunt for eggs and look in our baskets, making sure we said thank you. We always did. During Christmas dinner, he made sure we asked to be excused before we left the table. We always did.

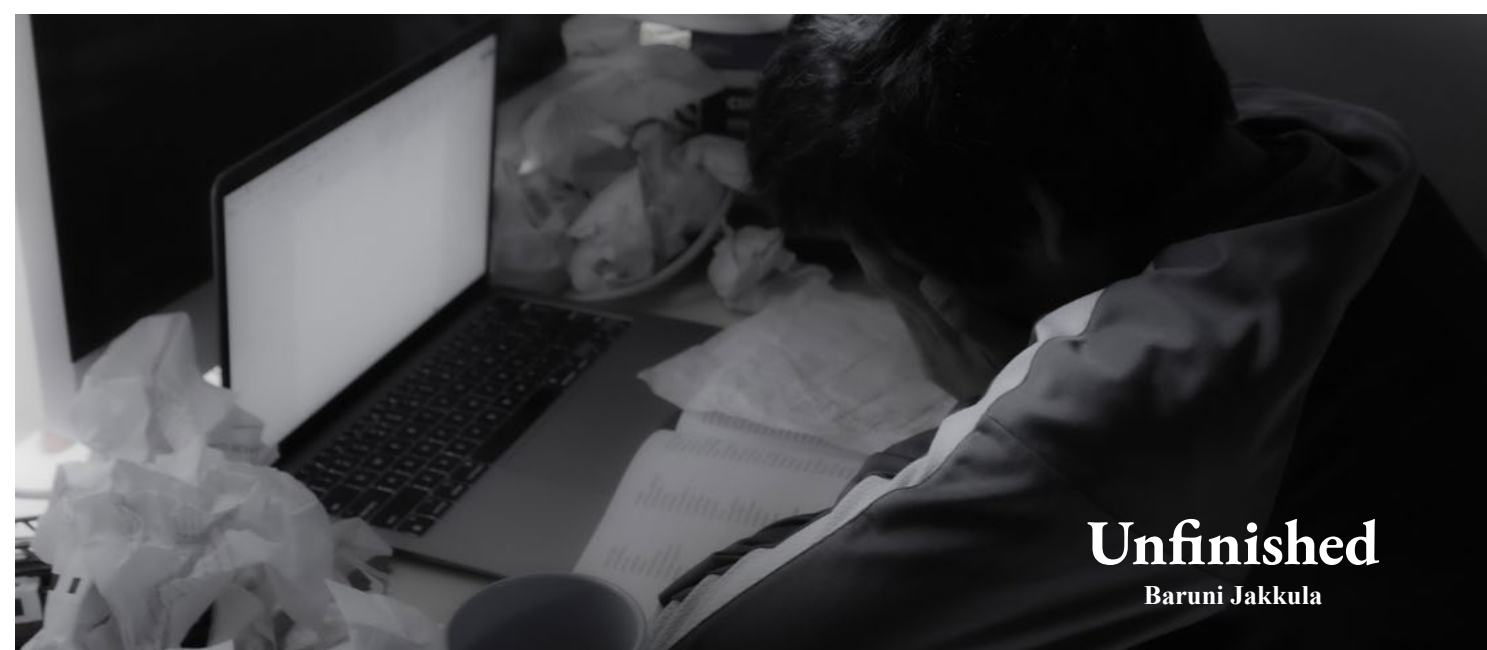
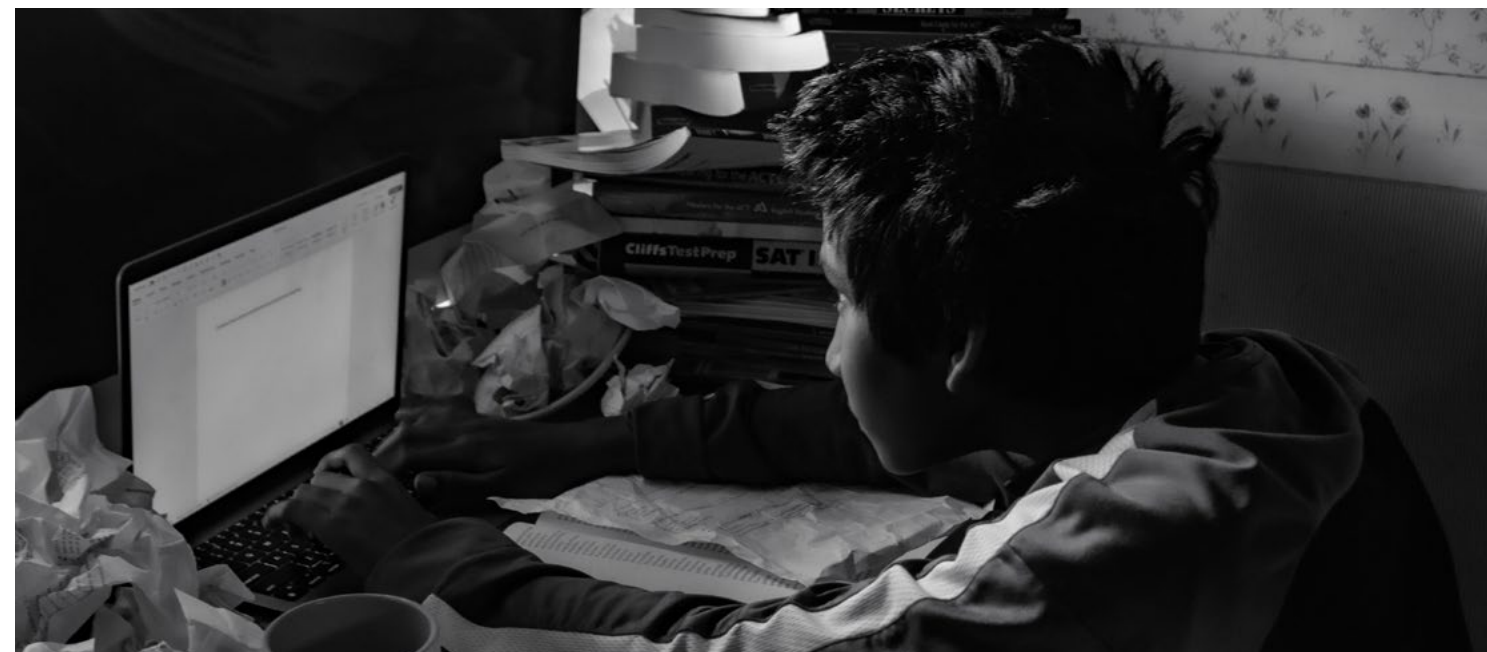
We had a running bit we played together. I'd walk past his armchair on the way to the kitchen, and he would snatch me up onto his lap and poke his fingers into my ribs. Except it never tickled; it just hurt. I would laugh anyway and try to escape, and once I did, I walked as far away as I could so he couldn't grab me again.

The games stopped as Papa Dino grew sick, and as I grew older. He stayed in his room once I reached five. My father would tell my sisters and me to say goodbye. When I walked into his room, it was like walking into a foreign world. It was dark with a plush carpet and a bed with canopy poles, but no canopy. The most frightening piece of furniture in my grandparents' room was the respiratory machine. It beeped and glowed green. I would give Papa Dino a light hug with one arm and a small voice, "goodbye," and then rush to the door, ready to leave the space. I hated the act of saying goodbye, the awkward silence as I walked out the door, and not knowing when I was going to see them again. I hated goodbyes, but I found comfort in the fact that they never had to be permanent.

I stared down at the box and held the clump of dirt my grandmother gave me. It was cold and wet and made a heavy thump as I let it fall from my hand onto the mahogany. I didn't like the sound, the attention drawing to me from dropping the dense mud onto the box. I dragged my feet over to my dad, and my mom grabbed me instead. I held her hand, feeling bad that I didn't have more to contribute to the funeral, more experiences with Papa Dino to relate to everyone else. My five years versus my grandmother's forty. I let the acoustic guitar serenading the funeral goers wash over me, and I tried to disappear into the melody.

As I held my mother's hand, I knew Papa Dino was gone; he was in the wooden box. I knew that my father and his siblings were missing something in their hearts, but I couldn't understand that I was never going to see him again, or feel the pokes in my ribs, or see the scary respirator machine. In my understanding, I figured I would eventually be able to experience the stories my cousins told about him. I assumed I could grow old with him, and he would be able to see me graduate, see my wedding, and all the other milestones.

I stood in the sticky wet grass waiting for the funeral to be over, waiting for my daddy to be happy again, waiting for the day I would graduate, and Papa Dino would be there, waiting for when I would be married off and he would watch me walk down the aisle. Because we could always come back, the goodbyes never had to be forever. 🌊



Unfinished
Baruni Jakkula

A Bushel of Sham Daisies
Rebecca Sun

Contributors’ Notes

Simeon Barnes (Collins) enjoys writing fiction and is inspired by Anne Rice and Rick Riordan. He compares his creative process to a sponge—constantly soaking up ideas and squeezing them out. Barnes hopes his work inspires readers to be passionate and experiment with new ideas, just as he hopes to do in the future.

Cecelia Buehler (Starkville) looks up to her mother as her inspiration for writing. Her favorite form of writing is poetry because it challenges her to be succinct and creative, and it’s the form in which she writes the most. Cecelia plans on majoring in psychology to eventually become a psychology professor.

Lani Carter (Columbus) is inspired by her mom, who recommended her to brush up on her writing skills. Her favorite genre is poetry and would describe her writing as generally having a crinkly texture. She wants to major in electrical engineering somewhere up North and hopefully keep writing for fun.

Christopher Chen (New Albany) considers his lived experiences as his muse. The closest physical representation of his work is a savory and aromatic Chinese-style steamed fish dish. He hopes to become a doctor after pursuing a degree in chemistry, all while writing creatively—mostly nonfiction—and motivating others to share their stories.

Colin Chung (Brandon) enjoys writing short fiction as a means of exploring his emotions without exposing all his personal matters. He draws inspiration from his frequent Wikipedia excursions. He plans to major in math, publish a collection of short stories, and maybe one day eat a sea urchin.

Bones Cole (Clinton) is mainly influenced by RJ Williamson, Andrew Rowe, and all their incredibly talented peers. Their favorite medium of writing is video games because their interactive nature allows for deeper personal connection. In the future, they will live in the woods and befriend the local murder of crows.

Sophia Dean (Lucedale) took inspiration from her father and grandmother, which led her to pursue her creativity through poetry and acrylic paints. Poetry was appealing to her because of the artistic freedom it allows in structure and meaning, and acrylic because of the flexibility it allows when manipulating it. She plans to find multiple outlets to express her creativity as she gets older, through literature and fine arts.

Ainsley Dew (Kosciusko) is most influenced by John Keats. She describes her art and writing as having the feeling of sun-warmed wood and the sound of cicadas humming at dusk. She likes fiction and essay writing and hopes her writing inspires people to slow down and see themselves in the narrative. She plans to pursue academia and possibly law in the future while continuing her writing.

Maya Diaz (Vicksburg) is inspired by the writing of Pablo Neruda, photographers, and the creative pieces of those close to her. She’s always loved photography, and she appreciates poetry as a way to express emotions healthily and create art with words. She plans to continue her photography and poetry as she pursues careers in either psychiatry or forensics.

Natalia Elmore (Jackson) looks up to her father, also a writer, as her inspiration for writing. She describes her work as the feeling of cold water running down your back. She hopes her writing brings an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia, relatability, and memory. In the future, Natalia hopes to become a lawyer.

Spencer Goodlett (Cleveland) says his main influences are YouTubers Evan and Katelyn. He would describe the “sound” of his art as an otamatone and lemon the “flavor.” His favorite medium is acrylic because of its versatility, but he also enjoys mixed media. He hopes that his art provides something nice to look at while reading the magazine. He plans to attend SCAD and major in 3D animation while minoring in acting or fashion design.

Sasha Harvey (Starkville) draws inspiration for writing dialogue by overhearing the cafeteria ladies’ gossip. If her writing materialized, it would have the texture and smell of soil after a heavy rain. One day, she wants to explore the world, continue creating art in many forms, and write a book (or two!) of poetry or fiction.

Harper Hipp (Oxford) finds inspiration in long-deceased writers such as Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, and Oscar Wilde. The best way to describe her writing is the limbo state where it’s about to rain and the air is still and you can smell the rain coming. She hopes her work will inspire others to write their own pieces as well as inspire them to enjoy their teenagerhood.

Baruni Jakkula (Greenville) is influenced by Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh, Ansel Adams, and Galen Rowell. She hopes the readers of *Southern Voices* will realize the beauty of a single leaf or a sunset through her photography. She looks forward to becoming a cardiologist in the future. Baruni will continue to make art as it makes her feel more serene.

Jane Kasselmann (Enterprise) would describe her art as similar to a Coke ICEE. She loves watercolor because it makes her less of a perfectionist. She hopes her work will allow readers to see her adorable, perfect dog, Zelda, and also prove that MSMS kids can be creative. In college, she plans to pursue pre-med with a major in biology.

JD Miller (Hattiesburg) finds inspiration in his cat, Fuzzy. His favorite form of writing is poetry because he feels like he has more freedom to use his space on the page to create dramatic effects. He hopes his work helps the readers of *Southern Voices* relax and wind down enough to jumpstart their imagination, possibly to create their own works!

Mirae Nishikawa (Starkville) is inspired by Ichiko Aoba, Kim Jung-gi, and Hayao Miyazaki. If her art took on a physical form, she thinks it would taste like Baja Blast. One day, she hopes to become a psychiatrist and a real estate mogul.

Nicolas Palagi (Columbus) envies the abilities of artists like Francisco Goya. If his work were an everyday object, it would be the over-burnt parts of crispy bacon. He is planning on spending a year at an art program after graduating high school and is interested in continuing to express his art as an architect.

Margaret Parker (Tupelo) would describe her work as an imperfectly peeled orange. Her favorite medium is painting because it gives her room to make accidents that occasionally look good. She finds inspiration in just about everyone she meets and hopes to one day pursue a PhD in English.

Kami Patrick (Harrisville) enjoys writing poetry and hopes her work can make people feel things. If it doesn’t, she at least hopes they enjoy it as art. She describes her poetry as rain hitting a roof, and her inspirations are her family, nature, and her emotions. When she paints, she wants people to view a landscape through her eyes. Kami does not yet know what she plans to do but wants it to be something that makes her happy.

Izzy Rushing (Coldwater) compares these artistic contributions to a dusty floor with warm sauce poured over it, probably made from tomato and vinegar. Izzy’s favorite medium is painting, and works are often inspired by the loving-kindness of food. Izzy intends on studying plants in the future.

Cathy Shao (Memphis) is mostly inspired by the experiences and memories she’s shared with friends and family. Her favorite genre being poetry, she hopes her pieces resonate with readers and allow them to form a meaningful connection through her writing. In the future, she hopes to pursue a career that involves writing, whether through legal work such as drafting proposals or through research-based articles.

Landon Strong (Ocean Springs), inspired by Nobuo Uematsu, likes to work mainly through photography. A medium that he claims often feels like memories captured in moments. If his work were to be brought to life, it would be grainy with a smooth finish, a lot like pavement.

Rebecca Sun (Yazoo City) hopes her photography inspires more people to find extraordinary beauty in the seemingly ordinary. She is inspired by the talent in which Joaquín Sorolla captures the vibrancy of his home country Spain. No matter where she ends up in the future, she will continue to find magic in the mundane.

Cassie van Riessen (Cleveland) would describe her art as the unique flavor of a freshly ripe tomato picked right off the vine from her summer garden. She sees growing up in the Delta around artists using different techniques and materials as the environment in which her art grows, in the same way that a tomato is a result of its environment.

Maya Venkat (Hattiesburg) enjoys painting with acrylic because it lets her change the course of a painting on a whim. She is inspired by her mom, who has encouraged her to paint even when she could only scribble. In the future, Maya hopes to become a pediatrician, but she’s also interested in a math major, so she’ll just have to see where life takes her.

Althea Wells (Greenville) looks to her brother Alan as a source of inspiration. She hopes her art and writing, which smell like tomato soup and wood smoke, resonate with others—if not through shared experience, then through shared emotion. Someday, Wells hopes to see herself as a singing, art-making, food-critiquing, piano-tuning dentist.

Rina Xu (Starkville) likes to write fiction because of all the different types of stories and possibilities that come with the genre. She is inspired by John Banville and hopes that people will find her work meaningful or at the very least entertaining. In the future, she wishes to major in something business related and work a simple office job.



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