



*The
Ephemeris Prize
2022*

Mississippi University for Women

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The
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Mississippi University
for Women
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The Ephemera Prize is awarded annually in conjunction with the Eudora Welty Writers' Symposium at Mississippi University for Women. The W is extremely grateful to the Robert M. Hearin Foundation for the support they have provided for the prize and the symposium over many years.

In 2022 the contest received 51 entries from 4 schools and one home school in Mississippi. The winners were each awarded a \$200 prize and invited to read their winning submissions before the symposium audience. Three honorable mentions were recognized, and the five prize-winners read their entries, following readings by the two judges.

High school or home school students in grades 10-12 in Mississippi and nearby states were invited to write poems, stories, or essays on the Symposium and Ephemera Prize theme “‘Walking Along in the Changing-Time’: Southern Writers in Uncertain Times” or Eudora Welty’s story “The Wide Net” which inspired the theme. Students from other states may participate if an alumna or alumnus of The W sponsors them by writing a letter.

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2022 Judges

Chantal James, author of *None But the Righteous*

Jacqueline Allen Trimble, author of *How to Survive the Apocalypse*

The current Ephemera Prize theme and contest rules can be found on our website:

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemerapriz

Cover: Fountain

The Ephemera Prize 2022

*Telling Stories, Charting a Future
“Coming to the end of the road... the jumping-off place”*

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Makenzie Brannon

The Side of the Road in Columbus, MS

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

Chloe Dobbins

A Day No Fish Would Die

“This is where I used to play when I was your age.”

Dad stood in front of the pines, looking over his shoulder into the woods so thick light hardly breached through. I knew far beyond the pines was a bayou — still green water occasionally disturbed by a floating American alligator or a feral Mississippi father.

I had been fishing there once when I was five years old. I still remembered the sandspurs pricking at my heels and the mosquitoes chewing on my arms as we made our way through thick blackberry brambles and pine trees to the bayou. The summer sun seared us as we trekked through the thicket, but the true agony only began when we reached the swampy stream. I spent most of the fishing trip clutching the edge of the tottering little boat, trembling as I spotted more moccasins and alligators than bass and bluegills. Dad would beam bright as a child as he plunged the oar into the inky mud, pushing us off into water too murky to see our own feet in.

By the time we were ready to release all the creatures we — *he* — had caught, I was waterlogged, wailing, and way beyond any chance of ever wanting to return.

“I don’t want to go fishing,” I repeated for the third time that afternoon.

Dad just pulled a bush to the side, unflinching despite its prickly leaves, a silent order to abandon the grassy clearing and march into the wilderness.

Raising my head, I could see exactly where the sun disappeared from the sky, a side effect of the pines stretching up and up and up. Letting my gaze droop down, I saw slender beams of light pierce through the woods, occasionally offering a small refuge from the shadows cast by the trees. I faintly heard the steady rhythm of a stream flowing further into the forest, the stream that would lead us to the bayou for the next few hours.

I turned around, trying to meet Mom’s gaze. She and my little sister sat eating lunch with my uncle on the porch, sheltered in the shade. All parties had declined the invitation to go fishing, so Dad settled on hauling only me down with him.

Mom finally looked up from her conversation to find me staring at her. She seemed to mistake my cry for help for a look of excitement and offered me a cheery smile.

My final lifeline severed, I raised my foot and ventured into the world beyond.

Gone was the cloudless sky and freshly cut grass — all I could see or hear or smell was pine. Pine trees stalking over me, pine needles crunching under my boots, pine wafting in the breeze. After a few more seconds, I was at last able to register other sensations again. I could hear a woodpecker droning into a poor tree somewhere, as well as the buzzing of mosquitoes flying around me. Worst of all, I could hear the incessant chirping of the crickets in the bait jar. I grimaced, ill at the memory of having to impale the insects on a fish hook.

Soon, I heard my father’s heavy footsteps behind me. “Ready to go?”

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I let the question dissolve into the air and get carried off by the piney breeze, thinking I obviously would never be *ready to go*. I decided to ask a question of my own.

“Do you think fishing for fun is okay?” I turned to Dad, my voice raised just enough to be heard over the woodpecker and the mosquitoes and the crickets. “I mean, morally.”

Dad trotted up to my side. “As long as you release them, yes. Catching them and keeping them is wrong if you ain’t gonna eat them.”

I thought about that for a moment as we walked a few more steps into the woods. I imagined being a fish, floating peacefully down the stream with my fish friends, and finding a nice snack only for my lips to be skewered on a hook.

“But... Doesn’t it hurt them?”

“No. They don’t have as many nerves in their mouth as us.”

“Oh.”

Dad held a machete in one hand and two fishing rods in the other. He had donned a dull red flannel, thick blue jeans, and heavy work boots for the excursion. His clothes and tools reminded me of the hillbilly caricatures I saw on TV sometimes — this provincial side of him mostly unfamiliar to those outside the family.

Sometimes, I had trouble reconciling the man I saw as my father and the man everybody else in town saw as the same person. I knew he was a lawyer, and I knew what lawyers were, but I found it difficult to imagine him in a suit arguing in a courtroom when he looked like this. Then again, Dad didn’t *usually* hunt or fish like most of my classmates’ dads seemed to love to do, and when he did, he never cared to show off his bounty. I had a slight suspicion the differences between him and most of the people in town didn’t stop at their hunting habits, recalling the arguments he’d had with my grandparents before. I wondered if he ever felt like an outsider in his own hometown — he certainly wouldn’t be the only one. Yet, he clearly fit in with the rural world much more than me, I thought, as I winced at the sharp prod of a branch in my side and he didn’t do so much as blink when he scraped his arm along a thorny bush.

We marched on in relative silence for the rest of the trek, the only sound coming from us the crunch of leaves underneath our boots. As we continued deeper into the wilderness, the pine trees and needles were replaced by cypresses and Spanish moss — we had arrived at the bayou.

A thought dawned on me as I gazed at the ever-broadening green river.

“We didn’t bring a boat.”

“Don’t need one.” Dad shrugged and gestured to a piece of land further down to our right. “Right over there. The ground’s solid enough for us to stand, and the water’s deep enough to fish.”

I tiptoed my way down, doing my best to avoid soggy dirt and puddles. Dad didn’t seem to care about getting his shoes or jeans dirty; he marched straight to the plot he had pointed out.

While Dad unpacked our equipment, I leered at the foggy water. Not much seemed to have changed since I was last there. The water was the same shade of muddy green — if I squinted hard enough, I thought I might have been able to see little tadpoles near the surface, perhaps descendants of the same frogs I’d spotted hopping

around years before. The same mangroves ambled into the water, the same coarse Spanish moss dripping off their branches. And Dad turned to hand me the same old fishing rod I'd been using since the first time I was forced into the water.

I cringed as he took out the bait jar and held out a cricket, gesturing for me to take the insect. Gritting my teeth, I shook my head.

"Will you do it?"

Dad scowled. "My daughter's too scared to kill a damn cricket," he grumbled as he still skewered the creature on the fishhook for me.

I cast the line out into the swamp, tiny ringlets rippling in the water from the disturbance. I expected Dad to follow, but instead he pulled out a box of cigarettes. I frowned at the carton.

"Pawpaw said smoke scares the fish." I didn't care about the fish.

Dad shrugged and lit one of the cigarettes. "He's not here."

I ignored the acrid smoke crowding my nose and throat and focused on the red bobber floating on the lazy creek. This was the worst part — the waiting. Nothing to do but let the sun fry you up while you stare down at the line. I looked over at Dad. He was leaning against a drooping tree, dangling his cigarette from his mouth.

"Do you actually like fishing?" I finally asked him. "All you've done so far is smoke."

Dad exhaled a cloud of smoke before responding. "I like to fish well enough. I just needed a minute."

True to his word, Dad extinguished the little flame and threw his cigarette butt into a trash bag we had brought before taking his own rod.

"When I was little, fishing was about all we had to do for fun." Dad was fiddling around with his hook, piercing the bait on it. "The TV only had a couple channels on it, and we only watched on Saturday. Your generation's pretty lucky, you know. A lot's changed since I was your age."

I readied myself for a *kids these days* speech, but it didn't come. Dad was looking out at the water. "Right over there's where we always took the boat out." He gestured at a tall cypress creeping into the water.

If I thought hard enough, I could imagine Dad when he was my age, sitting in the same place I am now — much taller and thinner and stronger than me, and a lot tanner, too. He would have been grinning, I think; he had to have enjoyed it far more than I was.

"One time when I was sixteen I drove to the woods by myself to go fishing." Dad cast out his line beside me. "Accidentally left the radio on — 'Jeremy' was playing. A lady from church heard it when she drove by, and she snitched on me to my dad. I think she invited me to a CD burning later that year."

I met Dad's eyes in surprise. "She tried to get you in trouble for a song? And... is a CD burning what it sounds like?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Back in the day, church folks would get together and burn music they didn't like."

"I think Mawmaw may have said something about that. She doesn't really care for Pearl Jam."

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Dad laughed. “Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure I was the first person in the county to listen to grunge. A lot of folks didn’t like me much for it.”

Maybe Dad overestimated how much had changed in town since he was my age. I was still too scared to admit I listened to My Chemical Romance, popular as it was, when my classmates humiliated another student for wearing a *Welcome to the Black Parade* shirt.

Dad spoke again. “I always told myself back then I would leave here when I grew up. Move out to Seattle or somewhere ‘round there.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I tried. Kept having to come back, and eventually I just gave up.” Dad’s gaze was fixed on the water. “Town’s cursed, I’m telling you. But it all worked out okay. Not many cities you can get a place like this a couple minutes from your backyard.”

Before I decided whether I agreed or not, Dad dropped his rod and stretched. “You ever heard ‘Crown of Thorns?’ Talking about Pearl Jam made me think of it.”

I shook my head as Dad reached for one of our bags. To my surprise, he pulled out his phone. “Well, you’re about to.”

“Won’t it scare the fish?” I was already tossing my own rod to the side.

“Forget the fish. Mother Love Bone is more important.” Dad pressed play, and soft guitar began to echo across the bayou.

Coated in sweat and swamp, we crouched together under a cypress and proceeded to scare off all the fish that dared to approach our moss-smearred sanctuary that day.

Nathané George

Dirty

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

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

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

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

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

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For the next seventeen months, the sound of an alarm pierced my ears every morning at 5:30 a.m. I brewed a pot of Folgers coffee and made a cup with two scoops of sugar and a dash of creamer to wake my mother. We began our forty-minute journey to her cancer treatments sipping caramel frappés along the way. During one of these rides, she admitted something neither of us wanted to hear: “Nathan, one day I won’t be here.” I sadly knew this, and I watched over the next year and a half as her health rollercoaster up and down with me there to help her up and down. In a blink of an eye, I was letting her down one last time into the one thing she hated the most: dirt.

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

Elliot Nix

Inhospitable Hometowns

My youth was filled with small town talk;
the brunt of it trials and tribulations
of average countryfolk magnified
into end-all, dynasty-like struggles
by the ever running mouth of someone
too volatile to settle into their life and
too scared to change it.

If it rained, it was never enough.
Whether it was too much for tomatoes
or too little for lima beans, there was always
something wrong with the weather, and
never with the farmer.

Town gossip was served like syrup at breakfast;
If a cousin had a cheating husband,
or an auntie had a son who turned out queer,
or, God forbid, there was a grandchild who left the church,
it was the first thing I heard in the morning
and the last thing I heard at night.

But every now and then, on a cool day in late September,
when the sun would hit the dewdrops on the hayfield just right
and provide a view that seemed just for me, I would relish
in the piece of smalltown heaven that, I'm certain, was the chief point
of reason for those who defended living
in the land of Laurel.

I grew up, grew out of the phase of life where
running barefoot through fields is admirable
and into the portion of my youth where it was admonished.
I grew to despise the populace that detested me,
and to only appreciate that which I could see through screens.

It was then that I learned the lousiest lesson within county lines:
The glamor of small towns is a thing that is burned away
the higher the sun gets.

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In the heat of the day, the angry swirls of reality spiraled up,
the town's true colors bleeding through its very foundations,
teeming and twirling off the asphalt in an undeniable exclamation;
this place does not welcome you!

I later learned that message was more for me than most;
Friday nights rolled around, and by then I was too old to join
in the small scale side game of football next to the field and thus
was relegated to walking the poorly paved track around it with
fellow teenagers, none of which were sure of who we were;

We did, however, all rest firmly in one truth:
For one reason or another, we were not meant to be here.

We saw it in the color of our skin; in the baleful glare
of an old man with hatred tattooed on his heart and
a clump of tobacco permanently tucked away in his
judgemental lip.

We saw it in the desire of our love; in the offended,
offensive leer of a woman with unnaturally blonde hair
and an accusation of inhumanity on her tongue the second
she saw us hold hands.

We saw it in the faces of our families; in the weathered,
beaten down, beaten up faces of those who had clung,
tenaciously, hospital banded wrists clinging
to the smalltown even when it force fed them
addicting distractions, one after another.

We were dead set on leaving this place; we'd made the plans,
we'd done the work, securing asylum in any way we could—
collegiate halls, military bunks, guest rooms of distant cousins.

But when we readied to leave, one foot outside the county line
for the first real time in all our young yet immeasurable lives—
We hesitated.

Looking back, we saw ourselves.
Small, childish versions,
youth running in colorless trails
down our nose; a now outgrown response

to the pine tree pollen most of us
would never weather again.

They looked at us, these childhood renditions,
and they smiled the knowing, mischievous,
good-yet-bad-intended smile of southern youth
and they extended skinny arms to wave us a goodbye,
nothing but joy on their small, haggard faces,
and it was okay.

We all knew, young and old,
that we would leave today,
but there was no need for sorrow;
because, as certain
as small towns stay small,
those who leave them behind
will always return
when their child's goodbye
has turned to nostalgia;

When they grow brave enough t
o make a home
in an inhospitable hometown.

Dead Chickens in the Fence

I'm not sure if I started counting the bodies at all, but if I did, I've forgotten the number by now. I didn't even know where to put them all. Where do you lay your dead when there will be no graves? Where do you lay your dead when their lives are so insignificant that they don't deserve graves in the world's eyes? You lay them by the fire pit.

The ride home was everything I needed that day with the top off the Jeep riding 70 on Highway 9W. I had the radio turned up so high that the trees were shaking and swaying to the tune of Carrie Underwood. Work wasn't great, it never was. I worked hard every day to make sure that people could have a better life, but it seemed like they didn't give a damn about helping themselves. As I drove away that day, my thoughts began to circle back to that place. Because there was nothing special about that red brick building right off Business Drive. The name itself just elaborates on the monotony of the environment. Everyone there would smile at you but as soon as a client left the room the smiles vanished. It was like a museum with all our stone-cold hearts and plastic faces. Together we would spit out ugly remarks about the condition of these people's lives as if we were any better. But I don't think we meant the things we said about those people; I think we just hated the paperwork piling on our desks, the droning phone calls, the fear that being a files clerk was all we could ever amount to. Then I thought, it paid the bills and that's all you could need: enough life in you to get up every morning and go to work. And to earn enough money to enjoy life when you weren't in that God forsaken building.

And I knew when I got home there would be a cat around my ankles as I fed the chickens in my backyard, I would be living in my element. That's all I could ask for. So, I thought, with my Ray-Bans perched on my nose and my hair far past tangled flowing behind me I would let the roar of my engine and the energy of that moment carry away my troubles. The piercing wind cut away all my rough edges and gave me just enough space to breathe but I could almost still hear in the back of my head someone talking about an insurance policy or how the payroll didn't compare to what we could have been making. I turned up the radio.

I should have known from that moment that my world was ending. This universe works in balance and that day was no exception. There never was an exception. Even for just a second to breathe you must pay your dues to the stars that spin and swindle away our fates.

When I finally made it into the driveway with its broken gravel and mailbox nearly on its side, I saw the neighbor boy in the distance with his ankles in the pond. Those waters weren't safe for a grown adult let alone a kid. The water came up to my mid-calf, but that was enough room for things to grow. Sickly green algae caught in your toes with sulking, scaly things slithering around your ankles. One bite and you

would be gone but move too quick to run and then the snakes would know where to attack. We told that kid to keep a knife or something with him just in case something was to happen. Even if it was only grass snakes. God, he should know better for as much as he's out near that pond. That's just one step in the wrong spot away from a lawsuit for us if he was to get hurt. And there was that dog of his, yipping away at his ankles. That dog, in my yard. The last time he was back there- I couldn't turn off the ignition fast enough.

I've been talking to God a lot more lately. Being outside with my garden and my land, it's honest work. It brings you closer to who created it. I ask Him for forgiveness, I know I'm not the best woman or the best mother, but I try. I try so hard to be everything I'm supposed to be and try not to fall short. God had given me so much in my life and I had to be grateful, I had to understand His plan. But as I slammed the door of the Jeep and ran to the coop in the backyard, I was screaming, pleading to Him to have mercy on them and to have mercy on me.

There were so many feathers. I only let one group out a day so as not to mix them up. I had left that broody hen in with her newly hatched chicks that day. And as I entered the backyard, I could hear her squawking as she ran around the inside of her coop, no longer as broody as she was this morning. She was terrified, and so was I.

I didn't know what to do. The shotgun was inside but I couldn't bring myself to go get it. The danger had passed. The church had burnt to embers. The streets painted red. I just started walking into the grass looking for something, anything to show me someone had lived. I think I found a Black Copper Muran first. She was leaning against the shop door, and you wouldn't have known she was dead -just sleeping. Her black feathers shined purple and green, and her simple wings tucked back as if she was at peace. I bent down slowly to see if there was any way I could save her. And as I lifted her into the air her neck fell backwards, limp in my hands.

Please, I begged God, *please*. And when I looked into her eyes praying that there would be something, anything, they were fading slowly into the darkness of the night. Her eyes now were a glossy grey as her beak bobbed grasping for air. There was no blood, there never was. Her neck had been snapped. That dog had been killing for sport. I held her to my chest, rocking the lifeless body back and forth.

I found them roosted in the trees, littering the field, and the cow pasture next door. These chickens, my chickens, with death in their eyes. You would never think it was so easy to get attached to livestock, but they become a part of your family. By the time I made it around the yard they had begun to go stiff, their legs sticking up in the air and their toes pointed like claws. They were telling me I didn't protect them. They were whispering in my ears. They weren't wrong. I should have been there to save them.

With chicken feet in each of my hands, I tried not to look down. I couldn't stand to look at their faces. I began to set them in rows of two by the fire pit in the backyard that used to be a place of celebration and good times. You could open a beer and sit together as the sun faded away and the moon began its midnight dance with the stars. Now it was the final resting place.

When I laid down that night to sleep, my husband gone for work, I cried. I

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didn't understand and I still don't. Chicken bones clattered together in their own sick melody. I thought about what to do next with my empty coop and a broken heart.

Now I keep the shotgun leaning against the shop door. I'm always prepared for the worst no matter how bright the sun is. But that old shotgun, I don't have to worry about it rusting. They say when you grow something for someone you love it won't ever die. They always forget to mention, when something grows from hate it cuts and tears like the brambles around the fence. No matter how much you cut at them they can only grow back tougher. It's all they know how to do.

Maryann Dang

A Stir-fry of Tradition

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

September 2nd, 1963

We were the catalyst for our demise.

Or maybe it was the auburn haze that blinded us on those lead-colored roads, hickory lining each side in its irregular manner. Paired with the thick mopey heat, it was sure to erode any hopeful spirit passing down to their gray bones. It was so hot, and we were so cold. Time was a turning wheel that moved along with our feet; anytime we stopped, it would jerk us forwards. If you don't move along with it, it will crush you. My mother used to tell me that the world would roll over us all one day, and we had the choice of whether to run away or let it come. On days like these, with the disaster heat, the hostile haze of the sky, and the company of someone who will never understand taking a chance, I wanted nothing more than to invite it all to roll over me.

The road melted underneath us, and with every lift of your foot, you could hear the sticky scream of years of travel cling to your shoes. This was the only sound shared between us. Maybe we were using this time to meditate on things, or even thinking about what could come from this. But I had a feeling we were thinking about what won't come from it. Nothing that can happen will be worse than what won't happen, or so I thought. It was only five days ago that we were proposed with a dream, one shared between him and me, but one sought to be destroyed.

I've started to question everything about existence. About God. About war. About if one day while I'm walking down these melted roads to nowhere, I won't make it back. I always turn back around before dark, but what if I kept going? I've always been told not to cross this path. This is as far as you can go. We don't want you getting hurt. Maybe something will happen if I

don't cross it. Maybe change won't come until I change myself. We approach the limit, and the blaze of day shines in a line ahead.

"Better turn back now." My brother says.

"Mhm," I mutter. I stare at the movement of my own feet, pretending I don't see the end in my peripheral.

"You know we can't be down here once the sun sets." He states.

"..."

"You know that, right?"

"Never said I didn't."

"You didn't say anything."

I turn to him. He is sweating. I couldn't tell if it was because of the heat or because we were nearing the turning point. I look at his stance. He is going to convince me of something. He is going to persuade me. I am not going to listen.

"Listen, I know it's scary right now. Do you think this is going to make it any better?"

"Yes."

He scoffs.

“C’mon.”

He ushers me towards him, mouth agape. I don’t move.

“Come. On.”

His eyes are like cancerous moons lighting me down. I can feel a sickness growing inside me the more I look. I turn my head, looking off at the glare of the division line.

Something instilled in my mind won’t let me turn back. Maybe it’s been with me all along, but I’ve only just felt it. Never have I felt so strongly about anything. The glare of the sun bursting through the haze wraps my face in a crescent glow. I can’t hold the tears back, but I’m not sad. I’m not scared. I’m not even frustrated. I’m just ready. All that I am is ready.

“Gene” I turn to him and speak.

“What?” He sighs.

“...”

“Please.”

He immediately reacts. A look of disgust and disappointment makes its way to his face, but it’s all supported by fear. All that he is, all that he will ever be, is fear.

“You want to kill us, huh? Is what we have here not enough? Is it not enough for you? Why are you always trying to test this, Yvonne? We have what we have. We can’t change that. The more you reach for it, the more of it we lose. We can’t change them. We just can’t. Please... just turn around.”

It takes everything in me to stay in place. I feel like I have been pushed fifty feet into the ground, and I am still slowly sinking. The tears are now streaming down my face, forming a line of protection on me. No matter if he’s with me or not, I know I won’t be alone in this. I turn to him, using every beam of that hostile sun to fuel the words I’ve kept in for so long.

“No. You’re wrong. We can do something. That’s all we have to do, something. anything. Do you think we can just live as we have been without worry?” I pause, heavy breathing coming

from deep in my chest.

I look over at him. Sweat possesses us both, our only shared attribute. Whatever remnants of blood we had together have been eroded by this conversation. I continue.

“What about the people who don’t get to live like us? Do we just ignore them? Ignore them because we don’t have to sleep with one eye open? If we don’t do this, it’ll come back on us one day. We have to fight for everyone. Not just ourselves.”

In front of me is Gene, face dripping with fear while everything behind him is enwrapped in darkness. I turn around and look at the limit set on the road. It is illuminated by the sun, and everything just past the line of division is visible. It’s a scene I’ll have engrained into my memory until I am no more. It was in the sun, the heat, the words. It was in the year, 1963, and the way it has led me here. Without another word, I turn around, leaving Gene and the fear and the safety of my home behind.

Ephēmera

He cries out to me. I cannot hear it, but I know it's there. I don't know if I chose to ignore myself or if the force that moved me forwards was the cause. I could not think of it for too long before the reflection of light on the road blinded me but invited me. With each step I could hear the cries of everyone who needed me, each one slowly dragging me forward. I look behind me. Gene watches, no longer sweating. I smile at him, no longer crying. Then, without another thought, I crossed the line, and made my way to the end of the road.

Joseph Hanna

There is No Town Named Charleville

If there were ever a time to cross the wetlands that circle Charleville it would be now. The long high winding road was vacant, almost apocalyptically baren. No cars going to or from, and dark stains streak its sides from the decades of abuse from the elements while the pillars holding it aloft, though gaded, were as hardy as the day they were laid. Below it was the marsh occasionally divvied up by stagnant black water, which ran its tendrils through mats of cordgrass. The setting sun accentuated the pale yellow strands gilding them in gold. Autumn wind blowing from the north brushing each brittle stalk making them sway and whisper, forcing muted secrets from their roots to trade with one another. Stars grow more prominent in the darkness as the sun further recedes, so much in fact that it would seem that one had descended to the bridge. Loose gravel pops under tires as the singular headlight buzzes along its length.

It's just how I remembered it.

The long shadows cast by the sun make pebbles along the road look like winding cracks chiseled into the asphalt, not that there was a lack of hazards in the first place. I loosen one of the handlebars, slowing James down as not to spill the precious cargo onboard. That's what Aiden named it anyway, my moped. Its red paint job and headlight reminded him of a train from Thomas the tank engine, James.

A pair of little arms tighten around my waist, reaffirming my caution. He hasn't yet been to old Charleville where I grew up. Though, if you asked him he'd say otherwise. He's taken the few times I've mentioned it and let his little imagination run wild. And it ran, ran through the streets I never spoke of, and to the brownie ridden house my youth blossomed in just as his, ransacking reality along the way with the wonder only a child could conjure. Even though our generation had long left the tiny town not marked on any map, I wanted to acquaint him with our family roots, then the trunk, then its branches, and finally the fruit plucked from an ancient apple tree my grandmother planted in the front yard.

As if manifested by my memory, a red fluorescent light flashed distantly on the road. I loosened my other hand, and gradually let the moped come to a stop.

A barrier was bolted to the ground with red and white highlights lining its edges. In its center sat the unforgiving message "END OF ROAD" True to its word, behind the barrier the road came to an abrupt stop, like it had been ripped from its rivets. Rebar stuck out from the side and only pillars of the bridge were left, like monoliths jutting from the marsh. Much like the sensation in my heart the bitter gusts of bog air stung that much more as my helmet sat in my lap. Shifting to one side of the idling moped I slide off and approach the blatant afront. Though muffed by the helmet

Aiden asked

“Mom, are we in trouble?”

I can't understand, how did this happen? Why did this happen? Were there not still people on that island in the middle of the bog? Was there not still a town named Charleville? My head rattled with speculation, ideas bouncing from one ear to the other and vanishing just as fast as they appeared. I reached out to its metal frame in hopes of it not being real. It shot my fingers with the coldness that seemed so prevalent in the oncoming night. buckles clattered together as Aiden took off his little helmet and asked again with the same inflection

“Mom, are we in trouble?”

His brown squinted eyes had turned hazel as the final rays of sunlight had fallen upon his face, and in a tone that was unintentionally to reassuring I said

“No honey, just give me a minute.”

Running my hands through my hair I looked at the sky in defeat, and how it had almost completely succumbed to the night. Stars began to morph and blur as tears tugged at my eyelids. The same stars that once guided my ancestors through the primordial darkness and led them to Ireland, I thought. How they must have told their children of their former homes, cursed never to return to the lands whence they came. What stoicism they must have mustered, just as I have now.

My thoughts were cut short by a small metal tap. I was so caught up in contemplation that I hadn't noticed Aiden hop off the moped, and began throwing small pebbles at the barrier. Several sat in his hand, and dropped to the ground when he saw me looking, like I caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. His hands fell along with them in an exaggerated motion, and he shrugged.

“What are we gonna do now?”

“...Well, it looks like we're not going to Charleville right now, or ever for that matter, So I guess we'll go home. It's not like we can cross the marsh any other way.”

Aiden took several steps to his side, and stood on his tippy toes to see over the guardrail to the waterlogged expanse below. He rests his rosy cheeks on the railing, and after a moment shoots his hand up emphatically.

“We could get a boat!”

His reply caught me off guard, and a chuckle escaped from my lips. Though Aiden laughed with me his eyebrows betrayed his confusion. With one step we were now side

by side facing the fusca dyed horizon, and a squat at eye level made it easier to humor Aiden's idea.

“Hmm, maybe we could get a boat, but I've never driven one before. I don't think it's anything like riding a moped. Plus, where would we get one?”

“From a store. People have boat stores, I've seen them before.”

“Mhm, mhm, What kind of boat would we get?”

“A big one, like one with rooms and stuff. Like... um.”

Aiden tries to hold his hands out to show the size of his desired boat, but his arms apparently couldn't match the mass he had in mind, so instead he points to a malformed pond of water surrounded by grass.

“That big, maybe bigger.”

“Sounds a little expensive, and too big to steer around the mud.”

“Then I don't know mom.”

“We might not be able to go to Charleville sweety.”

“But you said we would.”

“I know, I know, I did. I don't like it either, but it just might not be possible right now. And it doesn't mean we can't go at all, Just not today.”

Cupping one hand in the other I crossed my fingers. It pained me to lie in that moment, because truthfully the odds of Charleville still standing and Aiden laying his eyes upon it were equally impossible, and that may be for the best. Made evident by the destruction of the only bridge in or out of the town, it seemed that not only did Charleville not exist on maps, but also didn't exist at all. But it's better for him to not know, at least for now, that the place he so idolized was now rubble. I'd prefer to let the image he's painted of it live on, rather than let his expectations shrivel up and drift away with the reality that is. Let him think of the old house Gran would dust to a sheen, the apple tree he will never eat from, and the corner store that had 3 cats sleeping in its window.

Maybe one day, by his own reckoning or even by my confession he will know that there is no town named Charleville.

“Mom, are you ok?”

Ephemera

His little hand tugged at my sleeve, I didn't even know I was crying. Darkness had fully cloaked the sky by now and starlight flickered and danced across the water in unison with the horizon above. The song of frogs and crickets echoed from below, and I felt Aiden embrace my arm.

“I'm sorry you miss your home mom.”

“No, no honey. I just wish you could have seen it. *Ahem*—Now let's go home before a Sprigan hops out to snatch you away!”

He squeals and squirms in surprise as I tickle his sides. The commotion doesn't last long though, I soon pick my helmet up and begin strapping it on, and Aiden follows suit. We had stayed out longer than the day had courtesy for, and pitch blackness crept in and out of the grass.

Hopping on James and turning his handlebars he sputters to life lighting the road ahead. Once again Aiden grips around my waist, and back down the bridge we went, likely for the last time.

Participating Schools & Teachers

Germantown High School

The Mississippi School for the Arts

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science

Picayune Homeschool

West Bolivar High School, Rosedale Freedom Project

Jamie Dickson

Dr. Nadia Alexis

Thomas B. Richardson

Cassie Cufre

Jeremiah Smith