

The Ephemera Príze 2023



The Ephemera Príze 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 2023 the contest received 44 entries from 3 schools 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 "With an Instrument Made of Air": The Transformative Magic of Story" or Eudora Welty's story "Circe" 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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2023 Judges

Halle Hill, author of *Good Women* Claude Wilkinson, author of *Soon Done With the Crosses*

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

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemeraprize

Cover: Cypress Branches

The Ephemera Prize 2023

"With an Instrument Made of Air" The Transformative Magic of Story

Georgia Bailey, "Death" and "Too Soon" Mississippi School for the Arts, Gulfport	6
Emelia Bosarge, "Becoming the Witch" Mississippi School for the Arts, Pass Christian	
Anthony Bradley, "Atrophied Ambition" The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences, Hernando	8
Ava Grace Noe, "Morning Glory" The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences, Paris	7
Iris Xue, "Speech Delayed yet Purpose Undeterred" The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences, Southhaven	11
Honorable Mentions	
Cryslin Lance, "Melodies of Life" Mississippi School for the Arts, Greenville	13
Claire Rizzo, "I Miss Most Those I'll Never Meet" The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences, Cleveland	14
Amelia Whitaker, "Carvings From The Wind" Mississippi School for the Arts, Brookhaven	16
Participating Schools & Teachers	20

Georgia Bailey

Death

Death and Chocolate.

They don't mix well.

I watch from a distance.

Never getting close.

It's not an option.

When I get close, life ends.

Beginning to end, observations were made.

Distraction,

My true grace.

Be calm,

Be wise,

Be smart.

She was just a girl with a book.

Years had passed,

But it was her.

Misfortune?

Yes.

I wanted to apologize.

I couldn't.

Too Soon

He had light brown hair,
The most beautiful smile.
He caught everyone's attention.
He was stubborn but had the kindest heart.
No matter who you were,
He was always excited to see you.
He was everyone's best friend.
He was spoiled rotten,
But he deserved it.
He died before his 6th birthday.
He lived a short life,
But he loved every bit of it.

Emelia Bosarge

Becoming the Witch

I became the witch in my isolated fortress—

brewing concoctions with the scarce clemency I was given.

I became the witch on the gleaming shore,

eyes pouring saltwater into the sand,

watching great galleys glide menacingly my way.

I became the witch around the dining room table,

feeding hospitality to brutal soldiers, wine to monsters

in exchange for their company until they proved

that they were unworthy of being forgiven.

I became the witch in the pigsty,

staring grimly at my past trudging in front of me-

sloshing around in their own waste where I

exiled them in retribution for their cruelty—

still too damaged to even take pride in my power.

I became the witch in the arms of a warrior:

almost forgiving, almost healed, almost

trusting as he engulfed my brain in wonder and

knowledge, spilling out stories like the fountain of youth,

taking my tattered soul and feeding it Coeus' sweet nectar, thirsting for more with every word that he spoke.

I became the witch in the wake of grand ships,

watching my heart sail away from me shamelessly,

leaving me only with a burden in my stomach,

a growing dread gnawing away at my immortality, a regret

so heavy that my knees became one with the dirt on which they knelt.

I became the witch in the depth of my isolation:

a crying babe forced into my arms sooner than I

was ready—child sucking more life from my breast than I was capable of giving—love was not enough to combat all the baggage that I carried.

I became the witch in the wake of a hero;

he became legend, and I became myth—wasting away with our child who built a battleship, ready to leave me the same as his father.

I became the witch in my isolated fortress,

honing magic to conquer the mountains of my grief,
turning evil into swine and lovers into heroes,
transforming herbs into potions and soil into lions,
turning desolation into eternally growing power.

I became the witch in all my undeniable strength, spiting all of the gods with my glory.

Anthony Bradley

Atrophied Ambition

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

Little luminescence trickles through the lodge, sunken far in Sylvan forest.

Too timbered for favorable travel, he solemnly heeds his secluded psyche.

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

Morning Glory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I can see the pond from here as I feel the world fold in around me. Maybe it's too

selfish to think that way. I can see the geese landing in the water, flapping their wings behind them, as the world closes in around itself. The tomato plant's spoke starts to scratch its way against my back pulling me up to my feet. I had left the tomato vines alone, too ripe to pick this late in the year. Now the ones I had left were oozing and scarred, small things crawling in and out calling the wilted red fruit home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Speech Delayed yet Purpose Undeterred

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When I started speaking, my victory tasted as sweet as maple syrup. But after

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

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

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

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

Crislyn Lance

Melodies of Life

In this world, a symphony unfolds, Each soul, a note, in the tapestry of tales, Unique, the melodies life's story holds, No fixed rhythm, as each heart prevails.

Together, we compose this wondrous score, A cacophony of joy, sorrow, and strife, Each life, a verse, in this grand metaphor, No set pattern, in the dance of life.

The rising sun, a chorus to the day, Each heartbeat plays its part in the design, As stars at night across the heavens sway, No strict tempo, in this grand concerto fine.

Through every birth, a new note takes its place, A chapter in this ever-evolving song, Each person's journey, an individual grace, No predetermined path, as we all belong.

So let us celebrate the beauty we create, In this symphony with no set refrain, Each life, a note, unique in its fate, No rigid structure, in the human chain.

Claire Rizzo

I Miss Most Those I'll Never Meet

In the Delta, many tales go unwritten, swallowed and buried like old growth by the river's flow. Many more stories die long before the people who knew them do. In an environment long dominated by a present mindset, the past is often treated as a pesky afterthought. This is no fault of the people. After all, who can afford to leave out sandbags for water levels that have long receded?

The stories held closest to my heart flowed out along with watered-down whiskey and tears. These rustic epics, half-remembered, cloudy retellings of my home in its gone-by gore and glory, are the closest things I'll ever get to meeting great people and witnessing past eras. In the those few, saccharine moments where the outdated times deemed important enough are passed down to the newest generation, even the loudest tellers speak in a dulcet tone, moved by the gone-by and alcohol alike.

The folks of this riverbed leave behind ghosts, whether of towns, neighborhoods, schools, or shops. We cannot often afford to hold on to things that have lost their current capital or pose irreparable risk. Memory, however, remains without cost. But nothing in my little world stands eternal, and these stories are subject to the same degradation as our other reckless abandonments. In attempting to escape the pains of the past, we are made to have only a faded recollection of the few, lovely things that remain there.

There's a certain kind of bittersweet that comes with missing the things, and people, that I was never meant to. There are certain days where I'd give everything I have to shake the giant hand of that gritty immigrant's son whose blood is muddled in with mine. On others, I'd lay everything on the table to question the great grandfather I cannot find a single online record concerning. A certain chill goes down my spine when I visit the long-retired homestead of the woman whose flowery namesake scatters among the clover. A distant warmth settles over my skin when I lay that daughter of a saint's knitted blanket over my shoulders. It's an odd kind of awe, someone else's comfortable shadow I can never seem to step out of.

The residual scripts of half-forgotten inside jokes, the memories of old family friends, and abandoned hopes and dreams of my elders, lay imprinted at my core, just as those ancient forests slumber beneath the farmland. I mourn for the stories I was never told. I weep for the ghosts of those who left too soon, before I could even receive an impression of them. When I think of those long-past, I am often left to wonder, to attempt to fill in gaps that I can't even be sure exist.

What motivated her to remain loving in the face of such struggle? What great Saint did he pray to become so accomplished in that short period, his life? These honored existences, summarized, afterthought-ed in but a few words, stand as testament to our most holy sacrilege. Sure, one could leave that great ice storm right where it ended, but could they do the same for those who bundled up next to the fireplaces with them?

What separates the tough times from the lives that endured them?

It is impossible to simultaneously leave bad years behind while fondly detailing those who have passed on, or at least to do both justices. Nothing here is forever, but I am thoroughly convinced that my culture may stay haunted by a half-forgotten past, while continuing to chase after half-remembered cameos of their departed, long after my own time. These advertisements for products long-since pulled, this film warped by humidity and heat, may justly remain as the only spoken culture that we will ever truly own.

Amelia Whitaker

Carvings From the Wind

The wind etches words into the cliffs, the trees, the pebbles of the riverbank. Anything it touches, it now carves.

It started with the pebbles of the riverbank.

Grass and weeds flowed around my legs, strands of my shorts getting caught on thistles. I didn't mind the scratches appearing on my legs or the threads coming loose; the soft pain and loss felt natural. Poetic, even, I remember thinking, and that thought made me smile. It was like I was the center of the universe, even though I was just going on a walk. I looked down at the grass I parted with each step until the warbles of the creek reached my ears, my sneakers crunching the first rocks surrounding the stream. Sunlight glistened off the water's surface as water striders rode the waves. I stood by the edge to take in the sight, the sounds, and the smells.

Buzzing bugs, chattering birds, splashing minnows. The smell of my sweat, of unchlorinated water, of something rancid far off in the background. Wavering light on the creek bed, the indents under the water strider's toes, the large pebble by my feet with curious markings.

I often see rocks people have painted and left for others to find, but never in the wilderness. Leaning down and picking up the stone, I found that it hadn't been painted, but instead carved with miniscule words.

"The curtain opens, the stage bursts into light, and a chorus begins," I read. I couldn't make out the other words due to their size. What precise craftsmanship. The rock felt a bit off, I think. There was a buzzing in my fingertips when I picked it up, so slight that at first I didn't even notice. Did the carver of this stone purposely leave it here, or did they lose it? Maybe they were even carving it right here, and something scared them off. I snapped a couple of pictures and set the pebble down a bit away from the creek, hoping to prevent it from being washed away, but still near its original location. I smiled down at it and continued on my walk.

The words of the pebble stuck with me. "The curtain opens, the stage bursts into light, and the chorus begins." Was it presenting a musical? An opera? What kind? Maybe the stage quite literally burst into light- that would be interesting. An ethereal creature rising out of a glowing stage, song emanating from it. Maybe it was someone's job to banish the creature, or maybe it was a part of a cult. Maybe the stage was an old rickety one from an abandoned basement, used for the summoning of some god.

I walked past sandy cliffs, through the forest, and then back to the riverbank. Upon my return, my eyes widened. Every pebble was carved. I picked two up at random, marveling at how they even came to be. There was no way someone could carve so many so fast and with such neatness; I had only been gone for two hours. The rocks I picked up had two different stories written on their surfaces:

"Wings protruded from the stage, Feathered claws scratching The polished floor boards. There was no turning back." "The musical was alive!
Actors bounded across
The beautiful, decorated stage,
All wearing colorful garments."

How... odd... I picked up two others and was met with different variations of the stage. I stood and took a picture of the creek, then videotaped myself examining the rocks. I wondered if anyone would even believe me.

My friends did, but we didn't chalk it up to anything supernatural.

"It might have been some group activity or something!" One said to me, and it felt like the most plausible answer. The next day I returned to the same trail; my hair tied up and backpack over my shoulders. The whispers of last night's windstorm were still present, foliage rustling in the wind. Windstorms had been happening all week, unfortunately. My mothers' house across town had a branch fly through the window, nearly hitting one of them. My mood plummeted upon remembering.

The pebbles were in the same state as yesterday. I don't know what I was expecting, honestly. Maybe that they had returned to normal or had vanished altogether. I paused to read a few, finding they were still about the stage, and continued on my way to the sandy cliffs.

Pushing past thin shrubbery, the cliffs came into view up ahead. Three rocky slopes stood with eight to ten foot tall cliff faces, all of which had words carved into them. I furrowed my brow in confusion and walked closer. The words were a bit bigger this time, though they were carved with just as much precision.

"The windowpane shattered from the impact,
The broken tree branch shooting forward,
And, with a sickening crunch and squelch,
Miriam's skull was impaled,
All in front her wife."

Feeling sick, I reeled back from the cliff, turned around, and ran back down the trail from which I came. Nearing my house, it occurred to me I should have taken a picture to prove what I had seen, but the windstorm was picking up. My braid lashed against my back as I unlocked my front door and stepped inside.

...I ended up calling my mothers. I just needed to make sure they were alright.

"This is Miriam Duffy speaking- Oh! Guthrie, sweetie, how are you?"

"Fine," I spoke back, voice hoarse, "I heard the windstorm is supposed to be bad tonight.

Maybe it would be best to take some precautions. You two have your window shutters closed, right?"

"Of course. Straight to the point today, aren't you?"

The windstorm actually was bad that night, I think. I hadn't looked at the weather before I called. I guessed it was just a coincidence. I hoped it was just a coincidence. When the sun rose and I got off work the next day, I found myself hesitating to walk

the trail. Would it be worse than yesterday? Perhaps my fears were baseless. Would it be worse if I didn't go? I didn't know.

What was I expecting to happen?

The wind wasn't as strong as it was yesterday. I kept one hand on my phone as I walked, ready to call emergency services or record if need be. If I found evidence of whatever- whoeverwas doing this, I wanted to be able to look back on it. The pebbles and cliffs were the same, but the sand patches by the cliffs had been written in as well.

"Guthrie waited for the call to be picked up,

But there was no answer.

The wind grew louder.

It turned out the internet had gone down!

Thankfully, no reason to worry."

I sucked in a breath, my worries feeling validated. The validation fed them, though, causing my hands to grip tighter to my phone, palms sweating as I took a picture.

"Who's there?!" I called, whipping my gaze around. No response. The wind's gales picked up slightly.

"I'm being stupid, aren't I?" I whispered to myself, "But..."

I glanced back at the sand as I continued the hike, "It doesn't- it worries me."

The forest soon loomed ahead of me, tree branches lashing in the wind. I stared up at them and slowly came to a stop. The trees, to my relief, were uncarved, and though the threat of some mysterious carver might not have been real, the threat of getting hit in the head by a loose branch was. I turned around just as the wind slammed into my stomach, choking on spit forced through my throat on the impact. I hit the ground with a thud, branches snapping underneath my back, senses struggling to comprehend the screeching hurricane ravaging the area.

I "What? What?" I struggled to lift myself up. It felt like the wind was about to pull my joints out of their sockets, forcing myself onto my stomach. A rock struck my shoulder blade with a sickening smack, metallic blood coating my mouth from biting my tongue in pain.

"What do I do? What do I do?" I squinted my eyes, patting around with one hand to find my phone- I had dropped it when knocked down. I thought my shoulder was broken. I needed to call an ambulance.

But then I saw it.

For a moment, the world was washed away, melting into the path of the wind like colorful, rushing streaks. The trees stood tall, unwavering, uncanny amongst the rushing landscape. I could see all of them, all at once. The pale wood underneath their bark, the bugs tunneling inside them, the water in their roots, the veins in their leaves, the words being carved into their bodies.

I could only sit there and watch, reading the words as they unfolded. My hair tossed every which-way, deliberately, in time with the strokes of the invisible quill writing into the trees.

"It's the wind, It's the wind." Amazed, relieved, terrified- my mouth opened, face scrunching into some amalgamation of emotions. Was I laughing or crying? Both, I'm

sure, silently ripping my throat and eyelids to shreds. My body felt alight then. Not in pain, not in joy, not as if I was burning; just alight.

I don't know how long I had been sitting there when I realized the howling of the wind had been replaced by my screaming. The world settled like watercolors; blurry, but distinguishable. Only the carved words were clear. The carved words on the trees, the cliffs, the pebbles...

The carved words on my very skin.

Participating Schools & Teachers

Mississippi School for the Arts The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences Murrah High School Nadia Alexis Thomas Richardson Mrs. Maxier