



The
Ephemeris Prize
2025

Mississippi University for Women

The
Ephemerá Prize
2025



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 2025 the contest received 55 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. Five honorable mentions were recognized, and the prize-winners read their entries, following readings by the two judges on October 24.

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 "Secrets and Revelations 'A Dark Thread Running Through My Story'" or Eudora Welty's novel *Losing Battles* which inspired the theme. Students from other states may participate if an alumna or alumnus of The W sponsors them by writing a letter.

© 2025 *Mississippi University for Women*

All rights revert to the authors after publication.

2025 Judges

Olivia Clare Friedman, author of *An Arm Fixed to a Wing*
Carrie R. Moore, author of *Make Your Way Home*

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

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemeraprize

Cover: "Trees in Frost"

The Ephemera Prize 2025

Secrets and Revelations “A Dark Thread Running Through My Story”

Colin Chung, “Raindrops” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Brandon	Story	4
Jake Heisler, “Little Guatemala: The City Inside Los Angeles” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Picayune	Essay	6
Anthony Nguyen, “Foreign Policy” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Meridian	Essay	8
Ryan Wei, “Finding My Voice” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Grenada	Essay	10
Althea Wells, “To Understand Who” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Greenville	Poem	12

Honorable Mentions

Stephanie Hartmann, “Doll” The Mississippi School of the Arts, Batesville	Story	13
Harper Hipp, “that early September evening” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Oxford	Poem	15
Participating Schools & Teachers		17

Colin Chung

Raindrops

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

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

You loved to cook with them; if I brought back a full basket, the next morning I’d be greeted with a plate piled high with regalia fritters. I’m still trying to figure out how you got them so crispy.

I leave the regalia half-pulled from its roots and continue trudging along the dirt path. The forest is quiet today; all I hear is a gentle wind whispering between the oak leaves and the rumbling ribbit of a devilfrog. As I cross into the marsh, I can feel my boots filling with water and algae seeping between my toes. Duckweed clings to my waist. Farther in, I’m careful not to get caught between the tangles of black kudzu; the moment they latch onto you, they don’t let go. Wading out from the kudzu groves, my feet plant onto half-sunken planks of rotting wood. I feel a tug in my chest; me and you built a pier across the marsh two summers ago. I remember we would haul willow branches from morning to noon, making up songs to pass the time.

“Even if it rains tomorrow, you’re the one I’ll always follow,” we’d sing to each other.

When we finished the pier, we sat together on the edge and let our feet skim the water below. We let crickets do the singing.

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

“Yeah, as long as you’re here to fix it with me.” You said, your eyes meeting mine.

I clamber over the slimy remains of the pier and back onto solid earth. Leaves twirl past my face; the trees are shedding their summer coat. The season is almost over.

The growl of thunder reminds me that I don’t have much time, so I quicken my pace. I can barely make out the dilapidated roof of Tom’s cabin through the dark of the woods. Do you remember the first harvest festival? He brought us fried lotus root and catfish. The next morning, he taught us how to weave fishing line out of the cattails nearby.

“Cross ‘em over just like that,” he said as his roughed hands gently thread the stalks. Like the others, Tom left last year.

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

A cold drop of water plops onto my nose. Soon enough, torrents of rain are lashing across my skin, and the wind is screaming into my ears. But I can’t turn back yet. I begin running down the path, soft dirt mashing beneath my boots. As I reach the end of the trail, my foot slips on wet grass, and I fly forward. My body tumbles down a hill and I slam face-first onto the ground, the thick smell of blood, rain, and regalios surrounding me. When I finally push myself up, there it is before me: a frail apple tree sapling, clinging to the soil. You planted it the day we first moved in.

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

“Yeah, ten years from now,” I laughed. “Are you not going to be here by then?”
“No, I’ll still be here too.”

“So, how long do you think you’re going to be here?”

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

“For as long as you stay.”

I hope the water carries me back to you.

Jacob Heisler

Little Guatemala The City inside Los Angeles

There's a word that haunted my Los Angeles family visit. It followed me to every corner of every building on every street in the vast City of Angels. It was in the Griffith Observatory telescopes, embedded in the Venice Beach sand, and flowed through the Santa Monica Pier's sea-salty air.

"Hola."

"Hola" was the first word I heard when my *abuelita* and I were picked up from LAX by our Guatemalan relatives: *Tia* Clelia and my cousins Jackie and Sofia. Immediately, everyone jumped into fervent Spanish conversation, leaving me stranded in a sea of incomprehensible words and unshareable stories.

From that point, the evil omen of "Hola" lingered throughout the trip. It began all the conversations that left me isolated and excluded. The language barrier strained my relationship with my family. I removed myself as much as I could while staying in a small apartment with six other relatives because the barrier separating us stood unwavering. However, no matter how much I distanced myself, there was no getting out of a *quince*.

After a two-hour drive in a fully packed car on the scorching L.A. highways, my family and I finally arrived at our next summer vacation destination: a *quinceañera* for a cousin I had never met. We walked into the angelic venue: decadent blue velvet tablecloths draped over each table, glass wine chalices that shimmered like crystals, and a stunning flower arch composed of blue tulips. For a moment, I was optimistic about what the night could hold. Then, it crept into my ear, staining the once enchanting decor.

"Hola!"

Carmen, the *quince* girl's sister, rushed over in a silky dress the same deep blue as the decor. Her eyes stared in expectation of a response. Her head tilted slightly to the side, the way people do when they have just initiated a conversation. Her feet were firmly planted in front of mine. Her whole figure hung with anticipation of my Spanish reply. I could give none. So, my eyes avoided making contact, darting around for my *abuelita*. My head hung firmly down. My feet turned away, ready to leave at the first chance. But I had no out.

I responded weakly.

"Hi, sorry I don't speak any Spanish."

Her neatly threaded brows furrowed; her mind was prepared for Spanish, not English. Her mental gears slid from their Spanish placement, finding the nooks and crannies of English comprehension.

Once they had found their place, her brows unknitted and shot up in understanding.

She awkwardly returned, "Ohhh, that is okay!" in a thick Guatemalan accent and an atypical cadence and stress pattern for speaking English.

Now she was the one with darting eyes, looking for an out. She unplanted her feet and angled them out in the opposite direction from mine. Her head bobbed up, trying to look over me, and to the side, looking for someone the same way I was looking for my *abuelita*. She found her sister and gave me an I-have-to-go look, an uncomfortable nod and smile, and a nice-to-meet-you arm pat. I felt like an outsider looking in, bound by my monolingualism like chains. I returned to my table, and I was content with staying there away from everyone the rest of the night.

It wasn't until the music started that I felt something more. *Los Tigres Del Norte*, a popular band among my relatives, came on, and my *abuelita* rushed onto the dance floor. Her enthusiasm skyrocketed as she danced to her favorite Guatemalan songs with people who understood her language and culture. I had never seen her happier.

As a forced observer, I had the opportunity to notice interactions that could only happen in an environment this magical—this Guatemalan. Whether it was my cousin Jackie happily chattering in Spanish or my *tia's* face lighting up when she saw an old friend from Guatemala—it all made me realize how lucky I was to be in that moment.

I stood absorbing the energy; my mind filtered out the foreign Spanish being spoken by my relatives and sung by the band, instead focusing on the universal elements of laughter in conversations and the rhythm of the music. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to dance. “*Hola*” had separated me because I let it; embracing this moment, my trip, family, and culture suddenly became vital.

With this new perspective came a deep desire to join the lifelong memories and culture I saw others creating and partaking in. I walked onto the dance floor as “*Aquí Mando Yo*” by *Los Tigres Del Norte* electrified my relatives and even me now, too. I greeted my *abuelita* with that once bitter omen, now a catalyst for hope and change.

“*Hola, abuelita.*”

Her eyes lit up, and I smiled.

Now, as I've returned home to rural Mississippi, the sights have surely changed. The “City of Angels” has become the “Worthless Penny City,” the literal definition of Picayune, my hometown. I've taken “*Hola*” with me, though. I've enrolled in Spanish and supplemented my classes with teachings from my *abuelita*. I hold simple conversations with her, and I've learned enough to call my Guatemalan family in Spanish.

As my Spanish improves, I am breaking down the wall that divided me from my family. I am unlocking the shackles that held me back from my culture. “*Hola*” doesn't haunt me anymore; it blesses me with belonging, starting the conversations and pathway leading me to familial and cultural connection.

Anthony Nguyen

Foreign Policy

Threshold

The coppery, putrid stench of a decapitated pig's head and poultry locked in rusty cages blended with the sweet, floral aroma of rambutan and durian. The markets that my mother and I roamed shaped a centerpiece of my fleeting memories of Vietnam: a kaleidoscope of smells, goods, motor-scooters, and people. It was a stark contrast to the kudzu-laced, clean-aired, cicada-serenaded stillness of Mississippi that replaced the overwhelming neon lights, scooter horns, and demands of street vendors and their clients.

Sigh ... Gone

Born only one hundred fifty-seven days after Saigon caved under the boot of the North Vietnamese Army, my mother would be pressured to marry right into adulthood. At the age of twenty-two, she would have her first child, and to this day, raising them would be the center of her life. Seeking a better future for our family, she immigrated to the U.S. In Vietnam, she had carved a name for herself as a journalist; however, America had her ambitions bend towards survival. Her master's in journalism meant little in America, where she solely spoke Vietnamese. Five years of work became a dead end, so the best way out was a job at a nail salon. It was an easy choice: only one year of training, consistent income, overtime pay, and most importantly, it fit her. Her small hands could masterfully display arcs of gradients and pinstripes, her fixation on precision sharpened the details of each subsequent nail, and an Asian-immigrant commitment to pride through hard work allowed for quiet, fleeting masterpieces—lasting only until her client's next appointment—but demonstrative of her pride, resilience, and the culture that raised her for thirty-three years.

Foreign ... Policy

I, in turn, was born just two hundred seventy-seven days following her immigration. It was tough for me to understand some of the things that my mother sought in me and my family. She expected obedience, humility, and stability. I chased ambition, expression, and risk; my attempt to conform to her mold wasn't perfect, and to her, every misstep felt like a betrayal of what she sacrificed. She would chastise me in her broken English; to my love of music, she said, "It wouldn't make money to leave Mississippi: useless for your future"; to my efforts to volunteer and tutor, "They can teach themselves: they take advantage of you", to my desire for hair longer than her spikey, centimeter-short-buzzed standard for an Asian boy, "It simply unnatural: nobody desire." I felt suffocated. Every attempt at a sense of individuality was crushed and twisted back into uniformity. To her, risk wasn't a possibility, it was peril: a foreign policy I couldn't understand.

Reproach ... Resilience

Acetone's sweet sting, the whirring of nail drills, and rows of flickering fluorescents—these defined my mother's new Vietnam. They became the backdrop of my life, shaping me in ways I was too young—and too stubborn—to understand. Beneath every scolding was the quiet chaos of a woman who bleached her hands with acetone so mine could hold a pen, a calculator, a trombone slide. What I read as reproach was love in work clothes. My dedication is a refit of hers—the audacity to bend my future toward my ambitions. Not in defiance of my mother, but for her.

Frontier

It never got tough enough for me; extraordinary obstacles began to seem ordinary to me. No matter how endless an essay, brutal a modeling question, or hopeless a family argument, I keep putting one step in front of the other until tomorrow comes. There will always be tomorrow, and many after that. In those tomorrows I will return the security, pride, and resilience that my mother always sought for me. I don't want all of the near-sleepless nights she spent cleaning floors littered with acrylic resin dust and dead skin and lifting containers with eight gallons worth of various organic chemicals—on a 4' 10" frame—to be for nothing. I'd be damned if it was. Her sacrifices matter, and I dedicate myself to making them something bigger—not just for us, but for others. With the time we have left together, I want her to see the fruits of her labor—proof that her trials built a life worth living. That proof extends beyond me—it's in the community I built through library programs and math competitions, and in the peers I've inspired to keep going, even when derivatives and integrals feel impossible. And just as she taught me persistence, I want her to see how far that persistence can reach—from wrangling code in MATLAB and Simulink to building rockets and aircraft that lift from their runways and launchpads.

What began in restless Saigon and lingered in Mississippi's stillness became my mother's survival—and my chance to risk, build, persist, and thrive.

Ryan Wei

Finding My Voice

I

Wooden wheels rattle on the stone, each brick jutting out or sinking slightly, making the cart dance under its own weight. “Yéy! Nǎinai! Nuòmǐ gāo chē lái!” *Grandpa, Grandma, the sticky rice cake cart is coming!* My first voice was completely Mandarin. It sounded like sweet rice cakes, their steam blending with the salty air of my grandparents' little seaside fishing town. That voice felt like belonging; that was the only voice I knew.

II

“Māmā, wǒ tīng bù dǒng tāmen zài shuō shénme.” *Mom, I don't understand what they're saying.* Kindergarten, New Jersey, and the weight of my parents' expectations felt as if I were Atlas, holding up the sky. English crashed into me—loud, cold, and swallowing. I was drowning. I clung to their phrases like life rafts, mimicking their mannerisms, their words, their voice. I would laugh when they laugh, even if I was the target. The more I copied, the more I felt those sweet rice cakes and the salty sea air slipping away.

III

New York was sharp, brash, and quick.

“Why do you say your R's so weird? You even American?” Each comment lingered after another. They would circle me, taunting. “Wanna fight?” I fought that day, not out of anger, but in defense, struggling for a voice that felt like mine.

Mississippi was slow, relaxed, almost sticky-sweet.

“Y'all listen up—meet your new classmate!” I looked at the rows of kids, all eerily alike, yet I stood out. I adjusted again to be like the masses, flattening my edges, softening my tone, tucking away my Mandarin as some possession I was ashamed of.

“Ryan, you're like a banana. You're yellow, but you act so white.”

I laughed, yet each breath felt like a betrayal of myself. Years of trying to prove both my “Asian-ness” and “American-ness” left me drained, like I was folding myself to fit into a box that wasn't my own.

IV

For a long time, I thought choosing a voice meant making a choice: English or Mandarin, Northern or Southern, Asian or American. Always halves. Never whole. I felt like that stone road in China, not smooth or straight, each bump and crack marking a voice I had gained.

Then came the locker room.

The rattle of helmets, the sour stink of sweat, pads thudding to some imaginary beat. Then, the coach's speech. Friday night lights, first game of the year, and a desire to prove something, he growled:

“You are all brothers; on that field, you will die for each other.”

Words that should've been terrifying brought me solace. The banter, the echoes of Mandarin, my half-faded northern edge, and my not-quite-southern drawl—all of it flowed together, unrestrained, but in that moment, none of it mattered. What mattered was reading the play, shedding the block, and being there for the team. My voices weren't clashing anymore; they were harmonizing.

V

Looking back, I stopped thinking of my changes as losses, but as layers. I wasn't splitting myself to belong; I was adding another facet to myself, *multiplying*. New Jersey didn't erase China, Mississippi didn't overwrite New York, and I didn't lose my voice; I built it.

I later stumbled across “Speaking in Tongues” by Zadie Smith. I had found myself within those words, ones that described not choosing, hiding one voice for another, but using them all. Smith called this *Multiplicity*; I called it survival, forging my identity. Now I carry them all:

The locker-room banter that created an enveloping warmth.
 The southern drawl that slowly curled my vowels.
 The jeers that made me reconsider my identity.
 The sweet cake that clashed with the salty air.

I am ready for the next voice: professor's wisdom, a friend's advice from across the world, or a new language; each new voice will not replace the others—it will join them, expanding the voice that shapes me. And I can't wait to hear it.

To Understand Who

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.

Stephanie Hartmann

Doll

After hours of hearing them stomp around, Mom and Blanca climbed down the attic ladder. Blanca struggled to carry a large, pale purple box. She set it down and proudly showed me our childhood dollhouse. Inside, laid the four plastic dolls that came with it. We named them so many different times I remembered them as only Mother, Father, Brother, and Sister now. We decided to keep it in her room as it was mostly hers when we were younger. I didn't want it anyway, I thought we were too old to play with dolls.

Later that week, she sat in her room with the door open, silently inviting me to come in. She usually did that when she had a bad day and hearing me talk helped her stay distracted. I didn't mind, I just wished she did it more often. I let myself in, standing in the doorway for a moment. She sat at her desk, writing in a journal. The dollhouse sat by the foot of her bed and the dolls sat at the plastic dinner table. Brother was the one I used to play with. He sat in-between Mother and Father. Sister, the one Blanca played with the most, sat across from mine. It was set up the exact way we would play as children. Blanca looked up and told me to get comfortable. I took my shoes off and sat on the bed. We talked for hours but we didn't mention the dollhouse. She told me she would be moving to college soon. I remembered her starting the pile of luggage in the dining room. I told her I wasn't ready for her to go.

The next evening, I realized I forgot my shoes in her room. She was at work when I went to retrieve them. My sneakers sat next to the dollhouse, which had a different scene now. The children dolls sat on the floor of the smaller bedroom and the parents stood in the kitchen. I remembered the times we played with the dolls like that, when we pretended like Mom and Dad 1

cooked together while we waited for dinner even though we knew Dad never helped. I took my shoes and left.

Blanca stopped leaving her door open. When I wanted to see the dollhouse, I waited for her to go to work. She started to make scenes I couldn't remember playing with. The first time I noticed, all of the dolls were standing in the kitchen with their arms raised above their heads. The plastic food and plates were thrown on the floor around them.

A week later, she asked to borrow some of my painting supplies. The next time I snuck into her room, the dolls sat on her desk over paper towels. Each had a new hair color. Mother was now blonde and Father now had brown hair. Sister, who was a brunette before, had dirty-blonde hair and Brother had brown hair instead of his previous blonde. I returned to her room the next day, after I knew the dolls had dried. Mother stood alone in the kitchen and the other dolls laid in their beds.

I stopped sneaking into Blanca's room for a while. She started to skip work and instead would stay in her room all day. One Saturday, she was finally out of the house for a psychiatry appointment, so I checked on the dollhouse. The newly painted dolls all sat upstairs. The two siblings stood close together in Sister's bedroom and the parents were in their own room. Mother was thrown on the floor and Father stood with his arms raised. I quickly left, feeling disturbed.

The next time I entered her room, she was downstairs doing laundry. I found the dolls scattered in the kitchen. Every doll laid or sat on the floor, except Father who stood with his arms raised. Tiny plastic cups littered the kitchen counter.

Blanca started to pack more for college, using the dining room as her storage. Each day, I watched the pile of things grow. Mom started to help her while Dad gave her advice about moving out. I was told to listen since it wouldn't be too long until I went off to college as well. 2

The day before we were supposed to move Blanca into her dorm, I passed by her room and the dollhouse was gone. Before I could peek in, I heard her yelling downstairs. I stood at the top of the staircase and listened. She was screaming, asking where the dollhouse was and what Mom had done with it. Mom told her she was too old to play with dolls. Blanca asked again where the dollhouse was. Mom said it was weird that she still played with dolls and Dad agreed.

I hid in my room, but I could hear Blanca stomp up the stairs and slam her bedroom door. I couldn't sleep that night. All I could hear was her throwing open and slamming the front door. I knew she was packing her car.

I woke up late that morning. Even though I hadn't seen her leave, I knew she was already gone. I laid in bed for hours while Mom and Dad argued downstairs. When I finally got up, something new sat on my nightstand. It was Brother, painted to look just like me. 3

*Harper Hipp**that early September evening*

who knew how much sin
two sets of lonely lips could do
on that early September afternoon

the sun still hung in the sky
adding heat to the already humid, southern air,
while your fingers danced across my skin,
that still had a fading tan of summer memories

I promised myself that I wouldn't let it happen
but I could see the green in your hazel eyes
and everything I knew that was wrong felt right

we sat there with our bodies intertwined
the same way millions had before
but the man with his red horns and tail
stood alongside us
on that early September afternoon

the Earth has spun around twice already
since you held me in your arms
with another woman's picture
burned away in your pocket

I wonder now
when your hands threaded through my hair
did you mistake the dark brown shade for hers?

or maybe you thought
the tiny freckles that dot my nose
mirrored the ones that cover her face
if only you squint hard enough
on that early September afternoon

twenty-one boxes have been crossed out on my calendar
since I watched your mouth move around her name
with the florescent lights flickering above us,
making your hazel eyes as brown as mine

I wish you had never spoken her name
because then I never would have met her smile
that you must have so easily fallen in love with

Ephemera

I would never have known the way her hands clasped together
while she prayed to a father in the sky
that no longer watches over me
after how much sin
 two sets of lonely lips did
 on that early September afternoon

Participating Schools & Teachers

Germantown High School

Jamie Dickson

Germantown High School

Wesley Pena

Mississippi School for the Arts

Nadia Alexis

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences

Thomas Richardson