



*The*  
*Ephemeris Prize*  
2019

**Mississippi University for Women**

*The*  
*Ephemera Prize*  
*2019*



*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 2018 the contest received 87 entries from 5 schools around Mississippi. The winners were each awarded a \$200 prize and invited to read their winning submissions before the symposium audience. Five winners and ten honorable mentions were also invited to lunch with the symposium authors. School groups were invited to attend the symposium, which is free and open to the public.

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 or Eudora Welty's story "Why I Live at the P. O." 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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## 2019 Judges

Cary Holladay, author of *Brides in the Sky*

T. J. Anderson III, author of *Devonte Travels the Sorry Route*

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

[www.muw.edu/welty/ephemeraprize](http://www.muw.edu/welty/ephemeraprize)

Cover: Moon over Columbus

# *The Ephemera Prize 2019*

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## *Hometown Wilted*

At thirteen, I wanted to be anywhere but Pascagoula. My small southern hometown had nothing for me; I would never get anywhere stuck there. I'd waste my life away as some bored housewife, cleaning up spilled sippy cups and dirty diapers. I knew this was true because it happened to my grandmother. There's no worse feeling than watching a woman you love realize she wasted her life away.

My grandmother's nimble fingers are scarred from tailoring our school uniforms because you'd have to drive miles away just to get it done professionally. She's no expert, either. I'd huff as my leg pants were always uneven, even if I was the only one to notice. Grandmother would try and try again, and I think my persistence might have caused all the wrinkles that adorn her face. When I was younger, her hair was always away from her face. She pinned back her dirty blonde locks with a small clamp, sometimes even those meant to seal open bags of chips. When you're a grandmother, you make do. Glamor is something she could almost never afford. Glamor is the red lipstick she only wore at weddings or funerals. Glamor is a brand-new skirt she just bought from Goodwill. We were dirt poor both then and now, so she cherished those used clothes like they were made of the finest silks to ever touch a woman's skin. I'd always turn my nose up at those hand-me-downs and ugly thrift-store jeans that never fit right. I remember thinking, when I live far away from here, I'm going to buy designer jeans never once worn by a stranger. Prada bags and Gucci belts. No clearance tags or worn out zippers. I'd leave this dusty old town and—never come back.

I've come to realize, though, that my little town is where I'm meant to be. I look at my grandmother's cropped hair with its faded gray strands and wish I could go back in time. I want to feel the cool mud of an October Saturday afternoon squish between my toes. I want to hear the clanging of pots as my mother and grandmother argue over what to cook for supper. When my mother left, my desire to leave did as well. I felt obligated to build a brand-new beginning from the shards that she left behind. This little town is mine and I must do my best to keep it that way. I watched this town grow as I did. It's hard to imagine what I'd be like without unpaved backroads and stand-still creeks. No city skyline compares to the splash made by a single pebble in a serene body of water, disrupted from its slumber. No department store can give me the satisfaction that I now know comes from getting \$50 Aeropostale jeans for \$7 after hours of searching.

I once looked into the mirror and smeared my grandmother's red lipstick onto my lips, hoping I'd look just like her. Our eyebrows arch the same when we watch my younger cousin blow out his birthday candles at the neighborhood park. He tries so hard to do it by himself, but he always managed to get help from his big brother. Our eyes twinkle the same shade of blue when the stars are brighter than the moon itself. There's nothing like trying to count the stars but being so engulfed in their beauty that you lose count. Our smiles glow the same when we watch as everything

around us becomes old and gray and thankful. The general store with its faded brick withstands the Walmarts and Dollar Generals, but it barely makes it out alive. I watch as neighbors who spent years building homes from a clean foundation suddenly find themselves in them alone as their children leave for college. The playgrounds I spent my elementary days hoisting myself atop are now rusted and unsafe for play.

Over the years, I have watched my town become a dying thing. It lies alone, far from anything I could've dreamed of in my naïve adolescent mind. Yet, I will not betray its memory. I want to build I life for myself that allows me to patch the holes years of wear and tear leave behind. My father always tells me that I could make this town what it once was long before I was born if I put my mind to it. He remembers his summers as a child walking down the clear beach, now polluted and a murky brown. Pascagoula is wilting but its roots still run deep. What it lacks in booming businesses it makes up as a wonderful place to raise families. My grandmother told me that my children will never know the satisfaction that is all of the businesses that have died here. The locally-owned grocery stores, the daycares, the Goodwills. I smiles and tell her that I will ensure that they see it someday. Perhaps my father is right. I am capable of great things, and this old town is, too.

*Ephemera*

*Ryley Fallon*

## *Speech Leapin'*

With my tongue, I wage the Mississippi River,  
Against the current, up to Illinois.  
My mother's homeland, bound by corn.  
She spoke her first words  
Three hours south of Chicago.

In the summer of 1999,  
She slammed her Lincoln-tagged talk  
Into a Toyota Camry and moved South  
With her Gulf Coast-bound accomplice.  
For their Last Supper, they shared a "pop."

My mother met my father through a blind date,  
But his voice stuck with her.  
With a golden, cross-engraved band on her finger,  
My mother promised to love my father more than grammar  
And to pick baby names that rolled off the tongue  
Nice n' easy.

From birth, my mother and father  
Had me leaping between voices  
Mom did her best to mimic my father and his community,  
"You're dad's fixin' to get off of work."  
"Get out from under us, this is adult conversation."  
But her mother was to be called "Grandmother,"  
Nothing more, nothing less.

I can tell if my mother has been talking to her family;  
She tucks her voice into a neat package, tied with ribbon.  
Her words, tailored to her tongue  
With inches of phonetic fabric cut to fit her,  
Pinned with precise pronunciation.  
The sound of her childhood.

My mother listens to advice  
At her Wednesday night bible study:  
How to raise “young-in’s”, memorize verses, and clean pans.  
She nods to a group of women she trusts.  
There’s one thing she will never share with them, though:  
She doesn’t make me call her “ma’am.”



## *Backyard Bugs*

Love feels so good when it's at home. And home feels so good when there's love. I dream about it sometimes, waking up in a cold room after being somewhere warm in slumber.

I would say, *imagine*, but not even I could do it justice. Though I'll try.

North Mississippi, sheer suburbia. Something irreplaceable. I think mostly of the backyard I spent all of my time in. The sun melted into lavender and baby blue, darkening into black, velvet studded with stars and lightning bugs. The lightning bugs were largely symbolic to my childhood, encouraging words into my brain that just felt and still feel right. Chemiluminescence. Entomology. The little creatures would land on my finger, lighting up like the rides at the Delta fair, or the string lights that come with December. They brought literal light into my life, and it didn't stop there. In that same backyard, on the same lightning bug lawn, I stalked down butterflies and daddy long legs. They were such small, delicate beings, and I admired them like my own mother admired my chubby baby cheeks and incoherent babbles. A primal instinct resided in me, telling me to protect them, to save them, to befriend them. The feeling was love. I harbored nothing but love for all of these things, for the jumping spiders and the tail-dropping lizards and the millipedes and lady-bugs. I loved them like they were my friends. I named them. *Mustache* was the black caterpillar I befriended at five. He went everywhere with me for about a week. *Corndog* was the granddaddy longlegs I found in fifth grade, holding him in small fingers, wondering how anybody could ever *hate* or *kill* something so small and innocent. Harvestmen spiders do not bite – they have fangs too small. So why are they so terrifying? Carpenter bees are big and buzzing, but they're just stubborn babies. Male ones can't even sting, they'll just aggressively kamikaze into you, and they're a bit clumsy. It's cute, really.

It was with no fear that I coexisted with bugs. I refused to put them down until my mother's eyebrows knitted together in the same old angered frustration. She'd stand at the screen door, watching my hands to make sure they didn't hold any friends. But she's an arachnophobe, and so is everybody else. And I apologize to every person reading or hearing this that their home isn't my backyard. I shared a home with such magnificent creatures and it was *glorious*. People don't even notice bugs until they're slapping a mosquito from their arm or chasing down a fly with a dollar store swatter. Bugs are the greatest secret of our backyards. And they make my backyard the homiest place in all of Mississippi. There's a reassuring familiarity in watching a cricket jump from one blade of grass to another, in studying a praying mantis and wondering why God made it like that, in admiring the wing colors of the butterfly on your finger, in naming beetles. I can close my eyes and be home in my own backyard, with humid wind blowing and bare feet on grass greener than envy. I realized, recently, how important it was that I was raised with a big backyard open to woods. It's shaped me to be a true entomophile, for lack of a better word. It's in the little things, from my collection of

bee socks to my inability to step on an ant. No matter how small, we must always remember that compared to the rest of the universe, we're infinitesimally tiny. It must be terrifying to be a bug under a sneaker. I've developed habits of watching my step and looking closely at trees and bushes, at cracks in the sidewalk, at the sky. They're everywhere, more present and closer than one might think. As all arachnophiles know and appreciate, no person is more than a few yards away from a spider, wherever they may be. Isn't it lovely, to know there's no such thing as really being alone?

Now, as a junior in high school, living away from my backyard and my family and everything I've ever known, it's clear that old habits die hard. I chase butterflies into busy roads, hold my breath to listen to cicadas, and stop to observe every spider-web. At least once a week I sweep up a dead ladybug or moth and I just can't throw it in the trash. No matter how much I try not to think about it, I always end up behind the building I live in, letting it rest under the same tree, under the same sky. I think I accidentally killed a little beetle once, and I wept over him for longer than I should have. But everything needs and deserves love, and who else would love something so unnoticed and hated? Whenever I let free a spider that found its way into my bathroom or into my room, or pick up a ladybug, or watch an ant and wonder where he might be going, I think of the backyard and the bugs that raised me.

*Abilyn Marie Strain*

*Home(less)*

Silver station wagon bumps over craters,  
pulling into the same asphalt valley  
that has sheltered my dreams  
for seventeen days.

Lining the car doors: trash bags  
filled with belongings, sleeping sister  
with cramped legs.  
Cracked black stone is my green-grass backyard.  
The back of my mother's seat  
is my living room hearth,  
and I curl beneath the flames.

This is the back of the mall parking lot  
where blue-clad security would  
rather patrol clearance-marked stores  
than walk across the heat waves  
emitted from my asphalt wasteland.

Worms wither and die away from their dirt  
after God sends his plagues of rain.  
God sends his plagues of angry landlords,  
and his children join his worms.

Your child-feet dangle out of the open door;  
you feel like taking the money  
from your friend's bookbag,  
like sleeping on the asphalt so your  
sister can stretch her legs. Like  
being no more than the parking lot.  
No more than home.

The cars who pass by whistle  
with pity, whistle with anger  
like the landlord when the  
money wasn't paid, like the principal  
after you punch that boy for  
laughing at your sister's greasy hair.  
Pity and anger are twins  
and no one has known a closeness like that.

You feel like standing on the highway  
and screaming the air out of your lungs.  
You open the door, but your feet stay dangling  
above your asphalt valley—  
above your place—  
and that is as far as you get.

## *King Street*

*“Down in the holler / Where folks are real.”*

I come from a place of plywood windows  
and houses painted with garish colors.  
Where proper grammar is as rare as  
a house without electrical problems.  
With thin walls and slurred vocabulary,  
everyone is always fixin' to get their life together,  
and yet, they all make the same bed every morning.

I am hiding behind this shoplifted identity  
of a promising individual,  
as if I was raised in a brick house--  
as if my future will be handed to me  
on a silver platter of college funds and support--  
as if I am not running from my upbringing  
amid cockroaches, cowboy boots, and nighttime gunshots.

My best friend has to travel ten hours  
and thirty-six minutes to see me.  
He tells me that my plywood windows are my best-kept secret.  
This boy did not know that  
we are only friends because  
I fashioned my monopoly-money smile  
after his dollar-sign grin.

I was raised in a broken neighborhood,  
that even Southern folk won't drive down  
when riding in shiny cars.  
I beat my accent out with books and Northern friends,  
as if I could come from somewhere else  
if I denied where I was for long enough.

No matter how many hours I devote  
to saying *either* without the “e,”  
soaking in crisp words doesn't mean  
that I am fixin' to get my life together.  
But it does mean that  
I'm making the same bed every morning.

*Shelby Tisdale*

## *Southside Sunday*

The title of complacent Suburbia  
is chiseled into shrubs on the hill.  
My reluctant home,  
where Jesus is a white man and wears a lavish robe,  
blurs east as we ride west  
away from chain restaurants and fixed opinions:  
fifteen minutes of Interstate greenery—  
ten, if my makeup takes too long.  
The Metro Inn taunts me at the roundabout;  
catch a smear of crumbled concrete,  
another peripheral broken building breaking my city  
where Mama says don't look out the window and never make eye contact  
past the Dollar General with prison windows  
and men shaking hands at the gas station  
who are not shaking hands at all.  
Every week we swerve to miss the pothole on the hill  
by the restaurant that used to be a Dairy Queen  
before gunpoint robberies and bullets in the parking lot  
brought blue lights teasing campaign signs in the gutter,  
and we hit the chasm as if the holes in the street are magnetized,  
rounding the corner to exchange shattered car windows  
for those of stained glass  
in the one building I have faith will stand.

## *Smoke*

My eyes followed my father, clean-cut churchgoer,  
up gravel driveway through fingerprinted window;  
I cannot smell cigarettes  
without tasting the pungent breath  
of that house tarnished with beer cans  
and evidence of years hung out to dry.  
The hovel on the hill brought attention  
to embittered gaps in father's childhood anecdotes,  
as I watched blurred vision squint through waning memory  
to recognize Dad as "grandson."  
I inched out of the car with a discomfited hesitation;  
the man's buried blue eyes, arched back  
under stretched skin,  
accompanied the woman's glare  
of renewed defiance and unfiltered mannerisms.  
The couple courted a static indifference  
to lack of companionship—  
their existence news to me.  
Father's grandfather  
called his chihuahua "Tarco"  
in a distorted dialect I never discerned  
through the clearing of his throat.  
Sheltered sister and I choked on the fumes,  
so Sunday night after Sunday night, for months,  
we entertained Taco,  
gaining Mississippi evening mosquito bites  
while Mamaw chain-smoked in her chair.  
She was as stubborn as the stench in the house—  
an admirable absence of censorship.  
Products of upbringing fled far from my father's lips  
as they pleaded at his grandfather's bedside  
toward a last-minute repentance. Within days,  
charred lungs gave way to a spirited smile  
on my great grandfather's uninhabited body.  
But the woman was tough—  
so tough the stroke that followed  
could not stop her determined crawl  
to the pack of cigarettes on the table,

but not to the nearer landline.  
It was not Sunday, but we came,  
a filter of blue ambulance light  
over my last image of that house  
and an unfazed woman who could no longer speak.  
Nursing home visits and a second funeral  
followed in a wave of predictability,  
and nothing seemed to sting  
like my eyes those first summer nights  
in the doorway of the house.  
My want for emotion was dry like the tissues in my hand  
and empty as the Kleenex box in the pew beside my mother.  
A steady gaze in a room of dripping eyes,  
I sensed nothing but devalued consolations  
beneath the bitter taste of smoke.



## *So This is Mississippi*

*(after Ted Kooser)*

The disturbed perfume of weighted sky  
Tempts mosquito feasts and feeds static hair.  
Greased sunscreen sweat drips to searing  
asphalt. Liberation condenses in my fingertips.  
Hands of burdened temper swing  
beside me and release at rising heels.  
Past high fences and higher walls, I see only  
electrical boxes under guise of plastic rocks.  
But I run to taste this lethargic air on the tongue  
I lock away when this city says, "Be still."  
To feel my foot rise and fall  
with certainty I choose its steps.  
So this is Mississippi. A familiar face  
in the advancing pickup, to which you avert your  
eyes and repeat a prayer that you will one day  
run past the neighborhood bounds.  
You feel like running nearer to the gutter, forgetting  
your mother's warnings not to fall in. You feel  
like defying elders' fixations  
and children's mistakes.  
You feel like running until you find a soul  
Who isn't wearing a counterfeit Bible Belt with judgement  
staining pursed lips. But you run back home. You run  
to crockpot dinner and eat with silenced tongue.

*Abby Amos*

## *I am Three, I am Me*

I've never known what it feels like to be alone. People are constantly around me. Without even realizing it, I have become a melting pot consisting of each person I've met. Their character and their characteristics have molded me into the person I am today, whether I like it or not. This is the most true regarding my family, especially my sisters. My entire life I have been told I am the perfect combination of my two older sisters. My identity coexists along with theirs. A part of myself will forever be linked to my two sisters. I am so grateful to have them. There is no part of me that resents or regrets having older siblings. However, there are parts about being the youngest sibling that have negatively affected me more than I would like to admit. By having two older sisters, my character is linked to theirs. We are always connected. After so many years, it takes a part of my identity away. I am not my own person. I was lost, did not know where I fit. It was not until my sisters left that I was able to claim my place in life.

When my oldest sister left for college, it felt like a breath of fresh air. With just one sister left in the house and at the same school, I could finally start to establish myself more as a singular person instead of a part of three. Now I could start to become my own person. I became more outspoken, trying to make up for the fact that a part of my identity was gone. But this overcompensation felt false. I learned that claiming my place in life didn't mean that I had to replace my sister. It just meant I had to claim myself. With my oldest sister in college, I began to mature. I felt less insecure by not having to compare myself to her. The shadow I felt that I lived in did not feel as large or as dark.

When my middle sister left, everything seemed to turn upside down. I had been longing for independence for so long, I did not realize what I would be losing. With both of my sisters gone, I felt like the world was mine. I would have no legacy to uphold and no standard to live by. I could finally be my own person. I would no longer have to answer to them, and I would have no reason to try to be like them. However, the reality was quite different than I expected. This freedom I had been begging for felt suffocating. The house became quiet. The deafening silence kept me up at night, and I had no idea why. I felt lost. I did not like this freedom. I did not want the sole attention of my family, with no other siblings to distract their attention. I had been so excited to assert myself as my own person that I did not realize I was losing something great.

It wasn't until I accepted the fact that my sisters would forever be linked to me that I started to feel whole. I stopped seeing them as a shadow and started seeing them as a light that made me just a bit brighter. I did not resent them anymore but was grateful that they had given me a path to walk on. By my two sisters going off on their own, I was finally able to claim my own place in life. We all claimed our own identities. I finally accepted that part of my identity is being their family. And that's one of my favorite parts about myself. My story was not one of self-discovery, but one of self-acceptance, which is the best kind.

## *Snow for Sky*

*"I'd rather swallow—gargle with—rusty razor blades than chop cotton." -Billy DePrist*

For Sky, the magnolia had always been a thing of wonder. She had been five years old when she and her family first moved into their new home in the country side and was disappointed to find that tree was no good for climbing. But when the seasons changed, and the large tree with its waxy green leaves bore huge flowers of white, seemingly overnight, she had found herself smitten with it. Sky and the magnolia had been inseparable ever since.

But now, three years later, there was nothing white on the trees, or on the ground, much to Sky's dismay. It was the lagging end of February. Winter was edging onto spring, meaning that the bite of the cold was mostly gone by noon, making the outdoors fair game for Sky, where she would stretch out on the soft patch beneath the tree, stare through the branches at the clear sky, and wish for snow.

You weren't likely to bump shoulders with someone in the countryside, but people were close. Loneliness and isolation: that's what the cities were for; all the *movement* meant that even in the most crowded room you could still be alone. Never in the countryside, though. Here, people had the time. Mrs. Jennings lived almost an acre away from Sky and her family, but she walked down the tired gravel road anyways and brought them a mason jar of home-made jam their first week living there. She was a kind but stern elderly woman, well into retirement, who had little else to do but make jam, go to church, and take walks. It was on one of these walks that Mrs. Jennings found Sky beneath the tree, as she often did, and stopped to talk to her.

"I'm surprised your momma doesn't whoop your butt, getting grass stains all over your clothes," the older woman chided.

"Well, we gots a washing machine so momma really don't care," Sky murmured quietly.

Anyone who knew Sky knew that she was anything but quiet.

"What's the matter doll?" Mrs. Jennings asked, realizing with haste that something was wrong with Sky.

"There's no snow," Sky said, a fat tear rolling down her cheek. "There was no snow last year, or the year before that, I just want some snow. I hate Mississippi. I hate that it don't snow."

To Sky, Mrs. Jennings was a grandmother of sorts. She always had wise words hidden within the smooth folds of her dark skin, butterscotch candies hidden in her pockets, and her home, decorated like a Cracker-Barrel that had shaken hands with a church, was always perfumed with the sweet scent of whatever it was she had decided to try her hand at baking that day. She hoisted Sky up from the ground and together they walked to her house for a slice of blueberry pie.

"Come on doll. There's a story I think you'd like to hear. Somethin' to keep your spirits up,"

The inside of Mrs. Jennings's house was one that made it glaringly obvious that she didn't have kids. The home boasted countless art pieces that the woman had collected over the decades around every corner, paintings of the same nature, and glass *everywhere*. At one of those glass tables, Mrs. Jennings and her house guest sat, a slice of pie each between them, and a tummy already full of peppermints from the glass jar on the counter—at least for Sky.

"So. What's this story," Sky said around a mouthful of pie.

Normally, Mrs. Jennings would have scolded her but she was just happy to see that sky was back to her normal self.

"Well. I want to tell you about the time it snowed in Mississippi so bad, I couldn't even open my front door,"

Sky's eyes widened, and her fork fell from between her fingers. "*Really?*" she said, mouth open in disbelief.

"Really."

Sky's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you,"

"Well, aren't you gonna let me tell my story?"

The young girl huffed and leaned back into her chair to listen.

"It was one of those storms people talk about for years to come. April, of you can imagine, of 1978. I had only been living here a couple of years...." She continued on to tell a story of what had been one of the most unexpected and severe weather occurrences of that decade.

"Ice covered the powerlines. All of my flowers, even my perennials, died. Three feet of snow covered my car, and I had to climb out of a window and shovel the snow out from behind my door, so I could walk in and out. It was terrible. Terrible,"

Sky finished her pie and put her fork down. "I don't believe you. It don't snow in Mississippi," she sucked the inside of her cheek and a pondering look flooded her face. "I mean, unless you count the cotton,"

Mrs. Jennings flexed her fingers. "Cotton? Pardon?"

"Yeah the cotton. It's so so beautiful! Sometimes, daddy takes me to run through it,"

"Beautiful....," Mrs. Jennings whispered. Memories hit her in waves.

She had been born into a time in the south where there hadn't been anything to do but pick cotton. She went to the fields as soon as her hands had been capable. It hadn't been terrible, but it certainly hadn't been fun. The burrs were fine once, twice, but after you'd picked hundreds of pounds of cotton, your fingers would bleed, staining the cotton white. To this day, scars still were still etched into her fingers.

When she was six, they had seen it fit for her to chop cotton. The work was worse, and it was made worse by the fact that she wasn't paid for it. Chopping cotton hurt; if picking cotton was a scratch, chopping it was a bullet wound. She could almost feel the sun beating down on her back.

For Mrs. Jennings, these memories were like bruises; they hurt, but it was easy enough to forget that they were there until you bumped into them, and there was nothing left to do but poke at them, prod at them, and wait quietly for them to fade again.

So, as tears wet her cheeks, and Sky's unmarred hands covered her own asking *why* she responded quietly, "Because it makes me so happy that you can look at cotton and see something beautiful,"

## *Why I Live at the P.O.*

We were fine as a family.  
Mama, Papa-Daddy, Uncle Rondo, and I.

We were *fine*.  
That was, until Stella-Rondo popped  
back into our lives...  
with a CHILD.

The nerve.

She said it was adopted, but we both know  
it wasn't. Shirley T.'s a terrible name for a  
baby. But Mama seems smitten.

Of course.

Goodness, that Stella-Rondo just pushes  
buttons in me I didn't know I had.  
She's been Mama's favorite ever since she was born,  
which was exactly 12 months to the day after mine.  
Since then, she's been utterly spoiled rotten.

And rotten she was.

Mr. Whitaker was mine at first, but Stella-Rondo  
told him that my body was lopsided, which he so  
stupidly believed. Then, she ran off with him and had  
Shirley T, a perfect mixture of Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy.  
But, God forbid Stella-Rondo is ever imperfect, with her blonde  
ringlets and blue eyes. She might as well be an actress.

Hah, okay. Alright.

She told Papa-Daddy I didn't like his beard.  
Said, "Papa-Daddy, Sister just don't understand  
why you don't cut off your beard?"  
And he went off on this *tangent* about  
"I started growing this beard back during the War"  
and starts to sling words like "Hussy" and Stella-Rondo  
is over there having the best of times, just smirking at me.

I wanted to slap that smirk off her perfect, pale face.

Then she got Mama to turn on me, which didn't take much.  
 We were talking, and I asked a simple, *innocent* question.  
 All I asked was if the child was normal. But, as soon as she's  
 proven "normal", I have nothing left to say.  
 Nonetheless, Mama instigated the whole thing, which doesn't  
 surprise me in the slightest, but anyways.

Back to *Her*.

After Stella-Rondo got her panties in a twist about the baby,  
 Mama ran to comfort them both and Stella-Rondo took the  
 opportunity to turn Mama against something sinful.

Next, Uncle Rondo.

She told *him* that I didn't like his whole  
 kimono/negligeé look, and I didn't, but I  
 didn't say anything about it. That was Stella-  
 Rondo. And she thought it was hilarious how  
 I got chewed by a half naked man that, just seconds before  
 looked like a drag queen.

And, my darling reader, that is why I live in the second  
 smallest post office in the county. Because, no matter what  
 I do or don't do,

It's always Stella-Ron

*Ephemerera*

*Imani Skipwith*

## *Mama Mississippi: A Poem*

You've got this  
sass that rolls from  
The tongue whenever  
Someone says your name.  
The swing of your hips  
as Magnolia trees bend.

The old reach out to seek you,  
At least the ones that already  
Knew you.  
They lay on your grass skirt,  
Smelling the familiarity they  
New of from their childhood.

There was a time they hurt  
You. A time where your babies  
Were at war. Black skin was  
Mistaken for tar, yet the murky  
Brown water was deemed safe.

Your chubby cheeks grew red  
And puffy from the way you sobbed,  
Your tears filling the river.  
Demons dressed as white coneheads  
Terrorizing your darker skinned  
Children - tainting your lighter skinned.

And though they're gone,  
You stay worried.  
Your magnolias don't bend like they  
Used to. They stay alert.  
There's so much work to do,  
So you dust off your apron,  
And set to work in our garden -  
Cutting weeds and kissing our cheeks.  
We see you, Mama Mississippi.

## *The Southern Struggle*

“Nicole, go get that food out the car!” Mama Jean calls as Nicole hurries down the hallway.

“Yes ma’am! How was your day, Mama?”

Mama Jean makes her way to the couch and steadies her cane as she plopped onto the leather couch behind her with an “*umph*”. She laid her head back and blew the air out of her cheeks before answering. “Whew, chile, it was something. When I tell you these people here done lost their minds! Some of y’all young folk are just something else!”

Nicole chuckles and shakes her head, putting her fists on her hips. “What happened today Mama Jean?”

“Girl, I was on the phone with Margaret just talking about the happening and she told me they went in her house and stole her radiator and her conditioner! I told her she had better press charges or else they’ll think they got away with it. If I were her, I would’ve took my nine and-”

“But, Mama Jean, you ain’t,” Nicole interrupted, setting the food on the kitchen counter in the other room.

“And? I was just saying what I would do. Don’t nobody need to be comin’ up in my house messing with my stuff, you hear me?” Mama Jean snapped, tapping her cane against the table as she fiddled with the remote. She flipped through the channels until she got to “MeTV”. Gunsmoke was on again.

“Yeah, Mama, I hear you. I hear you every single time you say it - cause you say it all the time.”

Mama Jean leaned over to stare at Nicole with scolding eyes. “You sho’ll got a flip mouth today. Keep talking like that and see where my cane ends up.”

“My bad, ma. I didn’t mean no harm.”

“You used to be so cute and sweet as a child, what happened to my precious baby?” Mama Jean cooed. here.”

Nicole laughed and sat in the arm chair next to the couch Mama Jean was on. “I’m still right

“Oh, shut your mouth. You ain’t worth ten dead flies now,” she laughed. “Nicole, you know, you still good. I saw this girl in Walmart today. Ooo when I tell you she was just all over the place! She came in the store with rollers in her head and these ugly pajama pants and house slippers. Then, she was cussin’ all loud on her phone. Just-a cussin’.”

“You be cussin’ too, though.”

“That’s cause I’m grown, peanut-head. You best to mind yourself. Keep on, hear? Anyways, did you go to that interview?”

“I did,” replied Nicole, quietly.



## *Ephemera*

“And?”

“They said I’m over qualified, Mama Jean. How can I be overqualified? Darius gone, and Junie done up and left. I ain’t got no type of help. Every job interview I go to, they’re either too full or I’m overqualified or some. What am I supposed to do?” She feverishly wiped away tears and stared angrily at the television. Her teeth grinded against each other.

Mama Jean looked at her with heavy, sad eyes and laid her crinkled hand in the crook of Nicole’s elbow. She used the other hand to wipe away her tears. “Baby, it’s gone be hard. It’s gone always be hard, especially for us. But, ain’t that’s why we got trial and error? We gotta make a place for ourselves. You gotta claim your place. I got ya. God’s got ya. You gotta keep ya faith, child, how else you gone succeed?”

Nicole sighed and kissed Mama Jean on the cheek. “I know. You’re right.”

“Child, I know I’m right now go get me my smokes and put that food on,” Mama Jean grunted as she lifted herself up from the couch to make sure all the food was in the kitchen.

“Mama, ain’t you too old to be smoking? Your lungs gone catch on fire,” Nicole teased, helping the old woman steady herself.

“Girl, I ain’t even studyin’ you. I’m tendin’ to my business and you tend to yours. Likes I said, you keep on and I’m-a bust you upside the head with this cane.”