

The
Ephemera Prize
2017



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

In 2017 the contest received 103 entries from 14 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 "The Hitch-Hikers," 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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2017 Judges

James E. Cherry, author of *Edge of the Wind*

Jacqueline Allen Trimble, author of *American Happiness*

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

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemeraprize

Cover: detail of Orr Chapel window, Mississippi University for Women

The Ephemera Prize 2017

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Interdependence

by Amber Jackson

Don't go.

Mississippi,
I think I might forget you.
Your cool nights and humid air,
Your silver bell trees warning the end of spring,
Your Murky swamps and lowly-hanging trees crooning
Songs and passed down secrets

Don't go.

I am dreading the journey.
Arguments and small talk in overcrowded cars,
Warm and heavy air clinging to skin,
Sleepless eyes determined yet anxious to leave,
Thoughts expanding and envisioning a new world

Do not go.

My experiences are hopeless, clutching on to yesterdays
I will know that there is somewhere better.
I close my eyes and envision a life where
Happiness does not feel like a commodity
And curiosity is what we eat for breakfast.
The trees sway rhythmically as if they are singing goodbyes

Do not forget me.

There are shackles that keep me from
exploring the deep canals of Venice,
That keep me from seeing the skies above us,
That keep me from finding a new place to call home,
Bigger than me
Bigger than us

In the Snow

by Michelle Luo

Bright sheets of untouched snow lay flat on the Michigan plains. Weary ranches sat next to towering silos, and the sky was low and white. Could barely see ten feet out the car, but it was still an improvement. The blizzard had settled for now though wisps of ice still fluttered about. The engine choked and rumbled and and skipped and chattered running over gutters in the halfplowed road. The heating element in the old Chevy had burned out last winter, so the bitter cold seeped through the gaps in the rattling doors, and the cracks in the back windshield. Its tires were balding and the fender was about to fall off, but despite that I knew my love Dean, behind the wheel would keep us going until we were across the border where we would be safe.

We were going about fifty on those straightforward roads. Red barns looked like miniatures on the white plains, like toys out of a farm play set or like dabs of paint on a landscape. They whizzed on by. I felt the brunt of the chill as a draft came in every few miles. But then Dean would take his free hand, lean over to pat and smooth the flannel blanket I swaddled up in, and I felt all the warmth in the world.

The road came to a fork, and we turned to the right toward a dead fishing town on the shore of Huron. *Johnson's Fishing Co. est. 1902, St. James Apothec. Rx, Huron Diner "BEST CRAB CAKES FOR MILES..."* The storefronts looked abandoned besides a message of hope on the door of Huron Diner saying "OPEN NXT SPRING." Tarry snow piled up on the curbside like another sign of life. We'd freeze in the car and had to find somewhere to shack up. So we did— in St. James where the resident pharmacist, John, took us in. He asked us where we were headed, and my love explained, "The border. Got a friend up there who'll take us in."

"Now for how long?" said John.

"We'll be staying up north for a while."

"Til when?"

"Long enough. But don't worry, as soon as sunrise, we'll be out of your hair."

John touched his whitened beard. I saw generosity in his eyes and kindness in his face when he told us to suit ourselves and take the room up-the-stairs on the second left.

The room had a bed with a bare mattress and a desk with a drawer. An ashtray sat on a nightstand with a few sprinkles of ashes. The musk of tobacco coated the room. Dean turned on radio, which was playing a staticy weather forecast—cold—and tuned it, but nothing else would play.

We sprawled then out our things: a couple blankets, a trunk of clothes, Dean's school diploma, my mother's ring, and a few wads of bills we had saved over some months. It was enough to get started. We would stay with our friend for twenty-three months; Dean would find work in oil, and I could sew.

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Dean said he was going to check on the old Chevy. I told him to patch up the crack, so no water could get in through the night and gave him a roll of tape I found in a drawer. He kissed me and held me and left. I crawled in bed alone. I heard the front door click shut, the little bell above the threshold jingling.

In the morning, I wiped clear a spot on the window but only caught myself looking back. The storm kicked up snow about six inches up the glass, the rest fogged up with a lace of crystals. I remember his eyes were as pretty pale grey as the foggy scene outside. I wouldn't cry, because I knew he would come back, and I got in bed alone again, the chilliness eased as John turned on the upstairs radiator and the woolen blanket wrapped around me. A snow drift piled up against the front door, but the golden light melted away most of the snow by the time I saw it out there. John put a heavy hand on my shoulder, and I palmed my mother's tarnished ring.

Soy Beans and Shrimp

Alex Monterde

The land stretched on forever, pulled taut in uniform rows of green. The boy's brown eyes flicked right then left as they passed, his disheveled brown hair plastered against tinted window. "What's this one, Dad?" He asks, referring to a short plant as green as the MPAA movie rating which scrolled past on the small screen in the boy's hands.

His father sighed, thumbed down the radio, and glanced right, "Soy. This is all soy. Far as the eye can see. They grow a lot of it up here."

"I thought they grew corn."

His father shrugged, his hands skimming to the bottom of the steering wheel. "Sure they do. But soy, too. Corn is big up in Kansas and those parts. We'll drive up there someday, too."

The boy nodded and continued looking out the window. He had never been through the Delta before. He had been as far north as Tennessee in his fourteen years, plenty of times in fact, but never through the Delta. It was flat and oddly foreign to him, without the pine trees which made Mississippi home. He watched signs for counties he had never heard of pass by and thought.

He supposed this was where he was from, in a way—Clarksdale Mississippi. That is where his mama was from. "I used to shell shrimp faster than anyone else in the restaurant," she would brag, "and you can bet I could do the rest of it better, too."

The boy liked it when she talked about the family restaurant in Clarksdale, the one her parents had opened. She got a distant look in her eyes, as if by talking about it she was suddenly there, shelling shrimp and selling food with her brother and sisters, taking orders from all the local folks. She had that look now, the boy knew, though he could not see her face. He wondered if she thought about her mother, her sister, her father. He did not ask. But then, he did not have to.

As the fields crept on for endless miles, the boy expected the mood to become as black as the car they sped along in, but it did not. Instead, his father turned up the radio and a soothing voice thrummed from speakers in each door, telling the story of a grueling crime novel. The reader was good. His voice pitched and yawed at such a consistent and pleasant pace that soon everyone in the car bounced along with his cadence, or with the bounce of the road, the boy could not tell or care. Away fell the boy's doubts about his being there, about why he had to attend a far-off procession instead of being at home, replaced by the deep rhythm of the man's voice. And soon, other voices entered the lullaby of speech and road.

His father and mother began commenting to one another, "Do you remember when?"

"How she used to laugh..."

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“How you yelled when you called her?” They laughed deep, belly laughs at their memories. The fields began to dance along outside the window, looking suddenly less austere. The boy wanted then to walk between the rows, to listen to his parents reminisce about the grandmother he would never know.

“Yes! Oh, goodness! Yes. She was just deaf as a—well whatever the deaf equivalent would be to being as blind as a bat!” The boy’s mother laughed, her smile shattering any pretense of mourning or fragility, her eyes crinkled in memory and joy. The boy smiled too, and slowly began to ask about his mother’s mother.

“Oh! She had loved to dance! And father did, too. They would dance together—a sight to behold—and when he had taken to getting rowdy he would smash plates on the kitchen floor as they danced, and yell, ‘OPA!’”

“Oh! She had such a lovely voice. Greg, honey, did you ever get to hear her sing? Only the once? She used to sing often at the old house...” The boy rested his head on the window again, looking out on the fields but not seeing them. Instead he saw a world of dancing, singing, and revelry. He saw a picturesque home and a close-knit community, a halcyon at once real and imagined. Music played to the drum beat of uneven pavement, and the boy’s eyes drifted shut to the shattering of plates and the sizzle of imagined stovetop.

He woke hours later to the car slowing, pulled from his dreams by the steady decrease in comforting road noise. Clarksdale was not large. They drove down what appeared to be the single street of the town and turned into an enormous parking lot. To one side a post office squatted low to the flat earth, to the other a church’s steeple reached toward heaven, unchallenged by trees. They parked on the far side, facing the post office, under a sprawling oak tree.

The boy got out of his seat and stretched his arms wide, pushing himself onto his tiptoes as he did so. Relaxing, he circled around to the back of the Durango, where his father already waited with the trunk open. From within, the boy grabbed a starched button down from a hanger and pulled it onto his body in jerks. He then donned tie (tied himself), blazer, and cheap Walmart dress shoes picked up en route. They were gray, soft, and had a plastic aroma to them, but they matched his over-large suit. Together the three walked into a small area with round tables and a projector facing one wall.

For an hour—perhaps more, the boy could not tell—they sat with a coalition of far-flung extended family and praised the life of this woman the boy had not known, and had scarce met.

“She was a true saint...”

“A striking beauty... and a lovely person.”

The words seemed genuine, and the boy enjoyed the procession. The attendees filed around to a table in a neighboring room and procured some flavorless pastries and dilute punch. The boy enjoyed that, too.

They filed out in groups of twos and threes by understood and unorganized order of primacy, trekking across the expansive parking lot under the blistering eye of the sun. The boy and his parents were in the third cluster—important, but not extremely

so. The procession made its way to the huge polished doors of the small yet typically ornate Catholic church.

The relations all filed into pews in the same manner they had filed out of the last building, but here they looked out of place. The boy's mother explained in a hushed, reverential tone that none of the rest of the family were Catholic. Like as not it was their first time in such a church. The boy found their discomfort amusing.

The priest in his royal robes came out and lectured about the value of life or the fragility of God's creation or something else the boy had no interest in. He merely stared at the closed coffin, with its ornate scroll work and deep black hue. When the priest called for readers of scripture, the boy was near the only volunteer. He strode up to the pulpit and looked out over the half-full church. For a moment, he said nothing. He thought again of broken plates and of memories he wished he had and of laughter. The boy smiled, thinking of the new breadth of his family and his home he now knew, of shelling shrimp and straight rows of soy, and began to read.

Ode to Dixie

Helen Peng

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose hands bend and curl
bluffs and valleys around river's veins
and whose pickup trucks,
dusted with red cinnamon around metallic bumpers,
groan with the need of new mufflers.
Whose foreheads glisten
beads of sweat
onto strings of a bracelet.

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose honeydew weather,
Supervised by a jar of syrup in the sky,
drips liquid sunlight onto bluegrass hills,
Sticking to sassafras skin in rolling waves of heat.
Whose Sundays mornings
are filled with clean powder and stiff button-ups
and thrum with hymns and hum with prayers
where a wave hello is a welcome for
heartfelt chatter.

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
Whose words stretch and curl and spread
like butter on toast,
and when Patricia asks 'Do y'all go to church?'
--the 'yaaalll' turning into taffy,
She really means
'are you an acceptable person';
And if you answer no,
Patricia will turn to Linda, with a shake of her head,
'The new girl—God bless her soul.'

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
 Whose nights are filled with sticky cornbread
 sweet potatoes, collard greens,
 Where supper is served with a side of gossip
 About the family who keeps the blinds closed,
 About that girl who doesn't go to church,
 About those boys who kissed under the slide;
 'Bless their hearts,' they say.

I want to write a poem for Mississippi
 Whose conversations flow like its river
 Stretching deep and falling wide,
 And where pleasantries
 Are a wide front porch welcomed with an open door.
 Where soul food is sanctuary
 for any soul,
 Where family rides high like the weather:
 Never to grow cold.
 Where everyone knows each others names,
 'Shugah, darlin', honey.'

I am writing a poem for Mississippi
 Where the rolling hills
 lie against the river,
 And the plains of the Delta
 harbor sunburnt skin.
 Here in Mississippi where the blue waters
 Are shadowed by grayness
 of barrier islands
 and whose hospitality is marred by skepticism
 Here in Mississippi where a simple hello
 is really a funnel cake of complexity,
 And where a compliment is meant to be stretched like bubblegum
 And when I say
 I want to write a poem for Mississippi
 I really mean
 I'm writing a poem for home.

Absolute Pitch

Alyson Espy

Oh, how I slumbered under the lilt of soprano —
Sing my song, Grandma, and learn me to sing it too.
Rebounding off the steaming pots and pans,
The cadence of stove heat and holy hymn
Hide me from the cold of sin.
Grandma shared her tune with me,
My full-mouthed family stuffed onto Grandma's den sofa
Struck silent by the soulful start of Amazing Grace.
Together as one we all sang true
No matter the pitch or tone or harmonies.
Never underestimate the boom of bass
Or the shrilling of soprano
Or the rumble of alto
All packed into one tight, tiny space.
The space that now sits hollow of sound and soul,
Because singing does not last forever—
Although we live on together,
We sing the songs of heaven no more.

The Gift

Billy Guevara

It was February 22, 2006. Yea, it was my 4th birthday. The man of the house wakes me up for another trip to the hospital to visit my “jefa”, the woman that was raising me, my mom. We had been going there for a week now. 7 days of absolute exhaustion with school and the visits mixing up my schedule. And I, being a momma’s boy, was starting to worry for her. She would be in a bed all day lying there as if she had no energy to get up.

Mom was in the hospital because she was having something or she was just sick. At the time they didn’t tell what was really going on due to me being a little kid. I thought she was sick since her stomach was bigger than me. I’m thinking at the moment, “that thing is huge.” That thing was a yoga ball. I thought it was because she was eating too much. But what was really on my mind was my birthday party. I was hyped. I could already see the gifts flowing in and the delicious ice cream cake with a cherry on top. But then something else comes to mind. Where are we having the party?

I go over to pops to ask him about it. “Ay pa, donde va ser mi fiesta?” I asked.

He responds, “Fiesta? Mijo no hay tiempo para una fiesta.”

I was mad. I start crying in the lobby of the hospital. I threw the biggest tantrum. I swear, no lie, I cried for at least an hour. My eyes would be so red. My nose would be stuffed up. And my mouth would that thing you do after crying a lot. So after my scene in the lobby, I took a nap in my mom’s room at the hospital. And you guys know, the naps after crying your eyes out, as kids are the best naps. Her room smelled so bad. Like you guys know how hospitals smell? They smell absolutely terrible.

I wake up and I see gifts. I didn’t even recognize the fact that my mother wasn’t in the room on her hospital bed. I see gifts and presents everywhere. They were all in blue bags, which was very weird. But I knew they were mine. You know because they said “Boy” on them. I, being a 4-year-old kid, just started to dig in and see what people had got me. It was all clothes and shoes and bottles. Like I always got toys and that had really put me in a bad mood since I didn’t get any toys. Not only did that upset me but the fact that none of the clothes fit me. The shoes were smaller than my hand at the time.

I got to my dad to show him the shoe and ask, “Que es esto?” He turns with a baby in his arms.

A small 8-pound wrinkly looking thing. It sucked on his thumb and enjoyed it, as it had never done it before. I’m thinking who is this? What is my dad doing with that thing? Is it his? Will this hospital smell ever go away? Why is it so small? Why is it so hairy? I was thinking it was a monkey.

Now at that point I started to put all the pieces together with the gifts and the baby. My dad shows me the baby and I’m thinking that this is the ugliest thing I have

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ever seen in my life. All it did was cry and whine. As I hold the thing, my father said to me, “Feliz cumpleaños Billy, here is your gift. Your nuevo hermanito.”

My body at that moment would be over taken by joy. Being an only child for 4 years is lonely and no fun. I had just received something better than a birthday party and an ice cream cake. I had received a gift that will last for a lifetime. I was gifted a very special gift on my 4th birthday.

In Mississippi

Victoria Gong

My friend from Iowa came down to visit this weekend, and we drove around downtown Vicksburg and by the riverfront. I showed him the murals on the levees, and he gave each one a long stare before nodding a few times and moving on to the next one until he had spent almost twenty minutes looking at them all — not that there was much to see. We sat awhile in my car with the engine running. I kept thinking that I really wanted to impress my friend but that there was nothing here that was impressing at all.

“What are those big boats for?” he asked, pointing.

I squinted in the direction of his finger. “They’re casinos.”

“You think we can get into one?”

“Maybe.”

“Do I look eighteen?”

“They’ll still ask for an ID.”

“Man...” He looked to the other side of the river, and of course there were only muddy brown torrents and drab shrubby-lined shoreline.

I tapped my thumbs on the top of the steering wheel. I said, “Matt.”

“What?” he said.

“Do you want to see a movie?”

“No,” he said, “I don’t want to see a movie.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t come all the way down here to see a movie.”

“Are you hungry then?” I suggested. “We could go eat.”

He scratched at his chin. “Yeah.”

So we went to a restaurant that hung over an empty parking lot and watched the river until it grew dark enough that we couldn’t see it anymore. Our dinner was cold when it came, and when Matt bit into his sandwich it sounded like his teeth were grinding down on gravel.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “The food was better the last time I came here.”

“It’s okay,” he said.

“Do you want to switch?” I hadn’t touched my plate; I’d been watching Matt’s grimace grow as he chewed.

“No, it’s okay,” he said and dusted his hands, sprinkling stale crumbs over the white tablecloth.

I looked down at my fork and said, “*Man, I wished I lived in Iowa,*” but my friend didn’t reply, just shook his head as if he were thinking no you don’t, and went back to regarding his sandwich. So I continued in my head: *I wish I lived in Texas, or I wish I lived in New Jersey. I wish I lived anywhere else, really.* And then, the silence was starting

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to get unbearable so I said, louder, “Matt.”

And he said, “What?”

And I said, “You want to go run?”

“Yeah,” he said, and threw down his sandwich with too much enthusiasm.

We went to the park and jogged over the hilly trails. My calves burned, but it was a good kind of burn. After the run, we sprawled out where the slope of the grass hugged our backs and gazed at the stars. But because of the light pollution we couldn’t really see anything anyway, so I tilted my head to the side and just looked at Matt. It felt like the Mississippi humidity was trying to drown me, and I wanted to cry for help, to yell until my voice echoed like gunshots pinging around in bowls made from valleys.

I said: “I think we should go somewhere, Matt — anywhere — just somewhere away from here.”

He turned his head, too, so that he was looking at me, and I could tell he was really thinking hard about what I said. I started thinking that he was going to agree with me and that we would get into my car and drive two or three hours to New Orleans and eat beignets and laugh our asses off at street graffiti, but he said finally, “No, I love it here.”

And suddenly I did too.

Traveling the Mississippi Gulf Coast

Anjeli Hoskins

Once you escape the jazz and po boys of New Orleans,
You drive past tall pines and man-made beaches
That are the Gulf Coast.

On a Gulfport morning at seven o'clock
And again at evening, you hear the trumpet
At Keesler calling our soldiers to work
And back home in the evening.

Midday in Biloxi while strolling on the beach
You forgive the harshness of the sun
Because of the apologetic breeze from the beach.
The sand is either a foe that blisters feet
Or a playmate in a battle of swim or sink.

Dusk in Ocean Springs at Walmart:
As soon you exit your car,
Seagulls pester,
Each one in need of a snack.
You feed one, and another one follows: a tourist mistake.

Night time in Pascagoula, a race against the clock.
To Bozo's Fish Market and Deli
Where patrons line up for Three plates of
spicy, steamed, shrimp.

On your way back to Mobile
You can't help but think that life would be a treat
If you lived on Mississippi's Gulf Coast.

Reflections and Dreams

Allison McElhenney

When looking back, some say that the first thing they remember is love. No concrete memory, just a feeling. Others remember a smell, something cooking or a perfume. Scientists argue that the olfactory sense is the best way to bring back lost memories, but sometimes it is emotion. If one can recreate an emotion, then who can say how much one can remember? Memories can also be brought back in dreams. There have been many cases where someone who comes back from war or witnesses a horrible crime dream about it for years, so often that they are afraid to so much as close their eyes at night.

I have two memories that have stuck with me from early on, but I am still not sure which came first. On one hand, I can smell the sweat that emanates through the room my father is working in, already preparing the arena he will train his eldest in to follow in his footsteps. On the other, I know the touch of my mother's arms around me and the smell of her skin, as she didn't wear perfume unless she was going out somewhere she had to be fancy. I am one of the lucky ones, one who was able to escape and leave abuse behind. I was abused for several years, but was ignorant of my situation, and was able to stay with my mother most of the time instead of being stuck over at my father's house.

My mother left my father, Lance, shortly before my first birthday. She planned for months how best to leave, slowly packing away things that wouldn't be caught in Lance's notice. She made her escape one night, eleven members of my family helping. As a bonus, her best friend's mother committed herself to keeping Lance in her cellar until my mother, her daughter in tow, was safely out of the apartment she shared with Lance. There were a few months of battle for divorce, then my mother's relative freedom. I was still visiting every now and then, until one night he brought me home with bruises all over the backs of my legs. My mother demanded an explanation, and when he lied, she threw him across his car and told him not to come back. This was before my second birthday.

Lance left for the military, not re-entering my life again until I was around seven years old. My first cohesive memory of him when he showed up at my seventh birthday party with this strange girl who was somewhere around three years old, insisting she was my sister and that I was willing to share my party, wasn't I? My world came crashing down in that instant. I had grown up believing my step-father was my biological father, but I soon found that was not the case. It was the first time I ever remember seeing my step-dad having to physically restrain not only my mother, but also my grandmother. I had always known Shelia to be a passive woman, but I did not realize that to have given birth to a woman such as my mother, she must have a temper herself.

At first, everything was great, except for the fact that I am an introvert, and the first time Lance took me to his house to spend the weekend, he took me to his girlfriend's house. She already had two girls of her own, one of them only four months younger than me, and one of the girls was having a party. As soon as I got there, I tried to walk right back out the door. When that did not work, I hid behind the couch nearly my entire stay. It took me three months to stop hiding behind the couch and learn their names.

I eventually became friends with Sam and her girls by the time I was eight, but still had some trouble with speaking to them. Because of my speech impediments, I rarely spoke as a child. I can remember long nights at Sam's house when Lance was not there that we would just sit around playing games or just doing something together. We occasionally talked to him over video feed, but never for very long, maybe fifteen to thirty minutes. I would say hello and good-bye to him, and that was all. I still hadn't forgiven him for not giving me any warning that we were walking into a madhouse the first night I was there. Besides the fact that he had thrown me into a crowd of girls, he also had not spent enough time with me to gain enough trust for speech. Especially since I knew that electronic communication devices, such as telephones, video feed, etc., made my impediment so bad that the person on the other end could barely understand me.

When I was eight and Lance left the military, I started arriving at Sam's on weekends when the other girls were not there, and Sam had to work. Lance came home and proposed to Sam, and Shannon stopped coming to look after us girls when Sam wasn't there since Lance was. That is when Lance started "training" me to take his place. In his mind, a girl couldn't be safe in the world unless she had the full extent of his military training, plus whatever the rest of his family could teach her. I did not realize at the time that Lance never pulled his hits like the others did, nor did I realize that his training was a way for him to let out his anger towards me because, in his mind, I was the reason his life was ruined. I studied, I learned, and I grew stronger. I had heard of abuse, of course, but I didn't think it could happen to me. I lived with my mother during the week and every other weekend, and only saw Lance every other week of the year. I never took any notice to the fact that he never trained me when the other girls were there, or showed Sam what he had accomplished. I didn't even realize that I would just be another statistic until I was in the eighth grade.

I found a book in the school library on people from the military, and the likelihood of them being abusers was nearly as high as those who had been abused themselves. That got me to thinking about what Lance might actually be doing, and those thoughts picked up momentum one night when Lance locked me in the car because I wouldn't listen to him talk bad about my mom. When I finally got home, the truth about why my mom left him came out. I went back only two more months. The first time I went back, I learned that he was wanting to train one of my little sisters, Sam's youngest daughter, the same way he'd trained me. She was the child most like me out of the family, as at that point Lance had had another child, a boy, a boy. I remember that night was the one and only time I beat Lance when we sparred. I told him to keep his hands off my sister. I went several more times, but he did not try to fight me again, nor

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did Anna speak of him trying to teach her anything. Not long after I left, Sam took her children and left him as well. I haven't seen him but once since, at a ninth-grade football game where he gave us a paper I needed to sign along with witnesses, stating that he could not be left alone with me. I have talked to him twice since then, but we still have not seen each other, and I'm not sure I ever want to see him again.

In dark magic rituals, the blood of an innocent is a powerful thing, whether it is the blood of a child, a virgin, or an animal, often ending with death. My innocence was taken a long-ago night when abuse began. Many other children lose their innocence the same way, and never make it out. I have night terrors about my past, and I wasn't even abused as long as most, only five years. My case did not start as early, or end as late, as most. Many children across America cannot look into their past for fear of what they will remember, but I finally dug into my past to see if this will help to heal me and help spread the word. Many who are abused never tell anyone, never even pick up their heads in class for fear of being noticed, and may even die before escaping. I think about that every time I hear 'Alyssa Lies' by Jason Michael Carroll or 'Concrete Angel,' by Martina McBride. Many lose hope, or don't ever realize that there is hope, due to the extent of their abusive past. I don't know that I will ever reconnect with my father, nor do I know if I even need to give it a shot. What I do know is that no one deserves to live in fear, and everyone deserves to know what they are going through for what it really is.

The Long and Winding Road

Indu Nandula

It's the last day of summer, both a sad and wonderful time. Sad, because I am leaving home; wonderful because I am finally spreading my wings in a place where I truly belong. Most people would rejoice over the chance to once again be a part of human society, but not me. After running from my demons for so long, I sometimes find myself wanting to slip away, into the darkness of my empty heart and hide eternally, never again having to reveal my face to this judgmental world.

My grandfather died in the spring of 2015; no one knew what was happening. And by the time anyone figured out something was wrong, it was too late; he was too far gone. Like me, he was a Scorpio, and a stubborn one at that, not wanting anyone to know the truth about what was happening to him. Years and years of medication took a toll on him, submerging him under the murky waters of old age. That winter, he was diagnosed with a fungal infection in his brain. Nobody had a clue. All of his children lived in the States; he lived in India. He had no wife to sit by his deathbed, no siblings to carry his ashes. He had been there for so many people, but when he needed them, they were nowhere to be found. When he needed me, I wasn't there, and like a rowboat in a monsoon, he went under, never to rise again.

He was a giving soul, bettering so many people's lives throughout the course of his lifetime. One day, a homeless woman with twin girls came to his door asking for some rice. He gave them a pound of rice, a gallon of water, and a room to sleep in for the night. He was a compassionate man, putting everyone before himself. My grandfather used to travel internationally, because he worked for the census bureau. He interacted with thousands of people throughout his lifetime, and impacted so many people's lives. Every night, there were always guests at his house, and every single one left with a smile on their face. When his daughter went into labor, who sat beside her and held her hand? He did. Who taught me to write in Telugu, and held my soft, young hand in his weathered, old one when I blundered clumsily across the page? He did.

As I drive on Highway 82 from Cleveland to Columbus, all the memories hit me like stones in a hailstorm. The mere reality of it engulfs me. Those last days, my grandfather had asked to talk to me, to hear my voice one last time, but I ignored him, thinking he was fine. But the truth was, he wasn't fine. He knew his last moments were coming, but I did not. He had been walking a tightrope over the river of death, with me as his lighthouse. But I failed. I failed him, and he fell, whispering my name, plummeting into the void. In Greek mythology, a mathematician named Daedalus was imprisoned in the Labyrinth with his son Icarus. In the story, Daedalus escapes the maze with his son by crafting a pair of wings for each of them. However, Icarus flies too close to the sun, the glue that holds the wings together melts, and Icarus falls. And I prayed, prayed that like Daedalus, when he escaped the Labyrinth, would

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spread his wings and fly back to me, but he didn't. Instead, he fell.

I see my Grandfather in every blur of scenery as I travel these winding roads between Greenwood and Winona, en route to my final destination. In the flowers growing on the median that separates home from my future, I see his beauty; in the shy fawn's eyes, I see his innocence. He is everywhere. Even in the sloping roads between Starkville and Columbus, I see him. Everyone's life has some highs and some lows; no one's life is perfect. Despite the hardships he went through, from losing his older siblings, to losing his wife, my grandfather hid his pain behind a veil. He tried to bottle it up, and pack it away, so no one would see, so no one would know. And none of us were keen enough to see it. I didn't see it. The last time I called him, he told me he loved me, and that I truly understood him. But did any of us? Sometimes I want to yell out and scream. "I ignored you when you needed me the most. I'm sorry." But I know that no amount of confession or apology can undo the past.

French philosopher Albert Camus once said, "I used to advertise my loyalty and I don't believe there is a single person I loved that I didn't eventually betray." This is what I did – I betrayed him. He gave me the world, and in the end, I turned a cold shoulder towards him. He could have opened up to me, but I threw away any opportunity he had to do so. If only he were here, now, and could hear me saying this. But in a way, I like to think that he never left, that he is still here, with me, offering me guidance, despite what I have done.

As I draw myself out of my reverie, I find myself in the middle of campus at the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. Here, I don't have to hide from my guilt – it empowers me to be the best I can be. Everything I do, I do it for him. His voice is my guide, and I hold his heart in mine. My mother once asked me, "What is it that motivates you? What are you fighting for?" I have to give her an answer, but as cliché as it sounds, I am fighting for him, for the years that he lost, that I failed to give him. Every day, I look at his picture, and tell him that I live, and breathe, because of him. He gave me my mother, and through her, he gave me life. And now, he lives through me.

Calhoun County

Jagger Riggle

The rutted roads meander
Into fields; a cloud of dust
Explodes into the air from a John Deere,
Circling, preparing rows of corn.

Rusted pickups litter
The yards of occasional double-wides,
Breaking the otherwise flat plots full of
Mud, beans, and sweet potatoes.

Calhoun County, an afternoon driving
In the middle of August. Crawling along
With windows up so I don't drown;
Air-conditioner cranked to high.

A pine forest towers above the road
Concealing shy does, stealthy foxes,
Silent crows, when it ends abruptly
To a waist-high field of ripening hay.

I want to run out of gas,
Want to leave the road
To go explore, to take the overgrown path
Where hikers have never trekked before.

I want to hear creaking from a barn,
Sniff the sweet smell of honeysuckles,
Pet pine needles off the old hunting dog
Who slobbers on my face.

I feel like drifting.

Jonathan

Daja Sayles

August 25, 2013 my dad calls the house. I don't really remember what time, but I know it was around noon. I pick up the phone, and his voice seems off, like he's been crying. This isn't the loud, laughing Calvin I know, so I don't say anything, but then I hear one single police car fly past my road, and I run outside because where I live it's unusual to hear police sirens going past. I'm still on the phone with my dad. I've gotten to the point where I'm standing on the porch, and I immediately forget my dad is talking to me because I'm scared and lost in my thoughts. My dad then says "who's there?" and I tell him "grandma, me, and Pee-wee." He then proceeds to say, "give pee-wee the phone." I do as he says, and I sit on the porch beside my cousin, then all of a sudden a white truck pulls up hurriedly. Lights are flashing, my uncle Joel jumps out and a police officer jumps out. I'm caught off guard because everything's happening so fast. My uncle Joel rushes into the house, he walks right past me and my cousin, and that's unusual because he normally speaks, shakes hands with the guys or gives me a hug; but this time he didn't and I then think back to my dad's voice when I picked up the phone, but I'm startled out of my thoughts when my grandma began yelling "what did my baby do?" I'm 11, so of course I'm going to panic, ask millions of questions, and I did. I got no answer, the response I got from my uncle was "go outside and talk to pee-wee for a minute", I go outside like I was told. I immediately began asking him questions, I ask "was it my daddy, did something happen to my daddy?" and he then answers to me and says "no it was mine." I ask "what happened?" but I get no response. I turn to look into the house because the door is wide open, and I see my uncle, and the policeman hooking my grandma up to her breathing machine, I take notice that my grandmother has passed out, and I know I'm freaking out, but I still don't know what's going on. I turn my pale brown skin face back towards the road, and see my dad's 4-door red Dodge coming down the road fast as if he's in a race, and I am lost as to why he's driving so fast, because I still don't know what's going. I only know that something has happened to my uncle Jonathan, my uncle Joel's twin brother. My dad's truck is now parked in the yard, and I notice he's not driving. Karen's brother is driving. He then hops out the truck and goes to my dad's side and he walks around the truck with my dad in his arms, and my dad is slumped over walking, his face is unusual he's crying a loud, and he then walks over to me and lays on the ground and I bend and I start crying. I see my dad is crying, and it just tore me up. I had never seen him this way. I then see everyone's car coming up and I'm lost. I'm crying but at the same time I'm thinking "why is everyone coming over, why are they crying?" With my dad still lying on the ground and me still lying on top of him crying, some policemen walk over to question him about the what had happened. I walk over beside my dad while he was about to give his statement, but

the police men ask me did I know what happened, and I told them “no,” so they said that I had to give them a moment with my dad by themselves so they could ask him questions. I waited, and when my dad walked back over to me, and he sat down and told me what had happened, and I didn't quite understand why my uncle had taken his life then, but I understood that everyone goes through things. The day we buried my uncle, I knew what a funeral consisted of but I couldn't deal with seeing my uncle lying in the casket, and seeing everyone crying made me break down. I knew he was gone and I knew he was never coming back. I miss him more and more every day, but I can't change what happened I wish I could, but I can't. I learned that if you are going through things in your life, talk to someone tell your parents, talk to your friends, or a counselor just talk to someone.

Speaks the Mississippi Story

Mariat Thankachan

Down the dirt road on the back side Delta
Stretching curves limp over the railroad tracks, lackluster.
Smutty lines of graffiti are etched into the rusting of abandoned trains.
Sunshade grit tunnels stand adorned with weebing shards of golden grass.

On either side, the flat plane of green nothingness
Horizons of corn heads and soybean eyes
as far as the vision witnesses, country roads of yawning meadows,
of bored schools of daisies and dreary bunches of dandelions

This is how Mississippi speaks. Abe's BBQ
and the Crossroads; Home of the Blues.
Droning, syncopated tunes float out an old man's guitar
as the lady beside him does a lazy sway to his honeyed croon

Sometimes you feel like wagging fingers at unattractive muddy trails,
like waving back at your neighbor's pickup truck honk of a hello,
like bellowing with laughter at the wise man's naptime tall tales,
like throwing a thumb up as a hitchhiker 'cause we're all friendly down South.

Twirling with the rolled haystacks or feeling icky slapping mosquitoes,
waiting for the crop duster hums or the lone train at midnight,
like falling back onto a shrub of cotton percale, like licking sod with the spotted cows
or procuring strength like the mighty magnolia standing guard over its barn house, alone.

Living with Zombies

Juliana Wilkins

They say the average American consumes around five hundred fifty-six drinks per year, but the year I lost my dad, I think his average would have been five hundred fifty-six bottles. Sometimes when I close my eyes at night, I can almost still smell the pungent stench of the bottle of Burnett's he would keep in the back pocket of his awful navy Pfeiffer pants. His green eyes were always glazed and unfocused when he would stumble down into his mother's basement to pass out until his next outing, but none of this mattered to me. He was my best friend and my hero. I couldn't blame him for his illness or who it would turn him into. The voices he harbored within were much louder than any others spoken aloud to him.

It was late October, just before my fifteenth birthday when my grandmother called to tell us he hadn't come home the night before. No big surprise, honestly. We figured "White Chocolate" was drying out and would show up eventually with more stories about the clubs he went to and the women who took him to hotels. He was well known in many places, by many people, by many names. Every call we made and every place we looked seemed to be just another dead end. We drove to all known hotels and "girlfriend's" houses in a thirty-mile vicinity just to return home for another night consumed by insomnia. Three days passed with no signs of return and a flood of anxiety for his well-being swelled. My mother said maybe him being gone was for the best. She always told me, "He's not in there anymore. 'Alchaeda' has taken over the cockpit." I never understood it but she knew the schizophrenia and alcohol had long taken over who he used to be.

On my birthday, I wanted to stay in bed reading books, in attempt to drown out the worries gnawing at my insides and turning me inside out. It had been a whole week with no hint of him ever returning. I remember telling everyone the only thing I wanted was my dad back home and safe. Instead, my mom got me an orange, bouncy dog toy with spikes on the sides and an obnoxious squeaking mechanism. I bounced that ball against my walls so long my hands became sore and my thoughts gave me a migraine. Thump, squeak, thump. What would I do without my dad? Thump, squeak, thump. Who would I be without the man who was my rock, no matter the pain he felt? Thump, squeak, thump. Would I be the girl everyone pitied because her dad killed himself? Thump, squeak, thump. Would he let the voices kill him? Thump, squeak. I couldn't sit there any longer marinating in these worries. I grabbed the coffee stained cigarettes that he left behind from under my mattress and climbed out of the window into the backyard. I sat there until the pack was empty and it was well into the witching hour. The crickets had no cry nor the frogs any croaks. Just the whistle of the wind and the race of my heartbeat. It had been days since I last slept and my mind kept going wild looking for somewhere to place the blame. I couldn't understand

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why the hell he would leave. Could it be the pain of losing the love of his life finally got the best of him? Would “the Hulk” really let himself get carried away over a petty bar fight? Did all the skipped days in his medications catch up to him? Had he found himself too deep in Tuscaloosa’s projects rambling about the wrong things in a drunken stupor? Were my brother and I not enough to keep him tied to earth? Did “Cosmo” let Burnett’s finest carry him away to his resting place in the stars the way I know he so wanted it to? I still couldn’t blame him, I knew he was on a road of agony simply trying to survive in search of happiness.

I don’t remember falling asleep that night on the back steps, but I know I’ll always remember waking up to a magnificently bright sunrise, wondrous songs cried by the early birds, and a filthy, pathetic, limping father snapping branches and emerging from the woods. At first, I thought maybe I was disoriented and hallucinating from lack of sleep, but he came closer and I realized it was really him. Shock hit me hard and I felt tears burning in my eyes as I watched him walk closer. His hat was torn, his favorite Atlanta Braves shirt ripped to shreds and spotted with blood, one side of his navy pants was missing to expose an obviously infected, swollen lower leg, and one bare foot to match a muddy Croc on the other. Even after years of being his caretaker I had never seen him so broken and rough. Without a word, he hobbled past me and into the cave-like basement we knew as home to find his mother.

After waking up and gathering everyone into the downstairs sitting area, my grandmother, my aunt, and I began to try to assess his injuries and learn what happened. He told us about a bar he went to one night after work and the few too many drinks he had. On his way home, he flipped my grandmother’s car into an eighteen-foot ravine, escaped into a tangle of vines and wandered off into the woods, leaving the car behind. The place he described was almost ten road miles away, almost seventeen miles through the forest. It’s almost unbelievable that he managed to find his way home through all that. His sides and back were

gashed and his right leg was loaded with what we believed to be spider poison, yet he refused to go to a hospital. Rather he pleaded with my aunt, and she had to perform some true backwoods surgery with needles and hospital supplies left over from my grandfather’s last days. He didn’t say much after this, nor did he even really thank us. He just stood up and went to his room for what seemed like the rest of his life.

As a child I never really believed in zombies, but I do now that I’ve grown up. I believe Hollywood has it all wrong. Zombies aren’t mentally defective and they don’t feed off of brains. They aren’t mangled, scarred, and sickly cold green-grey. Zombies aren’t simply corpses walking with the intent to destroy and kill. They’re like you and me: they walk in straight lines, work nine to five, sing to the same songs on the radio, and dress in oversized Atlanta Braves shirts and navy pants. Zombies are callous-hearted and relish the misery and torment of those around them. They’re internally mangled and scarred with a sickly cold green-grey film that covers their view of the world. That late October my dad died in those woods. I suppose the voices cruelly consumed his soul with no remorse, leaving behind the living corpse that was once my father. These ethereal beings are simply those plagued with enough regret and

desolation to embed them into an endless cycle of suffering. There are zombies all around us—in our cities, in our homes, our churches and schools. My zombie is in Pickens County, Alabama, unhaunted by the memory of his children or his family who tried our hardest to save him. My childhood father may have vanished forever, but my fool's paradise will always be a place where he is here with no trace of the infiltrator who never left.