



*The
Ephemeris Prize
2020*

Mississippi University for Women

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2020

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

In 2020 the contest received 63 entries from 6 schools around Mississippi and nearby Alabama. The winners were each awarded a \$200 prize and invited to read their winning submissions before the symposium audience. Due to concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic, the symposium was held virtually in Zoom and live-streamed on Facebook. Five honorable mentions were recognized, and the five prize-winners read their entries, followed by readings by the two judges.

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

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2020 Judges

Juyanne James, author of *Table Scraps and Other Essays*

Sandra Meek, author of *Still: Poems*

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

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemerapriz

Cover: Spider Lilies

The Ephemera Prize 2020

“Walking Along in the Changing-Time” Southern Writers in Uncertain Times

Joshua Bates, “I Apologize If You Feel Something”

4

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Forest

Callie Matthews, “Reclaiming the Soil You Sprouted From”

The Mississippi School for the Arts, Meridian

Skylar Nichols, “Stitches, Scissors, & Seams,” “Early Sunday Mornings,”
and “Homebodies”

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Laurel

Lauren Stamps, “Midnight by the Pearl”

The Mississippi School for the Arts, Mount Olive

Abilyn Strain, “I Call That Beautiful”

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Columbus

Honorable Mentions

Luke Bowles, “So This Is Wayne County”

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Buckatunna

Jaylin Jones, “Submerged in the South” and “Open-Casket”

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Clarksdale

Raeed Kabir, “Individualism of Culture”

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Biloxi

Amelia Pope, “Can’t I Live and Be?”

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Aberdeen

Stephanie Ressel, “Lock and Key”

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Vanleave

I Apologize If You Feel Something

I looked at her holding that aluminum walking stick, waiting on her to say something. But as her short feet began to carry her forward and her lips remained sealed, I knew it was time to begin. I dropped the headphones over my ears as the eerily soothing sounds ensued. The world between my ear and the speaker was a tight and small one, filled with nothing more than air, but this limited existence was a conspiracy I would never subscribe too. The sounds echoed out, lifted into a great empty theater by the strings of faceless and passionate players. It was an orchestra, its veins sparking with electricity. It begged for a new world, a larger one, one less tamed and uniform. No matter what perception of the surrounded world would urge me to believe, it was not confined to these usual rules of existence, and it begged of me to do the same, dragging me from the monotony of my life and placing upon my tongue that slight taste of the greatness I knew there could be, only speaking, “I apologize if you feel something”.

I followed behind her as she quickly crossed the highway and made it into the cemetery beside our home. I was exempt from this world, peering at it through a window, feeling it but not experiencing. The chilled January air brushed across my arms and hundreds of stones passed me by, bearing names I didn't recognize, and a few I did, making me ponder my ultimate end. Crows flew overhead, the tall oak tree shook in the wind, and rotting corpses lay just six feet below me. I felt it all, but somewhere deep in my core, if you tore away all the fake tears and forced smiles, I was nothing; I was numb.

But I was exempt from that world, instead residing comfortably in the haven crafted by the gracious sounds floating their way to my ears. In that place of peace, I could look out and understand the world around me. I understood death; I understood the way it made me feel and what it meant to be nothing. I understood why the birds above called out to the sky as they stood on the branches of the oak, watching over their kingdom of stone. I looked back over my home at the bottom of the hill, understanding why it stood forever alone in value, and as I slowly caught up to my mother on the road, I understood her love and why it continuously carried her out into the cold for me. I was fascinated by existing, determined to figure out what it meant and how it worked. I was alive, but only for fifty-one minutes and fifty-four seconds.

In that time, I would leave the cemetery and walk along only one of the endless, interchangeable backroads of Mississippi. As a child, it was simply a smooth place to ride bikes with my sister, treading our way up the towering hills just for thirty seconds of exhilarating speed down the other end. Upon that compact gravel, there were conversations with a father that I was still too young to understand why I hated. There was the fear of watching my sister dive into a ditch and cutting open her toe just to dodge a car, and some part of my overall growth seemed to be harbored by the trips I made down that road, but eventually, all of that was lost.

For years following, it meant nothing at all. The road was abandoned, and my brain lost the memories somewhere deep within. Life changed in this time. Bikes sat unused, leaned up against the dying pear tree in the center of my backyard, for my sister and I had both traded them for vehicles. She then used that vehicle to drive two hours south every week to a place that existed outside what I knew, leaving me alone and making even the places I did know become unfamiliar. Childhood ended at the same time I finally understood why I hated my father, a striking revelation I had as I searched for that snub-nosed .38 special to defend my mother with. Later that gun would become my friend once more, but this time I was the target. Thankfully I didn't find it either time.

Even the reason I was eventually returning to the road years later was tainted with pain. A deep hatred for myself manifested itself into insecurity. I would step off the scale in the bathroom and turn to the mirror, watching as stretch marks slowly crawled all over my body, engulfing me like a flame of shame, a mere preview to the evilness that had corrupted my soul. So, I headed back to the road in late December, determined to morph myself into some else. I would rid myself of myself, grinding my body and mind against the road like sandpaper if I had to.

Day after day I walked along that road, leaving my mother far out of sight. I was alone in the rubble of my childhood, memories I had convinced myself didn't exist and meant nothing. But with my headphones laying that soft blanket of music over my ears, I was exempt from that world. I no longer had to deny it and shove it away, for it didn't exist to me anymore. I felt it, but I didn't experience it. For weeks I stayed numbed to it, using my musical haven as an excuse to ignore my past, shed a few calories, and walk back home. But eventually, my temporary exemption from existing became not a curse but a gift. Just as the crows in the trees and the bodies in the ground, I began to understand. The walls inside me came tumbling down and the numbness of my core was overthrown for the first time in years. I was filled with real pain and joy as tears carried out of my eyes long tucked away sorrows and the laughs that sprang out into the world were justified. I was something again; I could feel!

I didn't know it at the time, but that road had failed to become a tool of destruction like that .38 special. Instead, it was vessel to a brighter world I had forgotten existed. On that road, a man that would later become my first boss occasionally passed me on a tractor, and I walked by houses I would do work at to earn my first paycheck. On that road, I would contemplate leaving my home and moving two hours away much like my sister. Despite my worst intentions, the road would become where I changed, not into a slim and happy human being, but into someone who could face their own existence and accept who they were. One day, unmarked to any calendar, I returned to that road for the last time, for I no longer needed it. I didn't just feel alive the fifty-one minute and fifty-four seconds of the album's length; I felt alive with every waking breathe. I would later carry out that decision to move away, igniting the best year my life has ever seen, but not because I was constantly happy. The year following my final trip to the road was filled with more tears than ever before, but it was the genuine pain behind those tears that made it all worth it. Sometimes I let myself return to the calming and rhythmically luminescent world of that music, and I still find it whispering to me, "I apologize if you feel something", and only now do I see how right it was.

Reclaiming the Soil You Sprouted From

As a child, living in Mississippi meant
trips to your nana's house:
meals abundant in cornbread, home-grown
lima beans, and ice cold sweet tea—
you once watched the pristine, sparkling dunes
of white dissolve into an amber ocean,
swirled by a wooden spoon
and conversation;
you once swept
after dinner.

As a child,
living in Mississippi meant
summers spent swimming in above ground pools
and watching neighborhood kids
pop wheelies in your driveway.
Living in Mississippi once meant
listening to the endless, orchestral concert
of crickets within
the fading, humid day;
living in Mississippi meant
marveling at Magnolias.

However, as a young teenager,
living in Mississippi meant
an overbearing sun breathing down
your neck,
a developed distaste for biscuits and
leftovers packed in yogurt containers,
and an annoyance toward
endless glasses of sweet tea.
Living in Mississippi then meant
an aversion to Southern vernacular,
as the words you once spoke so freely
began to encapsulate a rather unpleasant stereotype.
As a young teenager, living in Mississippi meant
a vow to escape the Magnolia State,
a vow not alone in its creation nor

its reason to find acceptance,
to find a more pleasant summer,
to find yourself treated with the respect
of a proper-speaking Northerner.

But living in Mississippi in this
day and age
means so much more than
iced tea and irritability.
Living in Mississippi means
home,
it means a familiar shape
on a map,
it means youth and so many splendid summers;
it means peaceful, curvy roads and
family.

Living in Mississippi means
the pride you feel
when you stand as a representative
of your state;
it means the loyalty that burns in
your heart
every time others
characterize your lush, hospitable
home as merely
a blemish of a statistic.

It means sweltering summers spent
melting on porches and living
in the moment,
it means elation stemming from the rarity of
an inch of snow
in the winter.

Living in Mississippi means more
than any survey, any foreign perspective, any caricature;
therefore, you no longer vow to abandon
the soil you sprouted from;
you seek to tend to it and
give the care it deserves.

Stitches, Scissors, and Seams

Grandma's eyes have aged
So that she sometimes misses a stitch
And the seam goes jagged.
She has become like a vocalist
Whose throat fights against the melody.
With a curse under her breath,
She'd yank the polyester from the machine
And get into good lighting;
Hands shaking and gentle, she pulled out thin threads
With seam ripper and tweezers.
After she'd started again,
She'd put everything into those threads,
Back bent with foot pressed on pedal
And needle dancing lightning quick
Almost sewing her fingers into fabric.
My grandma sewed to make ends meet,
Late nights filling order after order,
Hands cramping from stitching every stone to glittering dresses
Her scissors cutting sharp lines for tuxes and suits,
Laboring over clothes she'd never wear.

Early Sunday Mornings

Before my dad left, we drove to church three times a week
 Twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday
 I would comb and pin my hair
 Black shoes would pinch our feet
 My mother would dab on her only perfume

They still sell that perfume
 Memories stored in a golden tester bottle
 I walk by a kiosk in the mall
 And for an instant
 I feel I am in the car on Sunday morning

I am a small girl on a pew
 Who does not know the hymns and believes all kindness
 Struggles at praying and sleeps like an angel
 Her cheek red from the fabric
 The pins are lost between the seat cushion

While I learned about God, I also learned that
 A southern Pentecostal church is a place full of contradictory
 How is a malicious man a good one if he goes to church?
 People are people and will ignore scripture like they ignore problems
 Pick and choose the sins like they are a bag of candy

I loved to watch the early morning dew race down the car window
 Watch the same houses until we got to the edge of town
 My mom would scold me for not sitting up straight
 I never imagined that I would do something else on Sunday
 Or that I would question those who claim they speak for God

Homebodies

Home for me feels like an exit on the interstate.
It has what you need and you're often welcome.
Some have kinder people, and some are more crowded.
Difference is everyone knows who I am at this shortstop.
This is only my first and by now I am familiar with this place.
I might try to find a new one out in Texas.
Maybe even farther west.
A small boy, with his hand clutching a bag of candy,
And the other in his mom's hand.
He is about the age where you begin to lose teeth.
So, he probably understands me the most.
He knows, like I do, that when you are missing something,
It is extremely hard to not notice.
You cannot stop checking to see for the taste of pennies.
That is why I search every exit and count my breath.
This interstate does not have maps though, and
I do not have my mom's hand to hold on to.
It has the occasional sign,
But even those are painted with rust and
Used for target practice by locals.
Like a little kid, I often find myself worrying about being there already.
I never know where the next exit is until I reach it.
All I can do is hope and pray for serendipity.
Hope it is a good one that I can stay at for long.
One that is warm and has kind people.
That is what everybody does.

Lauren Stamps

Midnight by the Pearl

There was something special about living so close to the Pearl River— something that I couldn't quite describe to someone without sounding like I had lost every last piece of glass from the broken marbles in my head. The moss hanging from the oak trees dangled over the running water like God's hands resting their fingertips in the stream of their whimsical creation, and the spider lilies sprung up every autumn without fail, sucking the water from the river like a youngin guzzling down a soda pop. Chirping frogs, crickets playing their bodies like violins, and the soothing sounds of the rushing water pulling itself over the jagged, red rocks could coax anyone into a beautiful slumber.

And that's how it was most nights—being welcomed by the branches' waving shadows from my window into bed with my husband, who usually arrived drunk as a skunk before the nighttime Mississippi ambiance pulled him into a deep sleep, much like a pine tree needle bein' carried gently by the river that he oh so adored. We would wake up in the early mornings to the songs of bluebirds and chickadees, tweeting happily as they flew in and out of their nests, twirling around in the humid air. I was always told I was like a child who never grew old, and now I had a child of my own growing inside me, waiting to hear the same chirps and see the same glistening river I did every morning.

I liked to view myself as one of those birds, gliding every which way, living each hour like it was my last, and feeling every emotion that came to my mind as strongly as I could. So when the other side of my bed grew cold and empty for longer every night, my heart grew hot and beat faster than the second hand on the birch clock hanging from the peeling cabin walls.

It wasn't until I'd hear the creak of the front door my heart would simmer down. The missing warmth and weight of the bed reappeared along with a deep sigh from the man I loved.

"You're home late again, William Wallace," I muttered, my face still buried in a feather pillow.

"I know, Hazel," William Wallace groaned as he buried himself in the blankets, "won't happen again."

"That's what ya' said last time."

"I know, Hazel."

My fingers fiddled under the covers until I found his. After wrapping them around one another, I moved a caring thumb up and down the base of his palm. Sighing with contentment, he pulled me closer and brought his forehead to my collarbone. While the mattress springs croaked like the frogs outside, I closed my eyes.

"This isn't going to make up for it, mister," I said, giving a smile he couldn't see.

"How about you an' I head down to the ice cream parlor tomorrow evenin'?" He responded with a chuckle.

Ephemera

“We have a few spare nickels ‘round this place somewhere, right?”

“Probably so.” I sighed.

“That’s my girl.” He whispered, giving me a quick peck on the cheek as I drifted to sleep, the anxiety seeping away slowly along with the sounds of the rushing water.

“That’s my Hazel.”

Abilyn Strain

I Call That Beautiful

“It is not blasphemy / to see God in the skyline.”

I can't help but see poetry in everything.

When it is three twenty-four a.m. and my best friend calls to tell me that he is sitting in a motel room, alone, reading my favorite book for the fourth time, I call that Loneliness. I would kiss his forehead if he was next to me. Tell him, “you are the starry-night” and wipe the tears off of his cheeks. But instead I say, “191 days.” And he replies with, “658 miles.” And the call ends.

When I sleep in my sister's bed, she wakes me up with a video, a voice I now only hear in my dreams. “*Abby, I love you.*” and my voice responds, “I love you too,” thick with laughter. I call that Long Dead. My tears scream for exodus, and I tell them they have only been in Egypt for eight months. They have 499 years and four months left before Moses comes.

When it is four thirty-two a.m., and my head swims with things I shouldn't have been drinking, I tell a boy that he is beautiful. By the way his heart beats in response, I don't think anyone has told him he is the ocean before--beautiful, beautiful, beautiful--and I call that Injustice. I hear myself tell him that I am not a foundation. That he cannot build something here. But when he kisses my forehead and tells me “you are the starry-night,” I don't think he remembers the traffic signals. Red and yellow and green. Synchronized flashing. Beautiful. Harmony.

When my mother tells me she bought a wedding dress, we are riding on the bypass. She does not mention that there are no plans for a wedding; she does not take her eyes off the road. I call that Discretion. She plants daisies in her chicken coop and cries over missed grad school assignments. She is the night sky. I love her enough to water the daisies.

When the car is going seven miles per hour, I slip out of the door anyways. Feet bouncing off asphalt trampoline. Legs swinging over the side of my friend's boyfriend's convertible. I'm chasing the wind in my hair, and I call that Freedom. We look up at the starry night and someone tells me they love how quickly Columbus, Mississippi, fades to the middle of nowhere. And I tell them that I've been raised to fade to nothing, just like my town. In this moment, everything is forever—and I count the seconds and the stars until it's all nothing again.

Ephemera

Luke Bowles

So This Is Wayne County

After Ted Kooser

Leaving the old dirt driveway,
Pines stretch as far as the eye can see.
The houses by the road
Rest in patches of earth
Like old widows in recliners.

Asphalt twists and turns
As a meandering river
That never settles, always restless.
The stoplight flashes
Like a dying star
In a dying town.

So this is Wayne County.
A Sunday morning,
Everyone going to church.
Blouses and button-ups,
Elders in every nook and cranny.

Prideful teenagers,
Now models of modesty.
Racist adults,
Now advocates for acceptance.
Hateful old folks,
Ever careful to bring their Bibles,
A monument to their hypocrisy.

You feel like that;
You feel like saying something,
Like trying, attempting, anything,
Just to see a speck of authenticity.

You feel like leaving forever
Just to escape the cycle of insincerity.
Hello's, Goodbye's, How you doing's
Those fake smiles surround you
Like a masquerade.

You feel like replying something spiteful,
Anything to not conform.
You smile instead and say,
“I’m good, how ‘bout you?”

Ephemera

Jaylin Jones

Submerged in the South

Sometimes I tell people I live in Atlantis.

It is better than the place two syllables away from Nowhere, Nothing.

Better than the sinking city on the coast that I am sure no one built but God,
washing the world of its wrecks and dragging his mistakes to
settle on some shore because he forgot to give a damn.

Somehow everyone I know is drowning.

Laughing and cursing even with silt sitting heavy on their tongues,
even as muddy water licks their heels and fills their chests
fit to bursting with Southern pride.

Open-Casket

My sneakers scream as I smile, shooting up splintered steps,
swinging the screen door open.

I look past the counter and plant my feet against it,
my ragged laces dirty and untied.

You spring up from the couch quick, but slide yourself to the counter slowly,
grin spreading 'cross your face as you send that old, tired line my way.

Looking sharp there, Boogie. I need me some new threads like that.

I laugh hard, knowing my shirt is stained
and scarred with sugar you gave me.

I outgrow that shirt soon.

And I see you and those crooked stairs less as I stretch,
getting longer, and apparently far sharper.

Whew, you could cut somebody with that suit. Bet it'll drive the girls crazy about you.

I laugh again then, trying to not notice how
you're bent lower, carved thinner.

The last time I see you, my church shoes scuff smooth carpet softly.

I make each step count, slow and steady.

I lay eyes on your lapel, collar crisp and cufflinks loose.

And silently I say

Looking sharp.

Individualism of Culture

Humans are constructed analogously, allowing for variations in small characteristics that define us as individuals. Without diving too far into mankind's evolution, I would like to highlight the importance of locational and environmental factors on development, namely, locational factors that birth culture and in the case of the South, "Southernism". Following this idea, one could say that culture is a cluster of traditions and customs, indicating a sense of commonality across a group of people. I would like to argue that culture is the summation of stark differences of the individuals that live in a region. Culture, for this reason, is fueled by individualism. It is easy to interpret regional similarities as culture; however, when assessing a group of people in an area, it is quite impossible to simplify them into a single demographic. Southernism is not a single way of viewing the world, whether it be politics or scientific. Ideals can vary under a roof, let alone a city or county. Discussing the culture of the South requires inspection of the individuals that make up the population to further appreciate the culture itself.

To elaborate, I would like to introduce you to my individual experience as a resident of the South. My house overlooks the Gulf of Mexico, giving me a truly unique appreciation for the South. The location is stunning. Pearly dunes smile at me invitingly as I stand at my bedroom window. Seven years ago, however, my eyes merely glossed over what should have been an impossible sight to ignore. Having a beach in my front yard was simply a persuasive tool when inviting friends and family from afar. The days rolled on, and eventually, I forgot to look out the window. I became absorbed with a workaholic life and mindlessly barred out the very thing that would save me.

A few months ago, I found myself outside, staring at the crash of waves on the beach. My mental health was in tatters, and I was suffocating from burnout. Some outdoor work had brought me onto the street beside my house, and to avoid being corny at all costs, the wind hit me just right. The world froze, and I was enraptured by the beauty of the natural world. That moment spurred my infatuation for the coast. I found myself making daily trips to the swing on my front porch, the white paint-chipped cradle becoming my happy place. Hours would pass, and I would be alone with my thoughts, and the raging mosquitos, to understand the philosophies of life. The outside world taught me to slow down. My mental health skyrocketed, and I began growing closer to the coast. I think I smiled back at the pearly dunes a few times too.

My trips to the swing soon transformed into runs on the sidewalk that lined the beach. Those transformed into study sessions on the sand, and those turned into runs on the beach itself. As I talked to more people across the state, I realized the glaring differences between my interpretation of the South and theirs. For me, Southernism had become the beauty of Biloxi, Mississippi, the calming effects of the scenery around

me, and the people that made the city my home. However, it would be foolish to make an oversimplification that the different perspectives on Southernism are defined by location. Six other people live in the same location, the same beachfront home, and enjoy the same blazing sunsets that I do. To define Southernism without considering their perspectives would be unrepresentative and inaccurate.

To illustrate, I think it would be reasonable to present my dad's perspective on Southernism: hatred. The South, to my father, is a place of racism, prejudice, inequality, and barren of opportunities. The South reminds him of the lawsuit he filed against a hospital system for racism, encounters of Islamophobia, and long debates with the Biloxi Historical Committee that he ended up losing, while neighboring white businesses won. The South is a place where the courts of law dismissed my dad's plea for protection from a vengeful hospital system, seeking to ruin his career. Nice scenery does little to outweigh his views on Southernism.

Now, this begs the question: what about my own experiences with racism and Islamophobia? My answer is rooted in my naïve understanding of the world. Welcomed in nurturing environments, praised for academic success, and uplifted by great friends, I have fortunately not experienced the racism and unfairness that those older than me have. However, the older I get, the more I feel that this protective bubble fades. Now, I start noticing the ignorance behind questions and the prejudice behind stereotypes. I wonder if I was ever protected or just shielded by my own ignorance. For me, Southernism is beautiful but imperfect. For my father, it is a symbol of hate.

I feel racial tensions escalating, rattling both my father and me. Lately, there has been talk of moving to another part of the country; however, my love for the South holds me here, and my father's disdain pulls him away. We clash like the waves on the beach, pushing and pulling on this matter. I believe that this dynamic is representative of the state, where individualism drives our society to have big conversations. The love we feel for our state allows us to grow, while the issues we have stem from the angst of the people. Southernism is more than a unified feeling of patriotism. It is far from that. Southernism is the accumulation of vast mindsets that will propel the region into historical change. The South has earned a stereotype that grossly simplifies the population. I consider the stereotypes inaccurate but beneficial. It has prompted the residents of this region to reassess their values and strive for change. Being a writer in the South is exciting, and it is even more exciting during this time because of the social implications of current events. The first step to successfully writing about this vast stretch of states is to grasp the real meaning of Southernism: that there is no "one" meaning.

Can't I Live and Be?

From her short bob haircut to her outspoken views on politics, Flannery Plum has a reputation as a radical, wild woman in our small Northeast Mississippi town. Growing up with this impression of her, it was surprising when I got to know her as the sweet, passionate girl who loves playing Dungeons and Dragons and dreams of owning a pair of disco shoes with fake fish in the bottom. However, Flannery was not aware of her reputation until her passion for social justice led her to organize a March for Our Lives demonstration after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Highschool shooting in Parkland, Florida. The treatment that she faced from the community after the demonstration caused her to form a complicated relationship with our hometown.

On Saturday March 24, 2018, a small group of demonstrators marched down the sidewalk of Amory's Mainstreet. The march had gone smoothly until they reached a gun shop where there was a group of counter protesters who refused to let the group move any further. The organizers of the March for Our Lives Amory were not aware of any counter protesters before this moment; however, the Amory Police Department was and had already placed a few officers around the gun shop. The group tried to explain that they had permission from the mayor to hold their demonstration, but the counter protesters in front of the gun shop still refused to let them through. The officers around the shop also refused to step in until the owner of the gun shop began encroaching on the personal space of one of Flannery's family friends, who was pregnant at the time, and her two daughters. The harassment from the people in front of the gun shop did not stop after this protest and neither did Flannery's concern for herself. "My view of Amory and the world shifted a lot after that because I felt really nervous to go into work or go anywhere in public just cause I felt like I had a lot of people against me. That's kinda harmful to feel about your community."

I personally remember the days as a time when older people within our community began gossiping about a sixteen year old's sexuality and questioned why her mother would ever let her go to an ACLU summer camp in Washington, DC by herself. While she was not aware of the gossiping about her sexuality, she was aware of the gun shop owner slandering her and others involved in the march on Facebook. In one instance, the gun shop owner claimed that Flannery was a bad influence because her profile picture was of her at an annual vintage Christmas party holding a cocktail, which was a mocktail, and a cigarette that was made of cardboard and orange aluminum foil. One person created videos that made assumptions about her religious views and shared falsehoods about other demonstrators all to rile up the community. While she only ever received an apology about the picture, she was not angry at the adults who did terrible things to her, "If you feel really threatened because you're not educated about a movement you'll say like really horrible things no matter who it's about, but I think a lot of people saw through that because of my age. They were like this is like a sixteen-year-old you're trying to cyberbully."

Time has given her a chance to reflect on this phase of her life:

People talk about how it is bad to be in an echo chamber, and you should want dissenting views and want to be around people who would disagree with you because not everyone is the same. This can be true in some ways, but it's one thing to do that and a complete other thing to feel like there are very few people in your corner which I don't feel like that as much anymore. It's an alienating feeling to not have anyone who you feel is like you.

Last year she was accepted into one of the Seven Sisters Colleges in Massachusetts, and she no longer has to worry about whether she fits into the environment around her. She no longer has to worry about what the folks back home think or say of her. For her going to school in an environment where there are people who share her beliefs, she “has the freedom just to live and be.”

While Flannery says that her experience of living in Amory is not necessarily a bad reflection on the town and that some people are not meant to fit into the place they are born, her story is unfortunately not a rare one for small hometowns. There are plenty of other people, including Flannery's younger sister, who have been the butt of the joke and highlight of the post church El Toro lunch gossip within our community after voicing their opinions. Flannery just happens to be lucky enough to have found a place in this world where she is not a target and can look back on her experience with clarity.

Lock and Key

Growing up in what they liked to call the “wrong side of town,” I didn’t see much wrong with it. The park was within walking distance—that’s if you count walking through the ditches and climbing through chain link fences a feasible route. The neighborhood was safe. There were plenty of generous policemen giving my neighbors rides, I could only imagine, back home. The mean ole pit bulls were always chained up to a pipe to keep kids like me safe.

Mom had two full-time jobs and Dad’s job was simply to be the smartest man alive. I guessed our house must have been the most expensive estate on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Mom left for work every day at what felt like completely random hours. “Do not answer the door,” she would say to me and my siblings as she locked the deadbolt from the inside of the house. I never understood what she meant by this, given the door could not be unlocked from the inside without a key, and even then, the secondary door was also protected through several locks. Mom would say, “You never know if that person wants to take you away.” I loved where I lived. Never did I want someone to take me away. Never did I answer the door.

When I was in first grade, we moved across the bay to what they liked to call the “nice side of town,” though I didn’t see what was so nice about it. The streets constantly twisted and turned and cul de sac-d, and with every turn, there were fifteen more houses identical to my own. The trees were too tiny, far too weak to climb, surrounded in red mulch chips, and barely supported by strings and splints. There was no park. More importantly, too many people knocked on the door asking to mow our lawn, prune our hedges, change our satellite provider, and buy cookies. Sometimes, whenever someone knocked on the door, my parents would be home to answer. Standing behind my dad’s legs and hoping to God that these people weren’t here to take me away, I would listen. I would hear how they spoke and try to imagine what they looked like, never letting them see me as to not remind them that I am the one they came here to take away. Our new door could be unlocked from inside the house, so I began to answer the door when my parents were not home, just to see what these people looked like. They weren’t all that bad. All it took was a simple “No thank you, mister,” and they went away.

One morning I woke up to a loud banging on the door—a solid, dense mass beating on the door as if to say, “Let me in!” I lay awake to decipher whether the banging noise was just my imagination until three more blows hit the door. *Bang, bang, bang!* I sprang up and answered the door. Two men towered over me, so close to the door their black boots covered almost every letter in “welcome” and made the floor mat read “...el...e” instead. The men wore black blazers and opaque sunglasses. Where were their eyes? Was there even someone in there? Being an expert on handling visitors at the door, I said, “No thank you, misters.” “Is Marilyn here?” they interrogated.

The fear of who was behind the door began to slowly fill me with regret as I went to wake Mom up. Tired, she just stared at me. When Mom answered the door, I hid behind her legs and listened. They were not asking to mow our lawn or prune our hedges. Instead, they were demanding my mother's documentation and threatening to "send her back to her own country." The men in suits told my mom that she didn't belong here. I guess we should have stayed in our old neighborhood. The men in suits put my mom in handcuffs and let her have a seat on our porch. They then proceeded to rape our home, inspecting every room, digging through every closet, bathroom, cabinet, and even our garage. The men blunderingly searched through my brother and sister's rooms, unconcerned of the risk of waking them. They looked under the beds and in every pile of clothes. It was as if we took something of theirs, and they desperately needed it back. Whatever they were hunting for, they never found because as soon as they got through the third or fourth sweep of snooping, they met my mother outside.

I knew this was my fault. These people were taking my mom away and it was all my fault. All I could do was try to go back to sleep and hope this wasn't real. My bed felt foreign. My entire house felt like I had never lived a day in it. After what felt like hours, my mom came back inside, walked into her room, and shut the door. Those men left, and the days that followed were like those of the days before the knock. Dad was still the smartest man alive. Mom still went to work at random hours, and although I still wasn't able to see her often, I was glad to know that she was still coming home.

It was only a matter of time until I'd discover that those men were ICE agents. That day was the closest I'd come to being orphaned by the hands of a white man unhappy with an Asian woman. I learned that some people didn't like people like my mom living in their country. Regardless of the countless of jobs my mom had worked, and years waited to even be eligible to becoming a citizen to this land of opportunity, all it took was an angry white man to convince these officers that she did not belong here. Must have been a white man's country. Must have been why my first home was on the "wrong side of town." It must have been why the people living on the "nice side of town" believed they were entitled to a better community. I thought back to my old neighborhood and the wondrous paradise I knew it as. Many new questions arose like "Why didn't the kids that got rides from the policemen ever come home?" or "Why was the mean ole pit bull so mean?" or "Why did our door have so many locks?" Part of me knew the answers to these questions. Another part of me was afraid to admit them, but for now, the door will remain unanswered.

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