



*The
Ephemeria Prize
2021*

Mississippi University for Women

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The
WTM
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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2021 Judges

Kendra Allen, author of *The Collection Plate*

Annette Saunook Clapsaddle, author of *Even As We Breathe*

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

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemerapize

Cover: Farm Scene

The Ephemera Prize 2021

“All They Saw Was at the Point of Coming Together” A Confluence of Southern Writers

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Jordan Isbell

Okolona, Mississippi: The Little City That Does "Big Things"

Never forget where you came from.

That is my town's local boogeyman's calling card,
uttered as they kidnap the roaming kids
from three blocks away and torture them
into revenants that walk past the house with a sign
that reads, "*The Chandler Home, circa 1850*"
and write it off as a historical site,
without realizing that their ancestors, who they
saw only through dust-riddled photo albums,
were victims of the broken foundation of
my town's heritage, a foundation imitated
by the cracking slabs that masquerades as
a sidewalk that the roaming kids from three
blocks away can safely walk on.

The kids on east side narrowly escape
the forsaken adage, denying the calls
of their grandmothers who blame it
on living in the country with no damn service,
ignoring the pastime activities of
transforming soil-ridden fingers
that learned to make mud cakes in
five minutes into the world's greatest
gun duel, all to make room for a northern
identity, one that rids the stench
of banana puddin' hidden at the
back of grandad's fridge and infects
the kids with amnesia, causing them to
forget the town's name, only referring to
it as *the place twenty minutes away from
Tupelo.*

My town loves to call me an outsider,
claiming my unorthodox method of spreading
lead across a college application
rather than spreading lead across

a nearby corner of divided flag colors
 makes me unprepared for their world,
 a world where God's disciples find the
 cheapest bible book to recite a few proverbs
 and declare themselves sanctified,
 a world where abandoned buildings
 tatted with annual graffiti make
 public headlines for a last-minute party,
 a world where the roaming kids from
 three blocks away remembers to wear
 only black clothes across Avenue St after
 forgetting the y-intercept on their math test.

I write to the unresponsive town,
 asking it if it is happy of its abusive
 nature, if the gunshots from the alleyways
 are loud enough to drown out the nagging
 voices of the elderly,
 if the teen pregnancy is high enough
 to finally double the town's population,
 if the compact apartments that stay on
 one block can finally bring people in.
 I don't expect an answer, an outcome
 I try to find peace in as I pass the lowered
 U.S flags around the town that droop in shame
 of its current state, leaving themselves to
 the roaming kids from three blocks away
 who stab holes into the stars and leave only
 thirteen present, which, to them, describe
 their superhero persona as they snatch
 the flags from the splintered poles
 and place them on their backs,
 pretending to be their own superhero
 in order to find an identity my town failed to give them.

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Kinjal Patel

The Lockdown

The bells rang.

I started to enter class: Mississippi Studies.

I sat down and took out my book.

Mississippi is great, they say;

Go to school in Mississippi, they say

It will be safe to go to school here in the South.

Code Black

Books and pencils were scattered on the floor.

The teacher said to hide.

The teacher locked the doors.

The teacher kept looking out the window.

The teacher looked pale as if she were hiding something.

The teacher said “shush, do not say a word.”

I hid in a corner hoping the man would not find me.

J.B. Snodgrass

The Word of the Lord

With Brother Schultz's droning, preacherly voice slowly fading into the background of my mind, the growing picture of my New York City neighborhood taking its place became crisper and more defined. Tenement fire escapes zigzag skyward, cracks in the sidewalk make hopscotch for the local kids, my mother waters the banana plants on the iron landing outside our window. I could almost believe I was back there again...

"Jacob. Jacob!" Grandma's sharp voice woke me from my reverie. Nails on a chalkboard. I winced.

"Yeah, Grandma? What is it?"

"Don't you 'Yeah, Grandma' me! You say 'Yes ma'am' right now, you hear?"

"Yes ma'am. What's the matter?"

"Don't you play dumb, boy. You're fallin' asleep in church again, Jacob, an' I won't have it."

"I expect the Lord doesn't care too much," I replied with a grin.

"Well how're you gonna know what the Lord do an' don't care about if you're asleepin' while he's talkin'?" Grandma retorted.

"If the Lord wanted me awake, I figure He'd'a woken me up himself."

It was getting awful hot in the tiny church. Every one of the twelve double-hung windows was open as wide as could be, but the chance of a breeze that didn't feel like Satan breathing down my neck was slim to none, and the little paper fans stuck in between the hymnals on the backs of the pews were no match for the brutal Mississippi heat. A mosquito buzzed annoyingly close to my left ear. I had noticed none of this when wrapped up in my New York daydream, and I longed to return to it, but it was slipping away from my mind, just like the minnows that slipped through my fingers when I tried to catch them bare-handed in the creek behind Grandma and Grandpa's house. I tugged at the tie around my neck.

"The Word of the Lord," came Brother Schultz's voice.

"Thanks be to God," the parish responded.

Lately I hadn't been thanking God for much. Momma and Daddy had decided I needed to "rediscover my roots" and "connect with my relatives," so they shipped me back to the Mississippi Delta to live with Grandma and Grandpa for the summer.

"Try to understand them," Momma had said. "They're your family too, all those folks down in Cleveland."

I didn't see the family resemblance. I was miserable. I missed my friends—Aaron and Esperanza, Luis and Katie. I even missed my whiney baby sister Grace. I wanted to wander the streets of New York with them, not be trapped in the middle of nowhere in a house that still didn't have air conditioning. I may have been born here, but we moved when I was three. This isn't my home; I don't come from any place but New York.

When we got home from church, Grandpa and I sat on the screen porch with our

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shirts off and tall glasses of lemonade in hand, the only way to cool off unless you felt like taking a swim in the muddy creek.

“Why doesn’t this place make me feel like I’m home again?” I asked.

“Well, that’s quite a question, all sudden-like,” he replied, eyebrows raised. “I reckon you gotta figure that out yourself, but maybe I can help just a little.” He and I pulled on fresh shirts, and in a moment, we were bouncing down the road in his beat-up 1962 C-10, headed for the Mississippi River.

And twenty minutes later, there it was, stretching across the horizon: a vast expanse of brownish green water, hundreds of yards wide. Beyond it, Arkansas.

My breath caught in my throat. I had seen big rivers before—the Hudson, the East—but this was different. The sun caught the tips of the waves, a million fairies dancing on the water. Mystical.

“You know your great-great grandpa was a ferryman? Took people back and forth across the river to McGehee. I think he’s got a name on a ferrymen’s memorial somewhere ‘round here,” Grandpa rambled.

We took some backroads and parked the C-10 under a magnolia near the bank. Slowly, I climbed out. The sight of the river had stirred something in me. I began to stumble towards it, hesitantly at first, then faster and faster, ripping off my shoes and socks as I ran, until I was sprinting into the shallow water at the edge.

“Grandpa, I’m gettin’ it! I think I’m gettin’ it now!”

Grandpa just stood by the truck and smiled his big, sideways smile.

My feet sank into the mud. Mud that my ancestors could have stood in. What would that old ferryman think of his great-great grandson, come all the way back from the big city just to stand where he stood?

“Jesus,” I whispered, a whole prayer contained in one word.

Mississippi

You hold me back.
 You give me opportunities.
 You make me hide half of me.
 You show me that I can still stay
 true to my roots even if I hold shame.
 You disgust me, your people spout hateful
 things, but maybe I shouldn't blame just you.
 Your people default to ignorance and hate,
 and what could you possibly do to stop it?
 Only they can change as you sit and watch the
 fighting in either disgust or satisfaction.
 I do not know how your mind works, and yet
 you enchant me, your music and culture sing
 slowly, deliberately, hauntingly in my ears.
 I want to leave you behind, erase you from my
 past and forget every memory we ever shared.
 But I want to stay, I want to stay with you
 because I know you'd never let me forget.
 Never let me forget your sweet swamp song:
 raging rivers and croaking frogs and
 whispering winds and squelching mud.
 Never let me forget the gravelly voices
 rising to the sound of twanging guitars,
 echoing with the thrum of a pulsating crowd
 as they all sit together in your hot, sticky, humid heat.
 Never let me forget the fields tumbling in green waves.
 Never let me forget the smell and tastes of my home:
 fried chicken and boiled crawfish and simmering gumbo.
 And when it's finally time to say goodbye,
 salt tears will bleed from my eyes into
 your Muddy Waters, feeding the gators
 and the fisherman and the blues
 and into everything that
 means anything
 to you.

What a Hunter Hears

When I was young, everyone was a hunter. Every family member I could name and every one of them that I couldn't, expected me to be a wonderful hunter. Every child in my family received a BB gun when they graduated from kindergarten, my younger cousin got a rifle for her eighth birthday, and every member of my family over the age of thirteen had killed a buck. So, when my father said he would take me hunting for the first time for my birthday, I was expected to be overjoyed.

I dreaded the trip for weeks.

If hunting was an artform, my father was the Picasso of blood. He stood a little over six feet tall, with tree trunks for arms and a razor blade for a brain. He was always laughing, sweating, or both. He had a reputation for being the biggest, most respected person in the room and, perhaps most importantly, was a better hunter than most of the family.

That Friday evening, we loaded up his truck and drove to the camp. The deteriorating camp roads went up and down a series of hills, coating the truck with dust from the peaks and mud from the valleys. We arrived in time for an evening hunt, and I hastily pulled on a camouflage jacket and pair of rough jeans. We drove Dad's ATV for maybe half an hour, up a winding and rugged trail.

We rode in relative silence for the first ten minutes or so, before letting the crickets be our radio. The trees huddled tightly together like they had something to fear. Slowly, however, the trees thinned out, and we could see past the foliage on both sides. The forest extended far off to the left, and, on our right, an abrupt drop, maybe four stories deep, into a river one hundred and fifty yards wide. The drop was maybe five feet at its farthest from us, and at one point I could have stuck my hand out over the ledge. It was the most beautifully terrifying sight I'd ever seen.

The trail diverged from the river, instead following a small stream a few feet away and proceeding deeper into the woods. Dad began to slow the ATV down, and it came to a creeping halt maybe fifty yards from the plot. He meticulously eased down off the ATV, lifted his gun and pack, and motioned for me to do the same. I, with as much stealth as a little boy can muster, clambered off the ATV, hoisted my bag, and after nearly dropping it, slung my rifle over my shoulder.

Despite the leaves crunching beneath our feet, we managed to stealthily approach the shooting house at the closer end of the plot. It was a wooden hut seven feet off the ground that couldn't fit two grown men. Dad and I squeezed ourselves into the shooting house, sat down in the two withered plastic chairs, and waited.

I learned something about my father while we sat in that little hut and waited for the sun to set. I learned where he practiced his patience. We sat for four hours, trying to breathe slowly and limit the creaking of the house. Dad barely moved during those four hours, simply taking a small sip of water near the beginning. Once the sun had begun to set, Dad spoke for the first time since we had settled, simply explaining that

we were going to stay out after it got dark to see how well I could see. I watched as the creature emerged from the back of the plot, maybe a hundred yards away. Her grey-beige coat looked orange in the setting sunlight, and her big black eyes surveyed the field, suspicious of the peas and ryegrass that grew in the open space. She walked out, as quiet as a mouse, onto the edge of the plot. After a moment of waiting, even I could hear the soft chomp, chomp, chomp of her eating away at the grass.

Dad lowered his head slightly and whispered. My father identified her as old, due to her more grey fur and lack of companions, and as a good size for eating. He told me to creep my rifle out the little screen hole and take her. So, I, silently as possible, eased my rifle out the window, and began to slow my breathing. Shaking uncontrollably, I turned the safety off, bottomed out my breath, and lined up the crosshairs of that rifle with her front quarter. I didn't let my eyes sway from that spot as I eased back my shuttering finger.

I don't remember the bang or jerking upwards during the shot. I don't remember the strength of the rifle's kick. I don't remember the man's words. I barely remember the fury present in his voice as he ripped the gun from my hands and moved me down those steps.

I remember her screams, though. I remember finding her in a hole a dozen feet from the plot, with a bullet wound in her hindquarters and blood matting her back half. I remember the flies that swarmed the red of her blood and brownish pink of an intestine. I remember a rifle, strangely familiar, being shoved into my hands. I remember that when I raised the rifle, shooting her wasn't a process. There was no breathing or precision. Just another gunshot and another wasted bullet. Dad claims that there was not enough meat left to be worth skinning, and he tossed her in the gut pile for the coyotes.

A few years later, I decided to go hunting again. I felt that same up and down of those dirty hills, was rendered speechless by that same view of the river, and wore those same camo pants. I was plagued by the same creaking of that old house, and that same memory of her screams. I guess that everyone hears her screams.

If Anything Happens to Me

The cool crisp morning wind brushed over my face, flushing my cheeks bright red as I seldomly made my way into the police station. The dull grayscale clouds were moving slowly through the sky almost as if they mimicked my current mood. My breath heaved out in small puffs as I tried to warm my hands while waiting for an officer to take me to the back. Mama needs help cleaning out the store and I'm here answering questions for another incompetent police officer. This is the last place I wanted to be. Their questions were all the same, "*Where were you the night of the incident?*" and I'd always answer with the same lie, "*I was out studying with a few of my friends.*" My face never showing any other emotion than an annoyed scowl. It was a tedious cycle I had to go through every Saturday for the past four weeks.

It's almost ironic in a sense. Police officers are supposed to protect the people in their town, and yet here they are only investigating petty crimes that please the wealthy. Nobody came to Mama's rescue when all of her kitchen supplies were stolen. Just because we lived on different sides of the track doesn't mean we didn't deserve justice. Luckily enough my friends and I found the culprit and were able to get our supplies back, but that goes to show how useless our police force is. Mama's restaurant is the backbone of this town.

A stern, scratchy voice filled the room calling out my name. My eyes locked with officer Dunley through the locs of my hair as he motioned for me to follow him to the back. Out of all the idiot officers here, I had to get the worse one. Dunley was the laughing stock of the force, even his coworkers knew how bad of an officer he was. He filled himself with pastries and conspiracies, rather than actually doing his job. He was known for falsely accusing anyone on the south side of any case he didn't solve. *Maybe this would be the one time he actually got it right.*

The smell of coffee and paper filled my senses as he took me through the barren halls of the building. Every few steps I would catch glimpses of beady eyes following my every move. I'm surrounded by police officers and I'm still seen as a threat.

"Please have a seat. Can I get you some water?" He asked as he pulled the chair out for me. I stared past him burning a hole into the blue wall before me. My impatience grew as more time went on in this monotonous room. I was never going to talk and they knew that, and yet, they still brought me into this forsaken room time and time again. I flopped down in the cold metal chair adding an extra umph to show my frustration. The dim light beamed down on his white insipid face as he took the seat in front of me. They always turned the lights down low to intimidate me, but the only thing they ever did was make me sleepy. "So, we caught the person who burned down the building on 4th. Is there anything you would like to share with us before we close this case?" He asked, staring into my bored eyes.

Was there anything I'd like to share? Sure I would like to share the fact that the police only lookout for the people on the wealthy side of town. Maybe I'd like to share how

my mom's shop has been robbed seven times in the same month and we were the ones who had to find out who did it. Better yet, I'd share some tips on how they could be better at their jobs.

But I kept quiet, even though the thoughts in my mind didn't. I wanted to take all of my frustrations out on Dunley, but I knew better than to do that. Things don't end well for people who express their opinions on my side of the tracks. I had a family to take care of, and a restaurant to run. My community isn't going to feed itself. If my mama and I had to do it all by ourselves we would. My impulse decisions weren't going to cost hungry people their meals. If only I could go back and undo what I did, then maybe I would still have a shot at that. My body stilled as the hopelessness began to settle in. *I was going to jail today.*

I wasn't exactly quiet about what I did either. It was only a matter of time before I was going to be caught. Deep down a part of me wanted to be caught anyway. I wanted that evil company to see the face of the community they were destroying. I wanted them to feel a fraction of the pain they've caused my friends and family. That company has been trying to buy out our community to "integrate" bigger companies for more jobs. Sure that sounds good on paper, but they're rendering so many people homeless. That company on 4th? It was built on top of the community garden that we used to feed the homeless.

"Still nothing? Normally this would be the part where you people beg to not be sent to jail, but the less resistance the better." He sneered, a slight chuckle escaping his thin chapped lips. He slowly stood up out of his seat with a slight groan, his many years on the force catching up to him. *I could escape if I really wanted to.* What's the point of running? If they don't arrest me now, then my family will be targeted. Our restaurant could be taken away, leaving my family homeless and many others starving. I had to face the consequences that came with my rashness.

"C-could I have a phone call?" I asked Dunley with a shaky breath making its way through my dry lips. As much as it broke my heart, I had to tell mama that I wouldn't be coming home for dinner today. I rubbed my cold, tired hands together slowly to calm down my nerves.

"No," he said flatly, "put your hands behind your back." He motioned to the small metal cuffs dangling between his greasy fingers. I slowly stood up with shaky legs and turned around, placing my hands behind my back. As the cool metal slipped onto my thin wrists, all grit and passion left my body. He clamped them down so tightly that I yelped in pain. "Criminals don't deserve comfort." He whispered into my ear as he roughly guided me through the wooden door that wasn't as frightening a while ago.

Suddenly I was introduced to the cold evening air again as Dunley directed me to his car.

A deep voice shouted from across the street, interrupting my inner world. I hung my head down, ignoring all outside noise because I couldn't understand what it was they were trying to say. The chants steadily became louder, almost as if they were coming closer. Then, as more voices joined in, the words became clearer. I quickly turned my head to see where the shouting was coming from.

"Let! Her! Go!" the repeated chant began to thump in my head.

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A large crowd had gathered in front of the police station, all of whom were from my neighborhood. It was breathtaking to see people of all colors, shapes, and backgrounds rallying together in protest. *Was this all for me?*

Almost as if he was reading my mind, Dunley gripped my arm tighter pulling me closer to him. “It’s like your people to rally behind a criminal. This doesn’t change anything.” His words spilling out like venom.

The crowd ahead seemed to think otherwise.

They slowly made their way closer to Dunley and me causing his grip to become even tighter than before. He couldn’t hide the fact that he was just as nervous as I was. “Everyone stand back!” His stern voice extended across the crowd. Though it wasn’t his statement that made everyone hesitant on coming closer, it was his tight grip on his firearm that made everyone worried.

“Are you going to shoot us?!” A tall man in the baying mob exclaimed in knowing disbelief. His stature towered over everyone else, making him stand out like a sore thumb, especially to Dunley. Even as Dunley’s grip on his gun tightened until his knuckle turned white, the tall man in the crowd never avoided his gaze. He wasn’t the type to back down, and this man wasn’t going to be intimidated by him.

As the crowd grew closer to the officer, I could sense his unease. My intuition began to kick in because I was too familiar with the story. I couldn’t let officer Dunley lose his head. I couldn’t let any of these people be hurt today.

“Maybe I could say something to calm down the crowd. No one has to be hurt today, Dunley.” With nervousness, he shifted his gaze between the crowd and me. He nodded slowly, then pushed me forward into the crowd.

“Keep it brief; I don’t have all day to deal with your mess.” Every word he spat was filled with hatred for me. He stood close behind me, his stubby arms crossed, his gaze never leaving my every move.

The crowd’s loud banter soon turned into hushed whispers. I scanned the crowd of familiar faces. Each expression depicting the same emotion: hopelessness. “Y-you have to believe that what I did was wrong,” I said, my eyes glossy with tears. Unable to make contact with the people that love me most, I eyed the ground. I felt as if I were losing a piece of myself.

Suddenly, I remembered what this was all for, who this was all for. I lifted my head to meet the eyes of the people who I’ve grown to love. My heart began to swell with admiration. *They finally stood up to the police.* I could almost see the dark clouds that surrounded us beginning to dissipate.

“If anything happens to me, don’t let our spirit die.”

Jazmine Henry

The Inevitable

I saw the sirens before I heard them. Blinding blue and red lights dragged me from my state of shock. I remember standing on the red brick steps of my home. My arms crossed over my dandelion yellow quilt textured robe, hair wrapped in black satin, my twelve-year-old self resembling the epitome of black mothers nationwide. I watched as the nosy crowd quickly dispersed after the ambulance pulled the body from the overturned car in my front yard. The paramedics yelled between each other constantly. I suspected they were discussing an issue with the stretcher that had yet to be set aside for the man bleeding from his back and coughing up a foamy white substance mixed with blood. I couldn't hear their conversation, I couldn't hear when I had been told to go back inside because I shouldn't see this, but I could hear him cry for his mother, and I could hear the coroner pronounce him dead at 6:28 pm. I watched it unfold in front of my eyes. It was oddly similar to watching a movie in a theater, except I was frozen in place, and everything continued moving full speed around me. I never cried, I never spoke, I just watched the life leave his eyes. I stood there in a trance, contemplating the idea of mortality that had been trapped inside my head for so long. It was a significant turning point in my life. I no longer lived in that sheltered, candy-coated Disney Channel world anymore. My rose lenses had been forcibly removed. I now saw the world as others did, a global hospice, where the only thing that was guaranteed in life was death.

I was always considered an intellectually gifted child. Despite this, I could never understand the term "Life is short." As a five-year-old, hearing the phrase "life is short" was utterly appalling. To me, life was not short. It was a vast, never-ending journey ahead of me. I always knew what death was and thought that I had nothing to worry about because death was for old people who had been on earth since the Jurassic age and people who deserved it like murderers and pedophiles. I was neither. Of course, I saw death in television shows and movies, but it meant nothing. I could never comprehend the magnitude of the loss of life, until I actually saw it happen.

The first time I saw someone die, I was twelve years old. A man was shot in his car, leaving an apartment complex down the street from my home. He drove his car as far as he could with his debilitating wounds, and he eventually crashed into a light pole in my front yard and totaled his brand new black mustang. That, of course, would be the least of his problems after all. Death was given a new meaning to me after witnessing this man's death play out as vividly as one of my picture books. This man was only ten years older than me, and from what I knew, he was neither old, or a murderer, nor a pedophile. He was a person with his entire life left to live, and yet there he was, bleeding on my peonies and hoping that somehow his mother would get to him before he took his last breath. She didn't.

So what did that mean for me? Had my living thus far been in vain? I searched for answers in religion and philosophy, poem and prose, song and media, and to no

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avail. I felt useless and as though my life was purposeless. After all, what is the point of life if it could possibly end at any moment? The lack of answers I sought after caused me to ultimately fear death. To me, my fear was justifiable; it is entirely natural to fear the unknown. I would often ask myself if that man had found solace and peace after death as the articles I read had suggested. I wondered what he saw, how he felt, and if he could still hear what was going on around him. In some odd way, an answer from him would have given me comfort. I would have felt better about my lack of empathy for those who have experienced death. Eventually, I settled with my lack of answers and decided to continue in my life, hoping that I won't develop a terminal illness or be slain or trafficked.

My king-sized mattress made a flopping sound as I over-dramatically fell back onto it. The darkness overcame my already hazy vision. While I expected peaceful sleep as a result of exhaustion, I was met with flashing images of red and blue lights, the overturned, smoking, black sports car, my pink flowers stained crimson, lifeless brown eyes, The pain of the mothers surrounding us, and a white background where the crowd would have been, had I not been dreaming. I have not slept peacefully ever since.

Jacob McGee

Why Faith and not by Sight

A tweet or text or like or post, and then I slip into the inferno
 And like that I go straight from acceptance to rejection
 Tossed out of the light of life as Adam was from Eden
 But instead, being cast by my peers and not by God

So, I sit and blaze at the bottom until I grow my wings
 And I begin to ascend back to the limbo of Earth
 But I am reminded soon enough of my grave heresy
 Of not being a member of the devout twitter following

I am not so doused in the faith that flies with the big blue bird,
 The people that linger on the webpages of their saints,
 And wait for the psalms of wisdom delivered by those above.
 A reminder of the teachings that do not apply to me.

And the people who worship the pagan gods of Instagram
 With every post being a personal blessing from these deities
 The pantheon demanding praise and worship at each like.
 So, my critiques would be blasphemy against perfect gods.

The hierarchy of YouTube, mixed mortal and divine
 With the great gods hiding, depicted in glass plastered with stain
 And the mortals being the bricks that make the great cathedral
 And with every subscription, a baptism and which I would only drown.

But Snapchat is different, and the gods make many demands.
 Thou shall not take a selfie without a filter, or so the scripture states.
 And the TikTok gods are generous they always love to share,
 Everything that isn't there's as the users are their missionaries.
 Every new follower and subscriber, A rabbi or priest or nun
 Of the Gospels of the truth! that decides their life and death
 And promises the salvation that is of endless scrolling
 Maintained by angels of the keyboard and Jerusalem of the screen.

Every new terms and service, A Holy Bible or Qur'an
 As my funeral is filled with libations for being without faith
 So, I am demonized as Judas and have betrayed all my peers,
 For at the table of the last supper their plates were piled with media.

Blindsided

“What do I do?” a sentence laced with panic. In the dark, a computer screen sheds colorful light on her face. There is a constant feeling of falling in her chest. Her heart flutters, a bird trapped in the cage of her ribs. Her hand ghosts over her mouth as her mind flies farther from reason. Much farther than any deep breath could help. See, on that screen lies so much responsibility. Assignments glared at her. Deadlines scoffed at her reluctance. Unanswered emails instigated fear. At this point, one of many in her turbulent passage to adulthood, she feels wrong. She feels buried. An amazing amount of pressure pinpoints her chest. It’s trying to crush her. Everything has become too much for her fragile existence. Each task floats above her head, escaping her grasp. It laughs at her mockingly, taunting her for not understanding. Everything scatters and she must scramble to catch the falling pieces of her life. It won’t connect. There’s not a shred of evidence that everything will align and click in her head. She fearfully snatches them from the air and tries her best to make sense of it all.

In the midst of nothing factual, only one thing survives. That one thing is panic. So, as everything begins to spin, her mind goes with it. Her rational thoughts are thrown to the deepest recesses of her brain. All she can take in is everything she must do. It multiplies. Messages pop up on the bright computer screen. Email notifications follow suit. As the world turns and people continue living, she freezes. Her lungs restrict. Her breathing just stops. She stares at those lists she made, no matter how organized, with such a look of trepidation. All she can do is watch the tiny clock in the corner of that screen tick away. Each blink subtracting minutes from time she could be living, sleeping, or just anything else. Every wrong in that moment aligns perfectly to create a storm within her. It destroys her. She is so lost in the expanse of her obligations, she can’t even breathe. An orchestra plays in her mind, a soundtrack to her panic. Her thoughts are like painful staccatos. Her whole being is out of tune. Each try is a wrong note played. Her fingers still lay on the illuminated keys of the computer. The curser remains in the same spot. Seeing it now, you would believe that time has stopped.

It’s such a funny place, her mind. So easily panicked over things she just can’t control.

In many minutes she will unfold. Her breathing will return. Her life will resume. This may be the only thought that is able to penetrate the darkness

in her mind. The darkness that takes over her heart. The orchestra calms and sweet melodies replace fast rhythm. She looks up at all of those things she must do. She picks one gently, like a delicate flower. She turns it in her hands, noticing all that is within the little task. She breathes through the realization of its complexity. She sits back down and finally understands everything. Everything aligned and turned her world ugly. Yet, now she sees it as something quite beautiful. All of these trivial, tiny things will amount to something extraordinary. If only she could have seen it before. If only she could have seen it earlier. Her whole life is right in front of her.

A Monument of Sunshine

A sigh escapes my roughened lips as I begrudgingly glance over at the drumming clock hanging on the wall across from my desk. I've missed you, but it's just so damn hard to be reminded every week that you're not here. I stand up and straighten out the one suit of mine you always complimented. The colorful one. I always wear it when I come to see you. I wonder if you take notice. What am I thinking? Of course, you notice. You always noticed before. What's so different now?

I gather the scattered paperwork around my desk and carry on out of the colorless office space in which I reside. I march through the isles of blank faces sitting at monochrome computer screens. My employees won't dare to meet my eyes. You were never scared of me that way. You bothered to get to know me, my dearest friend.

My secretary grasped onto my sleeve, quickly briefing me about the staff meeting later that day. "Reschedule," I told her in my stern and unmerciful voice. "I'm visiting a friend." I continued, watching as the petite lady scurried off in a rush to reschedule the meeting as I had demanded. She seemed as if she were afraid of me. It only earned another sigh. Everyone in the office has moved on, yet you're always on my mind, buddy.

Finally, I depart from the skyscraper I call an office building. The streets were overflowing with people in suits like the one I harnessed. Rubbing shoulders with these people knowing that none of them could ever know me like you did, makes me feel so hopeless. You wouldn't like it if I said that, though.

I remember how much you admired these streets and how I couldn't realize their beauty without your help. Now, the colorful and exciting streets you once spoke so highly of are dull and irritating in my eyes. Every time I see that statue in the middle of 8th avenue, it reminds me of you, and that one night you dragged me out of my apartment just to take a glance at it the day it was built. You always got excited over little things like that. My expensive leather dress shoes sink into the freshly cut grass of the graveyard where you made your home. I'm glad that the grass is so vividly green. You would have loved it. I promised that you would have the spot on top of the hill, just like you had asked for in the hospital. I would have sold my soul to make sure that you got this spot. No, I would have sold my soul to have you stay here with me.

As I finally reach my monument of sunshine, I fall to my knees, my walls caving in under the overflowing emotions. I don't care if my suit gets dirty. I try to live my life like you would have wanted me to. Carefree.

My forever dry eyes flood with salty tears when I read your name across the well-kept stone. I miss you every day. I miss the smile you wore in the morning when you dropped off my coffee on my desk. I miss the way your eyes lit up whenever we met in the copy room. I miss the slight whine in your voice when I refused to go for drinks all those nights, even though I always ended up going with you. I miss the way you talked so passionately about the things you loved. I miss your stupid jokes and the way

you wouldn't even be able to finish them without laughing yourself. God, I miss how happy you were. Even on your deathbed, you gave me that same smile, like everything was okay. Most of all, I miss the way you loved me. I miss the way you always knew what I was thinking even when my face lacked all emotion. I miss the way you saw the good in me. You cared about me. I'm scared I won't find someone else who will put up with my bitter outer shell. I'm scared I won't ever be understood in the same way you understood me. I'm scared no one else will even try. Why did it have to be you? If anyone had to go, it should have been me. You saw the darkest side of me and still stuck around. The world is so dull without you. So dark.

I can't hold in these crushing sensations anymore. I'm so overwhelmed. I feel like my stomach's burning from the inside out. Tears overflow from my eyes harder than ever before; my agonizing whimpers echo throughout the voided burial grounds. My fingernails bury themselves into the green grass and squeeze to try and cope with the pain.

I'm not a religious person, but I need some kind of closure. "Why not me? Why not me god?" I cry into the infinitely empty sky. "He didn't deserve it! Why so soon? He had a whole life ahead of him!" I raise my fists into the air and slam them back down into the dirt with a hollow thud. "You took away my only light! My only escape! The only person who truly cared about me!" I angrily vented to whoever would listen.

I could feel my rage turn to despair. "One more chance! Please!," I begged. "I just need one more chance! Just one! I'm sorry! I'll do... I'll do anything you want, just give me my best friend back!" I exclaim, then my eyes trickle back down to the name engraved onto the stone in front of me. "Life isn't worth living. Not when I know what it could have been with you." I gently whisper to my best friend through the tears streaming down my cheeks.

"You saved me, buddy, I wish I could have done the same for you."

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