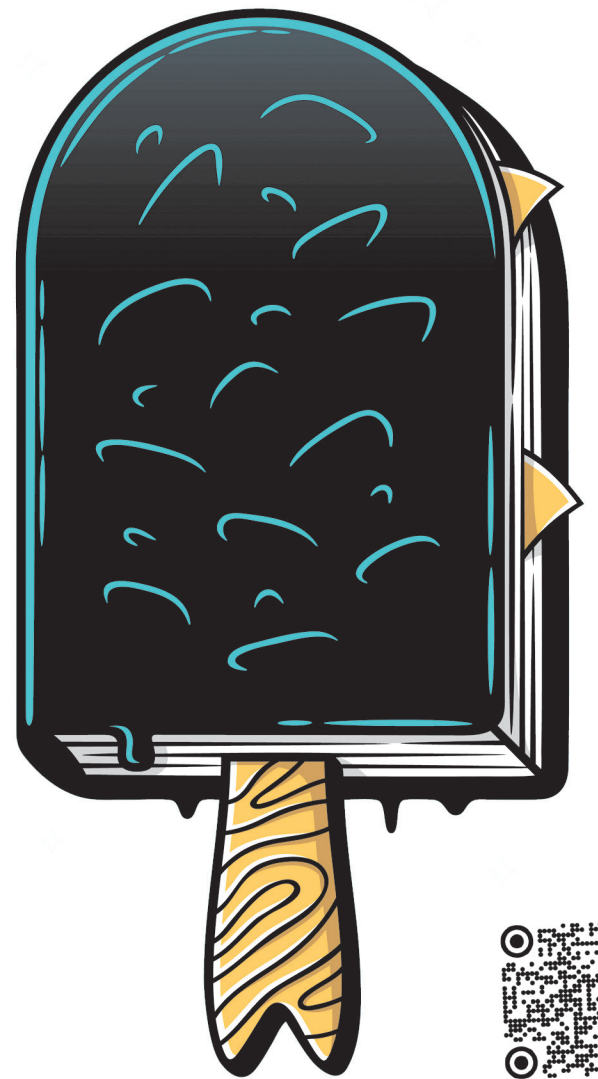


the Local Voice™

SUMMER READING ISSUE 2024



CONTRIBUTORS



OLIVIA BACON is a Stamps Scholar at the University of Mississippi majoring in the B.F.A. for creative writing. She also studies Spanish and Portuguese. Olivia is currently writing a young adult fantasy novel.



STEVE BREWER is the leader, songwriter, guitarist, and singer for the Oxford band, The All Tore Up. The music is an eclectic mix of upbeat jump blues, rockabilly, jazz, and alternative rock, and lyrics center around love and loss, ecology, and nature themes. For his day job, he is an ecology professor at Ole Miss.



WILL GRIFFITH is a Mississippi Delta born songwriter. Will doesn't see his dark country musings as directly blues influenced. "I want people to celebrate sad music because of its beauty. Sad songs help you laugh at your own sadness." Will's band The Great Dying will release a new record, *A Constant Goodbye*, on August 30, 2024.



CLAY HALE is a native of Water Valley, Mississippi, and a senior integrated marketing communications student at the University of Mississippi. He started songwriting in December 2016 and has over two hundred self-written songs in his catalog. Currently, he serves as the Managing Editor of *The Daily Mississippian*.



GALEN HOLLEY is an Ole Miss graduate and has written for several local newspapers. He has a graduate degree in systematic theology (Roman Catholic) and lives in Pontotoc.



PARKER C. HALEY is an English lecturer from Nashville. He loves to frequent the Square's coffee shops, where he is either reading history/philosophy, writing a review on Letterboxd, or scrolling on Reddit.



RACHEL MERRITT JONES grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, where she studied English at Ole Miss before transferring to the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She recently completed her Masters in English with a focus on food studies, and now lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her husband, dog, and cat.



MARY BETH MAGEE writes prose and poetry with an aim to uplift, illuminate, and inspire. Her work has appeared in local, regional, and national periodicals as well as her own books and anthologies. She serves as the current president of the Mississippi Poetry Society. Her website is www.LOL4.net.



ABIGAIL ROBBINS has lived in Oxford off and on since birth but has called it home since 2011. She is the wife of local favorite bass player and computer nerd, Nathan Robbins, and is the mother of the incredibly rambunctious, creative, curious, and brilliant Charlie.

the Local Voice

Reading Issue Summer 2024



LIVING WITH NATURE

Living with nature carries certain
wonderful benefits,
But also many challenges.
Once upon a time, the peaceful pond held fish.
Small-mouth bass, catfish, and bream
Swam there and grew there,
Lived and mated there,
Fought there and were caught there.
An occasional snake or two lived there, too,
Gliding in shallow elegant s-shapes
Across the glassy surface of the pond.
They avoided human contact,
Having no interest in creatures too big for
a meal,
And so, they caused no fuss.
Then came the turtles,
Big snappers which preyed on young fish
And threatened swimmers' toes and fingers.
The shelled critter count climbed
As the finned critter count declined.
They defied our best efforts at
Eradication, and decimated the fish population.
One day, a lodge appeared in the pond,
Sticks and mud packed into a messy dome
Which rose just above the water level.
A beaver family announced their presence
With clogged culverts and felled saplings,
And even fewer fish.
This spring, a new visitor signed in—
A young alligator, gliding just beneath
the surface,
Only nostrils and eyeballs visible.
The beaver are gone,
Either ousted or eaten
By the new occupant.
The frog population has plummeted.
No one swims in the pond anymore.

Watching the progression,
I fear what might be next.
I can promise this much...
If I spot a dorsal fin cutting the water,
I'm gone!

—Mary Beth Magee



THE QUEEN

BY OLIVIA BACON

My twin still wears her crown, even after she sheds her tiara for the after-prom bonfire.

She was never the type for the glittering circlet they placed on her head in that rented ballroom. My friends all screamed when she won. So did I, surprised that enough of the jocks at our high school realized what I had known since the womb: Kate was a queen, or at least the hierarchy between us approached that of dictator and peasant.

The doctors named me twin number one until she shoved to exit our mother first. I would have died without the emergency c-section: she stole my umbilical nutrients.

She wore her crown every time we measured our heights, always just taller. Her hair shone blonde, while mine glinted a mousy brown. Like most girls born in the early-2000s, “Let It Go” was our anthem. Kate released her ice-blond braid; I beat on the fortress door. (And Elsa got the dramatic song too! Will the injustice ever end for Anna?)

We outgrew dress-up games, but she kept her crown with her perfect grades, her perfect, mature composure. We might as well have been conjoined twins the way her stare had its forever hook in the back of my head, the way I clung to her despite her efforts to tear me away from the same outfits, same sports teams, same AP classes.

I lost my twin and found the brutal monarch when I flopped on her bed to chat and she hit

faster than I hugged, every time I opened the door requesting an audience and she slammed it closed, denying me, her most loyal subject. Like a queen trying to host a banquet with a clumsy serving girl, she pulled me aside at social events to whisper I embarrassed her: too hyper, too immature.

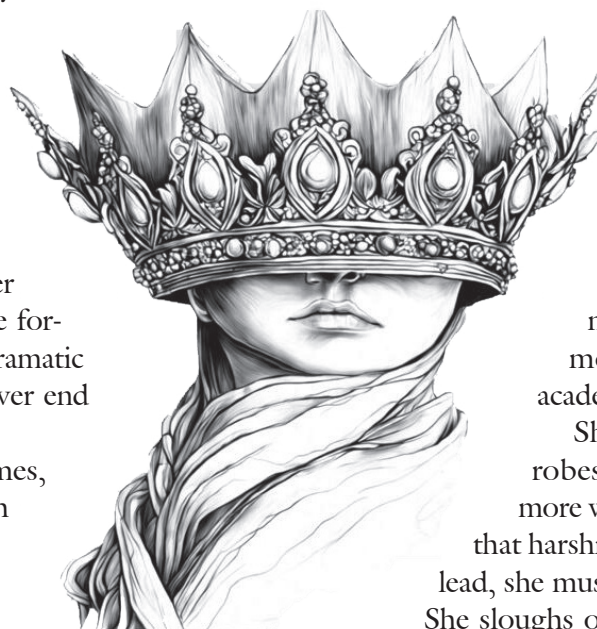
Senior year her majesty softened into graciousness. I rose from my sniveling bow and kissed her hand, elevated from tolerated servant to trusted advisor. We led together as cross-country captains, but while I giggled with the freshmen and brought them into the group, she led from the front. She won the All-Star award; I received the Unsung Hero plaque.

We were the first siblings to get National Merit together at our high school. We both earned full rides to college, but while mine sent me to Ole Miss, she marched to West Point, the most prestigious military academy in the world.

She still softens. Her royal robes grow more beautiful, more wise. The Army teaches her that harshness is too easy, and that to lead, she must first be gentle.

She sloughs off her harshness like dead skin, and it flakes onto me. I break up with my boyfriend. It's my fault. Meanwhile, she finds the love of her life, a man who sings like an angel and teaches her to cherish the hugs she scorned from me.

I orbit her like a dwarf planet around a glistening sun. We may be twins, but she still wears her crown.



TWO BIRDS

It won't always be this way—
just us in the moonlight, reflecting on the day.

We pick up a meal we see from soaring in the sky.
I watch ink smear in the open. Orange to gray to gone.

You blend in with the world around us. I was brighter,
but soon I, too, would become dust. And blend in with what I hate.

The sun went down, as too my joy. With
crowing in my mind. I offer half my peace, and then I echo,

Goodbye.

This is your favorite branch—thank you for taking me here.
So my heart could be fluttered, then shattered, then vacant.

I'll fly to other birds, but only by night now.
And shine any of my light left to them.

Your chain of darkness stops here.
On my way to the Deep South.

I'm off to a new flock



—Clay Hale 📖

BEHIND THE GLASS

BY RACHEL M. JONES

There is a window in my house. It's funny—I don't recall it being there before. The house is relatively new, but the window's glass is wavy and warped. I look out, only to find myself gazing upon a life I was part of once.

Blue dragonflies flit past, the sunshine glinting off hundreds of stained-glass wings. A green plastic picnic table covered in teenage Sharpie graffiti rests below an unfinished treehouse. Unfinished, but complete, with a nailed-board ladder leading to two shabby, weathered levels offering just enough room for two to sit sharing giggles and whispered secrets. The picnic table holds a bottle of overturned nail polish, the emerald hue punctuated by a nauseatingly pink shade dripping down the side, partially obscuring the words "I heart Joey."

I see a little boy who looks just like you, a boy I know I will never meet. You both laugh as you chase him through tiny tufts of dandelions until you catch him, whirling him around and around. Your blonde hair falls in thick vines across your face as you bend to pluck one of the un-bloomed puffs and, speaking words I cannot hear, blow the soft white seeds into oblivion.

I wonder what you wish for; I used to know what all your wishes were.

My fingers touch the glass. It is very cold, not warmed by the sun on the other side. You never raise your head, never look in my direction. I'm not sure if you don't know that I am here or if you simply pretend not to.

I see her too. Her angelic face smiles at you as she proudly carries a tray of her homemade cookies to the table. They are shaped like four-leaf clovers. Her own tiny doppelgangers follow close behind—one walking, the other crawling. The little boy with his father's eyes wields his stick sword, one strap of his overalls escaping its clasp and hanging free.

Everyone claps as she displays her creation; they dig in with greedy fingers as she languidly strolls away, a look of contentment on her soft features. She saunters along a row of golden sunflowers, delicately caressing an occasional petal. Her lacy ivory dress tickles the tops of her bare toes. That pensive look I remember so well comes into her large green eyes, and for a few moments she is somewhere else.

Then, her gaze moves upward.

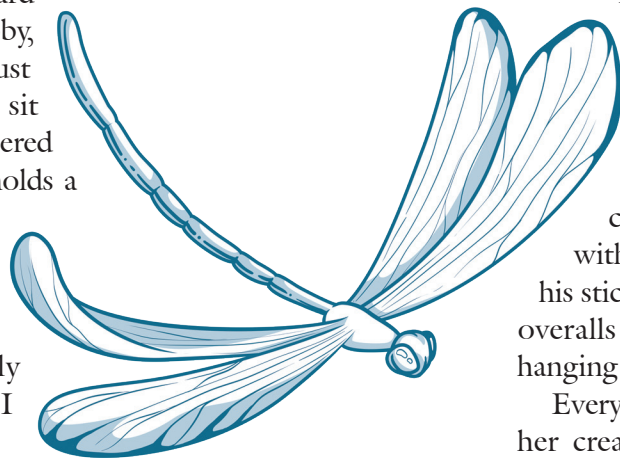
Our eyes actually meet, and there we hold. Although it never lasts very long, there are times our shared glance seems to last forever. She lifts her pale hand and gives the tiniest of subtle waves. I return it half-heartedly, and off she goes, back to the laughter and dandelions and clover cookies, my face in the window forgotten once again.

She does that sometimes, sees me. You never do. Those occasional waves we share seem to be our secret. Again I wonder if she is hiding them from you or if you are too oblivious to notice them. I wonder if she waves because she truly misses me, or simply to alleviate some guilt about me being stuck behind the glass.

And then they are gone, disappearing into the tall hedgerow in a Pied Piper line. With them they take the dragonflies, the dandelions, the laughter, the sun... leaving nothing but shades of grey.

Although I know inside my mind that I am not dead, I sometimes wonder if I might be. I wonder if I am dead and am in purgatory, or even hell, condemned by my own decisions. If indeed I am, if this truly is hell, I think it's not so bad. When I finally abandon the bleak coldness of the window, I find there is warmth here. Not unbearable heat like in the stories, but warmth. I am not alone, and I have an abundance of love here. If this is where I am to be for raising my voice, for putting my foot down, for shattering glass in exchange for peace, then I will gladly dance my way through with bells on my ankles and a dress made of gossamer flames, trying not to hurt over the things I have lost.

Maybe it's not really hell. Maybe it's just a different sort of world behind the glass. 📖



SUMMERTIME SADNESS: WOES OF A WORKING MOM

BY ABIGAIL ROBBINS

Tears welled up in my eyes as my child belted the Kidz Bop version of “Used to be Young” from the back seat as I drove him to camp early Monday morning.

I’m not usually one to feel anything but annoyed when Kidz Bop is playing, but hearing him sing those words on the way to a place he didn’t particularly want to go after rushing him out of the house mid Lego creation, I was swallowed whole by a megalodon named Mom-Guilt. I pushed my sunglasses up, glanced at him in the rearview mirror and forced a smile. He was still holding pieces of what was going to be his best Lego design yet, but “Mom has to go to work,” so his dreams will have to wait.

Just the word “summer” evoked a frenzy of happy feelings when I was Charlie’s age. Long days filled with endless possibilities. Late nights because why not. Waking up whenever my body said it had rested enough to take on whatever adventures the day may bring. I want that for him, but I can’t figure it out logistically or financially. For a kid, how does summer work when your mom has to?

As far as I have figured, options are as follows:
1. find some teenage girl who is willing to give

up her summer to play mom (which comes with a slew of concerns for the actual mom as well as a hefty price tag); 2. find a camp or series of camps that will keep your kid(s) safe and happy enough from before 8 am to after 5 pm (options are limited, camps aren’t free, and pre-8 to post-5 is an incredibly long day for a little kid, thus eliminating the possibilities of staying up late, sleeping in, and figuring out summer fun in real time); or 3. work out some combination of sitters and camps (a.k.a. spend my days coordinating pickups and drop offs; calculating camp fees, babysitter hours, and gas money; relaying plans to all parties involved; looking at the clock to figure out where my child is; and praying all the moving pieces fall into place according to plan. Exhausting.).

Then there’s a fourth option. I could quit my job. I’m fortunate enough to have an amazing husband who works hard and would continue to do so until the day he dies if he thought it would make me happy. Having two incomes provides us a certain level of comfort and financial wiggle-room, but my paycheck isn’t what keeps us in the black. I realistically could just walk away from my cushy desk job in a beautiful building with ample parking and


wonderful people whom I love. Say “no thanks” to my paycheck, insurance, 401K, and fringe benefits. (I’m not making a killing, but if I told anyone doing manual labor in the Mississippi summer heat what I get paid to sit in my ergonomic chair in a temperature-controlled environment and gaze out of antique glass windows, they would probably want to *Freaky Friday* my life.)

Do I love what I do? No. But I don’t hate it either, and outside of the summer months, the pros no doubt outweigh the cons. Summer is just hard. I know I can’t be the only one who feels this way.

I don’t want to be one of those people who complains endlessly without ever offering a solution, but I’m at a loss. I feel guilty for having a job. During the summer, at least, it seems like the bulk of my paycheck goes to some form of childcare. I’m working so I can afford to pay someone else to tend to my child so I can work. To a child, that must sound like “I pay someone else to be around you, so I don’t have to be.” That’s heartbreaking to think about, and I’m reminded of the phrase “perception is reality.” Please don’t let this be Charlie’s reality! It’s not mine.

Side note: Tomorrow is my birthday. Nothing forces a person to stare time—and the passage of—dead in the eye like a birthday, and how anyone manages to not become introspective around the occasion is beyond me. I’m not a fan of birthdays. I can’t help but think of all my childhood dreams, all the things I thought I would have accomplished by this point in my life, all that I’ve left undone, all of my missteps that got me here. Yesterday I was Charlie’s age. Now I’m sitting at work trying to process my feelings on company time while my kid kills another day because ... I’m at work. It feels very hamster wheelish.

I can at least recognize that I’m not in the best emotional state to make life-altering decisions. I know that this, too, shall pass. I won’t quit my job. I’ll feel better in a week or so. Summer will end. Charlie will go to first grade, then second, and so on.

And I’ll be right here. At this desk. Working so I can afford to pay someone else to spend time with him. Wishing I had more time to spend with him. Feeling grateful for my family, my job, my coworkers, my friends, and the excuse not to be a 1950s sitcom-style wife and mother. Fighting back tears at the thought of Charlie in his Spider-Man car seat clutching his half-done Lego masterpiece and singing “You say I used to be wild. That’s ‘cause I used to be young.” 



THIS ALL HAPPENED

(A PIECE OF FLASH FICTION)

BY GALEN HOLLEY

I tell him that the pictures look almost unbelievable, as if they were photoshopped.

She's standing at the base of the Eiffel Tower, I tell him, wearing a fanny pack, with a camera around her neck. She's sitting on a huge block of limestone near the Parthenon. She's in a beer garden, both hands wrapped around a mug of beer the size of a paint bucket.

"It's difficult to remember exactly how it happened," I add.

One day she bought an expensive set of luggage. Then, she got her passport picture taken at a costume shop. She taught extra hours at a community college to save up money.

Then, she was gone. "Whoosh!" I raise my palm, in a gradual arc.

"I don't mean gone as in simply gone to Europe, or the peninsula, or das Venterland," I try to explain. (He is not looking at me, nor is he really listening, I fear.) "She embarked over the Atlantic long before she called the travel agency."

"Some people make decisions and they simply stick to them," I say. She didn't allow herself to look back, did not indulge in one second of maudlin daydreaming. She got on the plane and disappeared into the ether, into a continental dream of chocolate soufflé, sirtaki dancing, and Impressionist painting.

"In one picture she's at St. Peter's Square," I say, nodding, as if he should acknowledge, raising his eyebrows, in a look of sincere admiration.

The massive arms of Mother Church, as I describe, reach around her as if Bernini had known she'd make it there one day. Here she is, scarfing a charred slice of margherita pizza at the Trevi Fountain. It's rather remarkable if one thinks about it earnestly, I tell him, the act of disappearing, of successfully pulling it off. One has also to resign

oneself to the fact that this thing — or these things, rather — no longer exist. But, I digress.

The point is that she left, slicing a vapor trail over the sea. She came back, but she was changed forever.

"She picked up where she left off, at least for a while," I tell him, "teaching *The Outsiders* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* to disinterested middle schoolers." She made crepes instead of waffles now on Saturdays. She subscribed to the online, English edition of *Le Monde*. She read it in a room by herself, sipping the almost-threateningly-smelling Kenyan coffee, heaved up, in foggy coughs, by her new espresso machine.

"This all happened; I'm not hallucinating," I declare. "Neither am I particularly angry about it." I'm trying to appeal to authentic sentiment and reason. Before long, though, she was gone again, and this time she never came back.

"May I smoke a cigarette, and perhaps could I have a coffee," I ask. (He writes on yellow paper with an expensive looking pen, then scratches his forehead and says, without looking up, "Fine.")

"You must understand," I say, folding my hands before my lips, as if in prayer. "It's absolutely imperative that you realize that all of these things happened, but they are no longer real." (He looks up now, and stares at me for what seems like a long time. He doesn't speak, only taps the yellow paper with the expensive pen.)

"It's not a laughing matter," I add.

("Door!" he yells, and the heavy bolt clanks. A muscular young man, with tattoos on both arms, and dressed in hospital scrubs, enters. "Saul, could you please bring us a cup of coffee and an ashtray?" he asks the muscular man. Saul returns shortly and places the steaming coffee before me, along with an empty cup. He lights my cigarette, pockets his lighter, then leaves.) I return the crinkly soft pack into my shirt pocket.

"Whoosh," I say again, exhaling smoke upwardly, and passing my rising palm through it.

("And, will there be more pictures?" he asks, staring at me again, in that uncomfortable way.

I tell him that it doesn't matter. This all happened, but, even if more pictures arrive, after a short while, they'll cease to be real. 📺



NEW METHICO

Awake in a motel
The kind that ain't kept well
Their sad song splayed all around
He kisses her head
She's asleep once again
He wishes he could lay down
The window is a scary thing
where a little light rarely leaks to wrangle
the darkness about
If only they could be one
No longer on the run
When each day the road may close out

Oh new methico luck ran out long ago
The minute you opened your mouth
Hold on new methico
buy some time or take it slow
Quell the pain or find a way out

In not such a distant time
Their loving whispers spoke in rhyme
And the highway simply led west
Where dreams often hit the wall
And dash down an endless hall
Where any touch feels like the rest
Now hollow words are brittle bright
Loud hunger silent nights
Where all is left to do is to shout
No echoes no sobriquets
No refuge nor stolen breath
Just paranoia track marks and doubt

Oh new methico luck ran out long ago
The minute you put your hand out
Hold on new methico
Buy some time or take it slow
Quell the pain or find a way out
Find a way out
Find a way out
Find a way out

— Will Griffith 📺



AI REVEALS THE VALUE OF THE HUMANITIES

BY PARKER C. HALEY

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is making its presence known unlike ever before, and it isn't going anywhere. It's no secret that people question how it will affect society, with one major concern being its bearing on academia.

AI uses machine learning—a process to continually track information to determine patterns in data—and this creates highly accurate predictions. An obvious example is when sports take advantage of this. For example, sports teams are now making decisions based on the machine learning role in data analytics. In short, while considering previous games, it evaluates the time left in the game, the score, the tendencies of the other team, etc. and suggests the best course of action—what play to call, what pitch to throw, who to substitute and when, etc.

But in academia, AI is being used for writing tasks. And with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reporting that the humanities only accounted for 8.8 percent of degrees in 2022, the lowest since 1987, the outlook for writing and other humanity classes may appear dim. But as a university writing lecturer, I believe the opposite will occur—AI's prominence will only reinstate the appreciation for skilled writing and the humanities.

Don't get me wrong, generative AI can do various writing assignments thoroughly. When I attended the Transition to College Writing Symposium at Ole Miss last fall, writing and rhetoric lecturer Marc Watkins presented a session titled "Promise and Peril of Generative AI in Education." He illustrated how AI can summarize articles, produce anecdotes, and find evidence, all of which are useful tools to aid college writers. But as I can vouch for, when generative AI is asked to write an essay, it's unable to meet collegiate standards.

See, generative AI is incapable of writing with nuance. Virtually all first-year college writing programs train students in argumentation, yet if a student were to ask AI to write an argument for them, it would come back with a general, satellite snapshot with unoriginal points. Sure, AI can present pre-existing information in new ways, but it cannot truly innovate or tease out the fine details of an issue that are overlooked or unaddressed. We push students to think critically, not cyclically.

But this is just the start of how AI writing is restricted. Beyond producing original ideas, students are asked to create a document that is tailored to their argumentative purpose. The writing task requires students to evaluate how humans operate in "real time." This is known as the rhetorical situation.

The rhetorical situation considers the context surrounding a piece of writing. The writer must consider themselves in the eyes of their audience. For example, by being a writing instructor, I have

more authority to speak on this topic and may presume that my audience—the readers of *The Local Voice*—have accepted that I am credible to comment on this topic. For a first-year writer, however, they may want to quote a professional within the field to gain credibility with the same audience. Each student (writer), then, must consider the gender, education, race, nationality, etc. of both themselves and their audience to create a purposeful, pertinent, and convincing argument.


Another key component to the rhetorical situation is the rhetorical triangle: logos, ethos, pathos. These (roughly) translate to logic, ethics (credibility), and emotion. All of these play a crucial role in dictating an argument's efficacy. As aforementioned, first-year students would be expected to recognize that their educational level creates a need to quote an expert for credibility on this topic. And granted they use that quote to support a point of theirs, this would also play a role in providing good reasoning—logic—something that's paramount for persuasion. My examples and explanations in this opinion piece serve as my evidence—my grounds—on which I hope you deem reasonable and sound; this is me appealing to your logos or ethos and if done successfully, I will likely have persuaded you to some degree. For an emotional appeal, students are asked to focus on word choice and personal anecdotes or experiences. Each word and story have connotations attached to them; therefore, striking an appropriate emotional tone complements their credibility and logic and can make the same exact message more succinct.

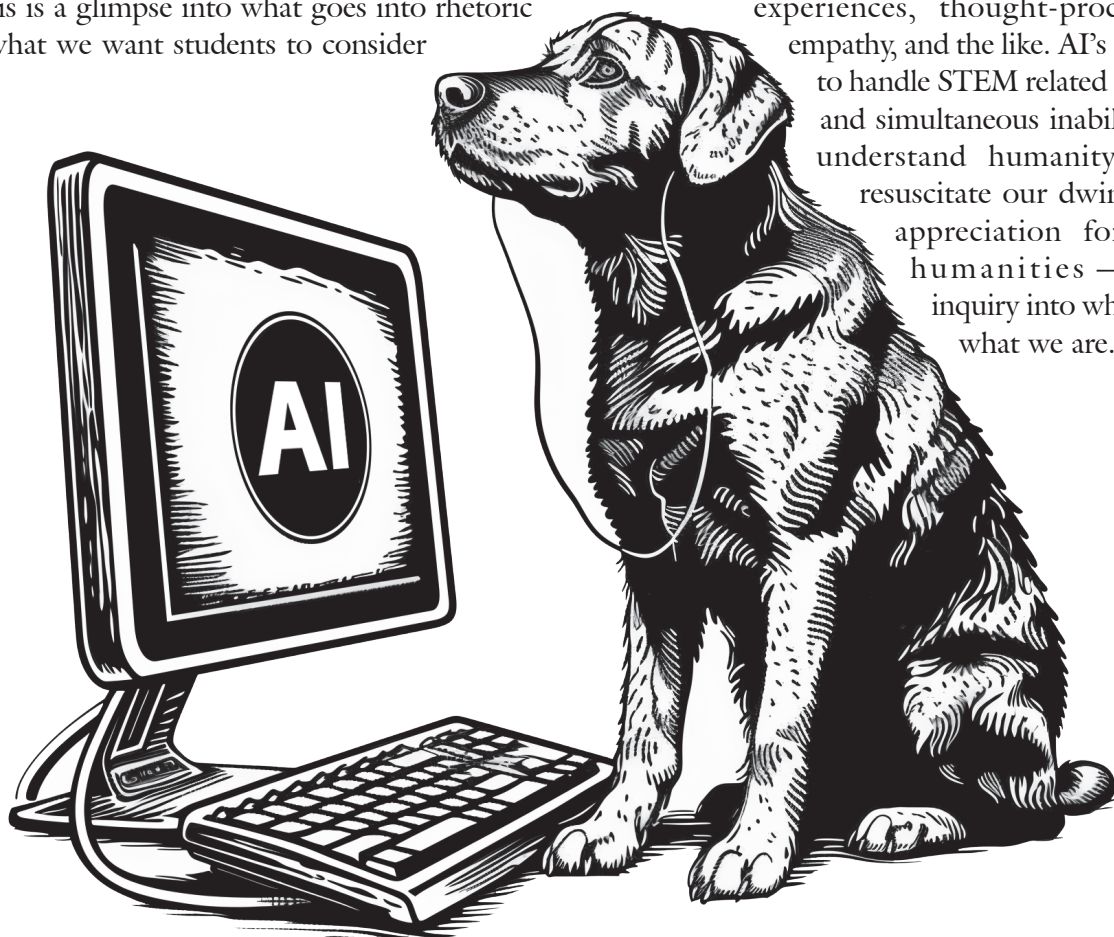
This is a glimpse into what goes into rhetoric and what we want students to consider

when they write their own arguments. But this also illustrates why AI will revive the appreciation for skilled writing and the humanities. AI will never be able to grasp the complexities of the rhetorical situation, or humans. AI can synthesize, summarize, and store information, and this is especially great for things that remain fixed and recordable: numbers, equations, tendencies. This is why AI is fantastic for things such as data analytics and other STEM related tasks, but unable to outmaneuver the humanities.

AI simply can't adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of humans. The human-author's ability to dictate the personality of a document according to themselves, their experiences, their audience, the subject matter, and the real-time conversation being had on that topic is something AI cannot replicate. And to say that it can is to insult yourself and humanity.

While I use writing to illustrate how AI fails to comprehend rhetorical situations, it's important to remember that this is a freshman level humanities course. But other humanity courses, such as philosophy, literature, history, religion, cultural studies, etc. invest in ideas that AI cannot contend with either. These disciplines place their values in the human mind, investigating the dynamism of how/what we think about ourselves and others.

The humanities consistently question and develop the understandings of human nature, yet to do so, one must understand the intricacies of human consciousness—the things that make us human—including the self-awareness of emotions, experiences, thought-processes, empathy, and the like. AI's ability to handle STEM related duties and simultaneous inability to understand humanity will resuscitate our dwindling appreciation for the humanities—the inquiry into who and what we are. 



LYRICS AND MUSIC

BY STEVE BREWER

BY THE TIME HE READS HER LETTER

By the time he reads her letter, she'll be north of Tennessee
Celebrating a new life with a pint of Hennessy
She'll make it far in the dining car of The City of New Orleans
And except for her guitar, she left him everything.

She met him in a bar south of Yazoo City.
He was not a handsome man, made up for by his wit. He
had a dead-end job, a beat-up Saab, and a BSA 650
And except for her guitar, she left him everything.

CHORUS 1 - Train whistle blows through the Shawnee Hills and below
Where she's going she won't know until Ontario
But she'll make it far in the dining car, all the way to Chicago
And by the time he reads her letter, she'll be looking at the snow

CHORUS 2 - Train whistle blows underneath a thumbnail moon
Where she's going she won't know until tomorrow noon
But she'll make it far in the sleeping car, at least until Mattoon
And by the time he reads her letter, she's checked into her room.

LIVING IN A FLOODPLAIN

A millionaire's Malibu mansion
Just went up in flames.
He's mad as hell, has a story to tell, looking
For somebody else to blame
Then he slaps away the hand of a poor old man
Who lost his trailer in a pouring rain.
Well, I'm sorry for your loss
But you gotta pay the cost
For living in that floodplain.

Well, a millionaire's beachfront cottage
Washed away in a hurricane.
He takes another turn, has money to burn;
Rebuilds it the same damn way.
But a man whose Chevy's underwater off the levee
Could afford no other place to stay.
Well I'm sorry to say you gotta move away,
But casinos are here to stay.

A millionaire's Malibu mansion
Just went up in flames.
See her tears of pain as she complains
That Cal Fire is to blame.
But she's got no time for other folks' crying;
They've only themselves to blame.
Says I'm sorry for your loss,
But you gotta pay the cost
For living in that floodplain.



WE DON'T HAVE THAT SPARK

VERSE 1

I don't know if it's me or if it's you,
But we don't have that spark
The way we used to do.
You tell me that you love me,
And I say the same to you,

CHORUS -

But we don't have that spark we need
To make that engine start. We need
To see what we still got, then weed
And seed that garden plot
We don't have that spark
Like we used to do.

VERSE 2

We don't do fun things together like the way we did
We each have fantasies
But we keep them hid
From each other then ignore
That things aren't like they were before

CHORUS

VERSE 3

I foresee another drunken haze night,
Even though I know that means another crazy fight,
But you're never satisfied
No matter how hard I've tried

CHORUS

SUPER LIANA

It starts deep down underground
Then it moves without a sound
In the shade along the ground
Into a gap where light abounds

CHORUS. Growing up and growing down
Spiraling and tightly wound
Climbing up tall trees into their crowns
Over houses then back to the ground

It's super liana
All it needs is light, air and water

VERSE 2. Virginia may creep, but kudzu's bound
To run through every thing in town
And winter brings all around
A tangle of gray and brown

CHORUS

VERSE 3. Before the plow sliced up the land
Turning five feet of loam to sterile sand
There were groves of oaks with fire brands
And wild sunflowers beneath their spans.

Now kudzu hides eroded ground
And "Welcome" signs to tiny towns
Growing up tall trees into their crowns
Over houses then back to the ground

THE PRESENT PAST

BY PARKER C. HALEY

My pillow was drenched; my heart felt labored; my thoughts had to overcome the remnant gauze of her words.

I was 13 then; I am 26 now. And this is the first time I have written about my experience the day before. Partly to remember; partly to understand; mostly to find similar experiences.

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The Mississippi sun had enough time to make itself known by the time I stepped out of my stepmom's house that afternoon. The heat radiated off the dying grass as always, but this was the first time it had matched my height. I knew if I walked far enough, I would become a black blob walking into Alice's looking glass.

No one was there to stop me. It was summertime, and Verna, my stepmom, was working at the newly opened restaurant. She always convinced herself that "this one was different," that "this one should pay better." But to my 13-year-old ears, I heard what I wanted — "hope" and "change." I'm unsure whether it was my reappropriation of Verna's words or my decision to walk beyond the blurriness before me but once in the woods — where the sun couldn't reach — I had a feeling of consolation and confidence.

As the sun painted the sky orange, the woods were permeated with a cool breeze from the Tishomingo creek. The sun's stray, yet stern rays complimented Tishomingo's gentle touch to my white skin. My sense of time was certainly distorted by the absence of our officially unofficial dog JoJo. He knew exactly when to leave the woods to be back home by eight, so this evening's departure became guesswork.

I figured I had roughly thirty minutes to spare, which gave me plenty of time to run over to what me and my friends called the "creek cabin." It was in no man's land and abandoned a while ago but sitting in there listening to the Tishomingo and feeling the cool breeze was blissful.

My walk over there had been quieter than usual, outside the occasional crack of leaves and twigs, and it caused me to realize that this was my first time in the woods without a friend or JoJo. I hadn't realized how solitude could disrupt depth perception. It was as if inches became millimeters and millimeters became meters. And it just occurred to me that while walking to the cabin, the distance felt elongated, yet as I approached it, the distance felt truncated.

But this is beyond the point, for when I spotted the cabin, light peered through its brown shutters.

I grew fascinated yet nervous. I knew others played around these neutral grounds, but I had never run into anyone. I felt Tishomingo's cool breeze behind me, assisting me on my walk. I slowly stepped up and over the three small steps leading to the small porch and peered into the open door.

There on a wooden crate sat a young girl, about my age. She instantly spotted me and sprang up.

"Hi there! You can come in!" she said welcomingly.

"I... I... it's okay," I started, "I didn't know anyone was out here." She was wearing a white, long-sleeved shirt, contrasting her skin. She didn't extend the invitation, sitting back down, so I continued, "Are you from around here?"

"No. Me and my mother just moved.

We move a lot, but I think we will be here for the summer." I hesitated to conjure up a response. I wanted my inquiry to appear natural and friendly.

"My friends are usually with me...we didn't know there was a light in there," I huff through my nose softly, "It's our favorite spot."

I noticed I had put myself inside the cabin by the time I finished speaking, sitting catty-corner to her. I blame my naivete for entering, but her eyes are what kept me there. Their solemn maturity neutralized me; they told me she had something valuable for me. I knew I was meant to find her there.

"So where are you from?" I asked.

"Mmm, well, my earliest memory was me and mama living in Vicksburg. My mama has lived in a few different states. Georgia, Alabama." She paused and then looked up at me. "Oh! If you mean before we came here, then Hattiesburg." I hadn't really considered what I meant.

"Why are y'all travelling so much?" I asked.

"My mama always said the best way to amend history is to never let it die. So we decided long ago to never let that history to fade, but to let it work through us and help others." I sat there, unsure of what to say next. Her accented voice began: "We see ourselves as the present past."

"But why you all? Why here?" I questioned.

"Mama could answer the first question better than me. But this town, this cabin has a history, you know?"

"My friend's dad said a Civil War encampment was around here. They said some confederates can still be heard out camping if you stay out late, but I hadn't heard nothin' before."


"You learn about murders being committed in the past. Brutal and inhumane murders. You are

led to believe they're part of a distant past, in no way connected to you. Listen."

She closed her eyes as the Tishomingo current resonated among the cabin's interior. The air felt coolly conditioned. "The same places that promise — peace — are often the exact spots that the past stains. My blood can no longer be seen on these boards, but I'm here to remind you of them. If you can tell others, or at least acknowledge what happened here, even if no one else cares, I can at least then let my story go.

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The details of that story still don't feel real. The gruesome nature of them should be reserved for select ears, which I'll write elsewhere.

Her story brought me to light headedness and then darkness. 

STRINGS by Clay Hale


Two of my guitar strings broke today — the same ones I put on this time last

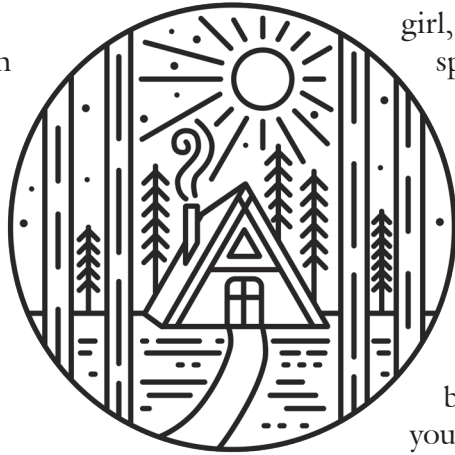
May. That was when I wrote my first real song. It took a broken heart to realize

that I was doing it wrong. So now I pluck these strings with calloused hands only

dampened when I wipe my eyes. I slip sometimes, don't play a note right, but it adds a piece of

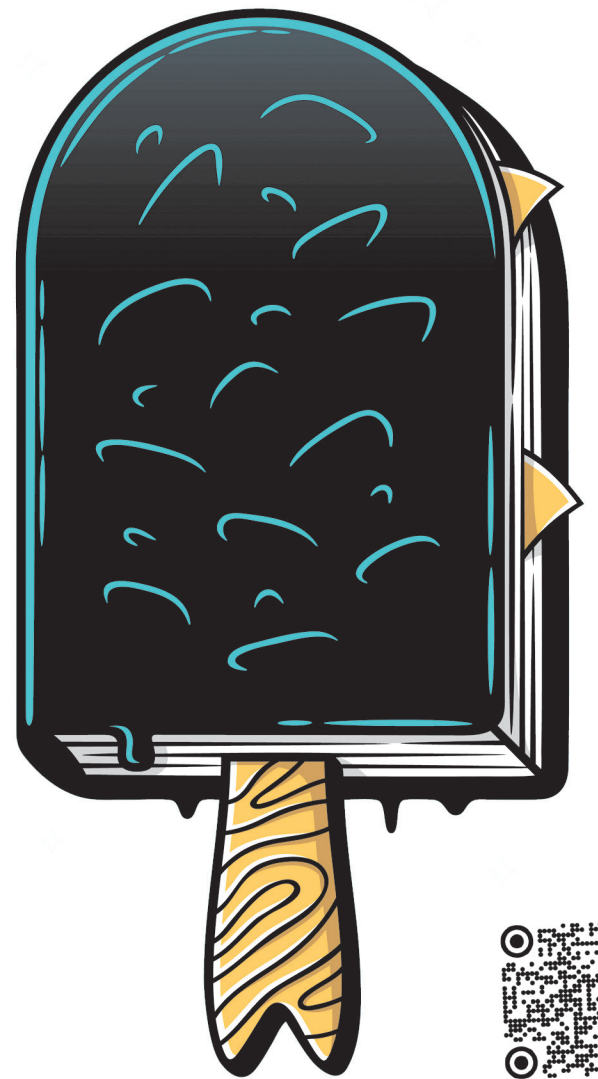
who I am. These strings have seen me through my worst days, my story, my song.

I've learned a lot through six strings though, that's why I left you when they broke. 



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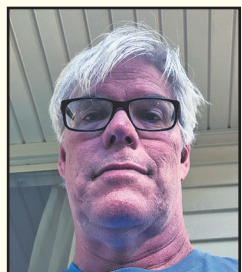
SUMMER READING ISSUE 2024



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STEVE BREWER is the leader, songwriter, guitarist, and singer for the Oxford band, The All Tore Up. The music is an eclectic mix of upbeat jump blues, rockabilly, jazz, and alternative rock, and lyrics center around love and loss, ecology, and nature themes. For his day job, he is an ecology professor at Ole Miss.



WILL GRIFFITH is a Mississippi Delta born songwriter. Will doesn't see his dark country musings as directly blues influenced. "I want people to celebrate sad music because of its beauty. Sad songs help you laugh at your own sadness." Will's band The Great Dying will release a new record, *A Constant Goodbye*, on August 30, 2024.



CLAY HALE is a native of Water Valley, Mississippi, and a senior integrated marketing communications student at the University of Mississippi. He started songwriting in December 2016 and has over two hundred self-written songs in his catalog. Currently, he serves as the Managing Editor of *The Daily Mississippian*.



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MARY BETH MAGEE writes prose and poetry with an aim to uplift, illuminate, and inspire. Her work has appeared in local, regional, and national periodicals as well as her own books and anthologies. She serves as the current president of the Mississippi Poetry Society. Her website is www.LOL4.net.



ABIGAIL ROBBINS has lived in Oxford off and on since birth but has called it home since 2011. She is the wife of local favorite bass player and computer nerd, Nathan Robbins, and is the mother of the incredibly rambunctious, creative, curious, and brilliant Charlie.