

# OXFORD AMERICAN

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*The Place Issue*

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- 8 Editor's Letter: How Beautiful My Land Is,  
by **Danielle A. Jackson**

## Points South

- 14 The Haunting of Lake Lanier, by **Anjali Enjeti**
- 18 The Pride of Nashville, by **Mikeie Honda Reiland**
- 26 The Chandeliers, by **James Seay**
- 30 The Cyclone of Rye Cove, by **Amy D. Clark**
- 34 Saturday on the Shrimp Lot, by **Leslie Pariseau**
- 38 A Pleasant Catastrophe, by **Rachael Maddux**
- 46 Five People Who Crave Sauce, a story by **Ladee Hubbard**
- 50 Oysters on the May, by **Max Ufberg**
- 52 Where I Was From, by **Lauren Stroh**
- 56 A Way to Become a Way to Be, a story by **Carl Napolitano**

## Pocms

- 17 Curve, by **Bruce Bond**
- 29 Blue-winged Warbler, by **Carl Phillips**
- 49 If Anyone Should Fight to Breathe, by **Emily Skaja**
- 62 This Life Not Yet Saved, by **Geoffrey Davis**
- 128 Caulbearer, by **Luisa A. Igloria**

Cover: Collage 18-03 - after Matisse's "Yellow Odalisque 1937," 2017 (detail), by Dinora Justice. Courtesy the artist and Gallery NAGA, Boston

The "Odalisque" paintings are Justice's current body of work. They address conscious and unconscious biases regarding traditional associations of nature with the feminine.

## Features

70  
**MIRROR HOUSE**  
*Howard Finster, my father, and a path to beauty in our broken world*  
by **Garrard Conley**

80  
**LA CANCION DE LA NENA**  
*An undiscovered guitar prodigy in the borderlands*  
by **Vanessa Angélica Villarreal**

98  
**WATER IS LIFE**  
*Black coastal Georgians remain resilient in the face of environmental peril*  
by **Neesha Powell-Twagirumukiza**

110  
**CAST IN CONCRETE**  
A graphic essay by **Martha Park**

116  
**WALLS**  
A story by **Indya S. Finch**

## Art By

Dinora Justice, Ross Mantle, Ryan Pierce, Chris Jackson, Melissa Brown, Wesley Allsbrook, Dylan Johnston, Emeline Mayo, Katlego Tlabela, Danny Leyland, Tjalf Sparnaay, Alex Ferrari, Nicholas Loffredo, Howard Finster, Jim Morgenthaler, Robert Poss, Keamber Pearson, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Jon Henry, Martha Park, Sofia Hager



The Place Issue



# Where I Was From

BY LAUREN STROH

**T**he first proof God gave us was the rice fields flooded on the way west into town, and the sugar cane. Then the billboards started to fall. When we reached the part of I-10 that curves out over North Lake Charles, Jack screamed. I held the Super 8 camera out the window and stared silent as we passed graveyards of slaughtered homes.

We'd spent the night with Conway gathering supplies to take with us. The three of us grew up together—I met Jack when I was five at daycare; Conway's grandfather was the best man when my parents wed. Jack evacuated the day before the storm to New Orleans, where Conway and I now live. We sat together in my living room and planned how best to provide aid back home.

The first night we photographed Conway's mom's house for the insurance claim, wielding but a flashlight against the dark. I shot the windows blown out and the moldy water spots on the walls, gaping holes in the attic and its shredded insulation spread across the bathroom downstairs from when the cat freaked out. We stepped over the mirror shattered across his sister's floor, the fence across the street blown over, the tree in the front yard snapped in an offshot tornado, the part of the porch flown down from the second story by the force of the wind. This was our safe place to sleep. We moaned and sighed through the night, spread across the parlor on a hardwood floor and leather couches, drenched by the wet of our bodies in August, in Louisiana heat.

Before seven o'clock, when night falls and the streetlights should have flicked on, Jack and I walked to his mom's house with a tree felled on it. On the walk back we saw a man tie a gas can to his truck on the opposite side of the street. We asked if he needed any water and he hollered back yes, so we left to bring some back. On the way home—two blocks—the cops stopped us twice.

By the time we returned, he was gone. I called out in the darkness and heard a woman

call back scared. We left her the offering as a gesture of goodwill—a few jugs of water and a cold dinner of rice and beans.

I thought of this in the night, turning; thought of reasons he wouldn't tell me his name. I thought of how after a storm, communities are governed by lawlessness and the consciences of those left to survive. Your neighbor might be your killer, your witness, or your friend.

**I**n the morning I walked the wreckage of my first life and looked, carrying water to dis-

tribute and extra cartridges of film. I walked past the bar that used to serve me when I was seventeen crumbled to bricks. I walked past a restaurant my dad and I used to love—at one point or another I'd ordered everything the kitchen had to offer. I passed the middle school I switched to after a challenging fifth-grade year, past my first boyfriend's house, past the street of nice houses where my ballet teacher lived. I stalked these scenes and settings of a past life beaten, backed away, and embarrassed with blackened eyes and their faces smashed in, staring back square.



That morning I met a disaster tourist from Houma who took a bus in from Chicago to pitch a tent at the lakefront in hopes to work on himself. He brought with him no water. I met overwhelmed Latino workers who drove in from Texas to tarp our roofs and clear debris on temporary contracts. They asked for boots. I yelled at undersupplied missionaries who carried expensive video equipment in righteousness, hypocrisy, and grief.

That morning I saw the lake stagnant for the first time, those poison waters totally still and unmoving, an egret strange and

watching on the shore. I saw a dog wandering around lonely with its leash cut off, cried at it, then had its owner drive by to take it out of my arms. I cried watching the hurricane hit at three in the morning on a livestream in New Orleans, and again the next day on the phone with my mom, this time in thanksgiving that the city did not flood.

But when I went to check on the woman who'd answered back in the night, she told me she had been on her knees praying for forgiveness when the storm hit, with a tree down and blocking her front door. Then I

cried in a new way, deep and breathy, all of a sudden and like I hadn't before.

I sat in her living room and let her son squeeze the fat of my forearm. She told me this was a sensory thing. He squeezed in ever tightening increments until I called out, unable to withstand the pain. He fell into hysterics, which she called regressing. I watched purple and red streaks bloom on the underside of my arm where I'd just let his hands grip for comfort after I coached him *soft, soft*. She showed me the rashed skin on his chest from bathing in the tap after the