

# WORDS ON CANVAS

WRITING COMPETITION  
HARN MUSEUM OF ART



2025 WINNERS

The Harn Museum of Art's annual writing competition, Words on Canvas invites University of Florida and Santa Fe College students to respond to artworks on display with compositions of prose, poetry, or short stories. As we celebrate the tenth year of Words on Canvas, we took this moment to reflect on the museum not as an institution but as part of an organic community of creatives, writers, artists, and changemakers. The three judges offer our sincere gratitude for being part of our community at the Harn Museum of Art. While art is always most visible in a museum, people are behind everything seen and experienced there. Thus, three Harn staff members—people who work with the museum every day—served as judges for this year's writing program. We received 60 entries to Words on Canvas and have selected seven written works to be printed in this tenth edition.

The judges for Words on Canvas 2024-2025 were Errol Nelson, Student Engagement Manager Heather Bjorn, Communications Specialist and Mary Diaz, Curatorial Program Coordinator with special thanks to Rachel Stergios, Spring '25 Student Engagement Intern, for her coordination.

The selected works address a variety of themes, including natural scenes as seen in *Champ d'avoine (Oat Field)*; urban and industrial settings such as those in *Swamp and Pipeline, Cancer Alley, Louisiana*; cultural and historical reflections as expressed in *Resting for the Ancestors I* and *Cocoa Beach I*; and entertainment and leisure depicted in *Ground Zero Blues Club, Clarksdale, MS*. Among many other themes woven intricately—themes of loss, inspiration, hope, community and promise.

**Watch for next year's competition at [harn.ufl.edu/wordsoncanvas](https://harn.ufl.edu/wordsoncanvas)**

## CONTENTS

- 5 FIRST PLACE  
**Aarati Maharaj, Clepsydra**  
Major: Accelerated Bachelors of Science in Nursing  
Richard Misrach, *Swamp and Pipeline, Cancer Alley, Louisiana*
- 7 SECOND PLACE  
**Kemarah Thermidor, The Burden in Stillness**  
Major: Psychology and Criminology  
Charlotte Watts, *Resting for the Ancestors I*
- 9 THIRD PLACE  
**Michael Orlando, Sacrifice Zone**  
Major: Mechanical Engineering  
Richard Misrach, *Swamp and Pipeline, Cancer Alley, Louisiana*
- HONORABLE MENTIONS
- 11 **Eluney González, Que aquí hay cero**  
Major: English and History  
Ray Hale, *Ground Zero Blues Club, Clarksdale, MS*
- 17 **Laura Newman, Cocoa Beach I, Florida**  
Major: Media Production and English  
Mitch Epstein, *Cocoa Beach I, Florida*
- 19 **Christian Rios, Pavane of the Butterflies**  
Major: Economics and Chinese  
Claude Monet, *Champ d'avoine (Oat Field)*
- 21 **Malik Williams, Resting for the Ancestors, Resting for Myself**  
Major: English  
Charlotte Watts, *Resting for the Ancestors I*

## Clepsydra

By Aarati Maharaj

Swamp wetlands: pristine treasures concealed in a time capsule my ancestors bequeathed to me,  
When they poured continuous green elixir to imbibe and nourish my wooden limbs,  
So Spanish moss can greet Cypress, Oak and Mangroves as it travels through,  
And wild birds can sing sweet lullabies to kaleidoscope skies,  
While magnolias stand guard on the nearby shores,  
Drinking in the fog of fading twilight.  
Safe in the humdrum of reverie.  
A promise made for Ever,  
As the winds flows,  
And I wade.  
Broken!  
Betrayed by greed,  
Black gold now fuels  
Flora and fauna, naively fooled,  
When a contract signed in black ink,  
Let in a shadow with a countdown clock,  
Hidden in lead-laden wooden horses: 1, 2, 85..  
Insidiously seeping into double helixes, erasing time.  
Requiems conducted for a watery arboretum: liquid night.  
And I, in my alley of death, nursing poison within me, *lup-dup*.  
As ash shrouds the *fleeting decades* the bayou once promised to US.



Richard Misrach, *Swamp and Pipeline, Cancer Alley, Louisiana*, 1998  
Museum purchase, gift of Dr. and Mrs. David A. Cofrin

## The Burden in Stillness

By Kemarah Thermidor

Inside the pale yellow sheets,  
mahogany brown limbs  
seem to collapse among  
transparent white cloth;  
my eyes only closed  
for a moment

in a banal spot where  
no one would think  
to check for a mother,  
daughter, sister, or  
wife against the sturdy  
weathered gray wood,

secure despite temptation  
to decay with abandon,  
leaving only one sign of life—  
since the wind never did stop  
for those soft bulbs laying  
below me



Charlotte Watts, *Resting for the Ancestors I*, 2018, Museum purchase, funds provided by the Melvin and Lorna Rubin Fund

## Sacrifice Zone

By Michael Orlando

A parish away from New Orleans, plants push  
petrochemical pollen, their smoke-stalks oozing  
synthetic tears across still-water algal blooms.

The sky hangs like a soot-stained sheet metal  
above miles of permanent alopecia backwoods.  
Below, the bayou is a dull green, like melted kudzu  
clots dissolved into the stagnant, burnt, dark roux.

Trees lie strewn like shattered stoplight poles.  
Rusted brown, they corrode into foreign bodies  
whose bare branches, like burnt nerve endings,  
tangle toward the impression of a sun.

And out in the swamp, out in the sacrifice zone,  
hypodermic reeds fence webs of steel cannula  
bolted to the bayou floor.

Wood husks bristle in haphazard, jagged suture lines,  
but they cannot close chemical wounds.



Richard Misrach, *Swamp and Pipeline, Cancer Alley, Louisiana*, 1998  
Museum purchase, gift of Dr. and Mrs. David A. Cofrin

## Que aquí hay cero

By Eluney González

Hubo un extraño en el pueblo esa noche, y todos lo habían visto menos Marta. Algunos del bar le contaron que era un argentino que se había vuelto gringo, que había regresado, pero sin que nadie lo reconociera. Parece que tenía algún interés en este pueblo, lo cual sorprendía a todos porque solo había cinco mil habitantes, más unos cuantos terneros y caballos, y varios kilómetros de pampa vacía en cada dirección.

Lo que sabían con certeza era que iba pidiendo tonterías a cualquier hombre sin razón. Al alcalde le pidió un corte de pelo; al cajero del súper, que le limpiara el auto. Iba tirando plata a cualquiera, dando órdenes sin decir su nombre, y algunos ya habían hecho cosas que nunca en su vida pensaron cobrar. Un maestro dijo que paseó algunos perros feos y casi muertos a cinco cuadras y que, por eso, el hombre le dio veinte lucas. Su esposa, en cambio, escupió a los pies del extraño por el doble. Marta escuchaba todo esto de los regulares y no entendía nada, solo que no quería encontrarse con él.

Estaban afuera, en un par de sillones sucios y cómodos bajo un cartel de luces fluorescentes azul y rojo que decía Ground Zero Blues Club, que había llegado de un primo estadounidense del dueño, como resultado de una apuesta que ganó en Mississippi. Antes, el bar tuvo otro nombre, pero cuando recibió el cartel, lo cambió para reflejar una nueva realidad. El dueño no sabía qué significaban las palabras; solo le gustaba cómo brillaban, y los demás venían igual. Marta recién había salido para atender a los clientes, llevando botellas que se amontonaban en la mesa frente a los sillones. Eran los de siempre que ocupaban los mismos lugares hasta el punto de que, si alguno de ellos no veniera, sería motivo de gran preocupación. Mientras hablaban de las novedades, incluyendo a ese hombre tan raro del que todos contaban historias, escucharon algunas pisadas. Y apareció él. Todos lo miraron de reojo, sus cervezas ya abandonadas.

—¿Tienen de comer? —preguntó.

Marta no se movió.

—No, señor. No tenemos nada.

—Che, pero no vengo mendigando —dijo engréido, con una sonrisa luminosa de dientes derechos y blancos—. A ver, aquí tengo.

Sacó un fajo de dólares de su bolsillo y empezó a contarlos, frente a todos, de a uno. Los hombres en el sillón miraban sin animarse a moverse. Contó un rato y paró, mirando a Marta.

—Ahí van cincuenta. ¿Qué me das por eso?

—De verdad no es asunto de plata, señor. Es que no hay comida —señaló el bar, donde las botellas verdes destellaban, pero no había ningún refrigerador—. Ni pan hay.

El hombre miró y, torpemente, agregó otros cinco billetes.

—Ni pan. No te lo puedo creer —se burló. Miró el cartel fluorescente—. O sea, ¿me atrajo este cartel y no van a tener comida?

—Bueno, si tiene hambre, dale algo —dijo el dueño, que había salido de la oficina de atrás por tanta conmoción. No miraba a Marta ni al extraño. Sus ojos estaban pegados a la pila de plata en la mesa—. Pero dale algo, nena. Que es muy generoso —insistió, sin apartar la vista del dinero.

Marta invitó al hombre a entrar al barcito y rebuscó en todas las alacenas, que estaban vacías, salvo una que solo guardaba platos decorativos del dueño. Le pasó un plato vacío, donde solo quedaban los dibujos de flores y pájaros en la cerámica.

—¿Y la comida?

—Es como te dije —respondió Marta, mientras llevaba algunas botellas para los muchachos de afuera—. Si encontrás comida, avísame, que a mí también me falta.

El extraño miró su plato vacío durante un largo rato. Cuando entendió que realmente no le iban a servir nada, frunció el ceño, escupió en el plato y lo estrelló contra el suelo. Los pedazos quedaron ahí, esparcidos en el polvo, y el hombre salió echando chispas. Afuera, los hombres en los sillones y Marta lo vieron perderse en la oscuridad, mientras el dueño cerró la puerta de su oficina y se perdió en la cuenta de su dinero.



Ray Hale, *Ground Zero Blues Club, Clarksdale, MS*, 2010; printed 2024  
Museum purchase, funds provided by the Melvin and Lorna Rubin Fund



## Here, There is Nothing (*English translation of Que aquí hay cero*)

By Eluney González

There was a stranger in town that night, and everyone had seen him except for Marta. Some people from the bar told her that he was an Argentine who had turned gringo and returned, but no one recognized him. It seemed he had some interest in the town, which surprised everyone since there were only five thousand inhabitants, along with some calves, horses, and vast stretches of empty Pampa in every direction.

What they knew for sure was that he kept making ridiculous requests to anyone for no reason. From the mayor, he asked for a haircut; from the supermarket cashier, a carwash. He went around tossing money to anyone, giving orders without giving his name, and some had done things they never thought they'd get paid for. A teacher said he walked some ugly, nearly dead dogs for five blocks, and for that, the man gave him twenty thousand pesos. His wife, on the other hand, spat at the stranger's feet for double that. Marta heard all of this from the regulars and didn't understand anything, except that she didn't want to meet him.

They were outside, sitting on a pair of dirty yet comfortable sofas beneath a blue and red fluorescent sign that read Ground Zero Blues Club, which had been sent by the owner's American cousin after winning a bet in Mississippi. The bar had had another name before, but once they received the sign, the owner changed it to reflect a new reality. He didn't know what the words meant; he just liked how they glowed, and the regulars kept coming anyway. Marta had just gone out to attend to the customers, carrying bottles that piled up on the table in front of the sofas. These were the same people who always took the same spots, to the point that if one of them didn't show up, it would cause great concern. While they talked about the latest news, including the strange man everyone had a story about, they heard footsteps. And there he was. They all eyed him askance, their beers abandoned on the table.

"Do you have food?" he asked.

Marta didn't move.

"No, sir. We don't have anything."

"Hey, but I'm not begging," he said arrogantly, with a bright smile showing his straight, white teeth. "Let's see, here I have it."

He took a wad of dollars from his pocket and began counting them one by one in front of everyone. The men on the sofas watched without daring to move. He counted for a while and stopped, looking at Marta.

"There's fifty. What'll you give me for that?"

"Really, it's not about money, sir. There's just no food." She gestured toward the bar, where green bottles gleamed, but no refrigerator was in sight. "There's not even bread."

The man looked and, awkwardly, added five more bills.

"Not even bread? I can't believe it," he sneered. He glanced at the fluorescent sign. "So, this sign brought me in, and you don't have any food?"

"Well, if he's hungry, give him something," said the owner, who had left his back office due to all the commotion. He didn't look at Marta or the stranger. His eyes were glued to the pile of cash on the table. "But give him something, girl. He's very generous," he insisted, not taking his eyes off the money.

Marta invited the man inside the bar and searched through all the cupboards, which were empty except for one, which held only the owner's decorative plates. She handed him an empty plate, its ceramic surface only showing floral and avian designs.

"And the food?"

"It's like I told you," Marta replied as she carried bottles to the guys outside. "If you find any food, let me know. I need some too."

The stranger stared at his empty plate for a long time. When he realized they really weren't going to serve him anything, he frowned, spat on the plate, and smashed it on the floor. The pieces stayed there, scattered in the dust, and the man stormed out. Outside, Marta and the men on the sofas watched him disappear into the darkness, while the owner closed the door to his office and became absorbed in counting his money.

## Cocoa Beach I, Florida

By Laura Newman

It's 1983. You're thirteen. You were supposed to spend the summer with your mom like you had for the past seven summers. The divorce agreement was very specific- school years with your dad, summers with your mom. After the split she moved to Georgia. You live in a Florida town no one gives a shit about with your dad and his new wife. They have a five-year-old called Suzie. She lives with you too. You hate her because your dad lets her do cheerleading. He won't let you join until your mom catches up with her child support payments.

Last week your mom called you to tell you she couldn't take you this year because she needed time to "find herself." You don't understand what she's talking about. Your bag was packed by the door. *How did you lose yourself?* you asked. Silence filled the other end of the line.

When the call was done you cried for four hours. You heard your stepmom Kara tell your dad to go check on you, so he came in and sat silently on the edge of your bed until you fell asleep.

This morning they sit you and Suzie down in the living room after breakfast.

You're all going to Cocoa Beach to watch the NASA rocket launch today.

They got you and little Suzie matching "sister shirts."

Suzie shrieks and puts hers on right away.

You ask if you have to wear it and they say yes.

In the car you stare out the window and listen to "Total Eclipse of the Heart" on your Walkman on repeat. You think about your mom and wonder what she's doing at that very moment. You watch as Suzie talks the whole three hour drive there. You have no clue what she's saying, but you're sure it's fucking annoying. That's how your mom describes her—your dad's fucking annoying ass kid. She tells you all the time without her genetics you'd be an annoying ass kid too.

When you get there, it looks like everyone has been there for days. Men with fully hooked up trailers are cooking hotdogs on grills while their wives lay in plastic lawn chairs next to them. Your dad pulls the car between two RVs and you watch as the guy in the van next to you glares at the sudden intrusion of personal space. It was the one spot you guys could possibly park. Everywhere else was taken. You wonder why so many people care about a rocket launch.

You learned about space flight last year in seventh grade and thought it was the scariest thing in the world. When your teacher asked who in your class would like to go to space one day, you were the only one on the "no" side of the room.

*Why would someone purposefully shoot themselves into a never ending vacuum of nothingness?*

You watch as your dad drapes a quilt your great grandma made you over the hood of the car. He says that's your and Suzie's "special sister hang out spot" for the day. You close your eyes and wish to be anywhere but here while Suzie jumps up and down in glee.

While you're laying on the hood you hear your dad and Kara talking. You overhear "lost soul" and "Georgia" and assume they're talking about your mom. Suzie starts to ask you a question about the clouds but you cut her off with a harsh whisper. She turns away from you and starts to cry softly. You know you should care but you don't. You keep still and try to listen. Waiting. Hoping they'll say something about her you don't already know.



Mitch Epstein, *Cocoa Beach I, Florida, 1983*  
Museum purchase, funds provided by the Melvin and Lorna Rubin Fund; and the Harn General Acquisition Fund, in Memory of Dr. Mel Rubin

## Pavane of the Butterflies

By Christian Rios

It's been a while since you've been here.

You used to lay there undisturbed and soft. Your little inhales and even quieter exhales could lull restless cities to sleep; a comforting reassurance that put my worries to rest. And like a pastry in an oven, your chest would rise, pause, and sink ever so slightly. The sky would blanket you in violet, velvet darkness, and your body would emanate a tireless marigold beauty. Your rich presence would permeate across the fields, blending this meandering reality with water and song. A lovely, filling presence. Above, I would see dandelions sprouting, eddying their way across the universe.

Without you, I wake to the arrays of cotton and the air of burning jasper. The callouses remain, the cattle continue to low, the wheatgrass still ripples. The dry winds parch the soil of its moisture and, like shattered ceramic, the dirt fragments as I walk over it. Skeletal boughs rest beyond the fields; their invitations go unanswered by the worms, roly-polies, and fungi. The dormant decomposers leave yesterday's fallen leaves littered and tomorrow's shapeless. Somewhere I hear a whirring river stream change its course, its riverbed whispering the ancient odes of sindoor eyes.

I open my eyes to a dawning wheatfield sky of vanilla sun: a heavenly idleness. Now, there are sweetgums and live oaks and sand plums. From them, roosting butterflies shoot out, finding their way to the flower-freckled mustard field. Masses of fluttering sapphire dance from petal to petal, dewdrops falling with each movement. And I imagine the nectar — gentle, dulce nectar — streaming from flower to butterfly, from butterfly to life. One lands on the back of my hand, opening its wings to reveal an azure harmony. It departs

and rejoins the others.

Barefoot, I amble my way through the flowers not knowing what to think or how to feel. I pause to pick up a lichen-covered stone, examining all its bumps and grooves. The symbiotic colony suddenly spreads, enveloping the rock; it crawls onto my fingertips, dyeing them a frostbitten black. It drives further up, turning my skin a jaundice yellow. It weakens me, and I collapse. I feel water seep up through the ground, carving rills that take my body away from the field. The butterflies set off from their flowers, and veil the sun, eclipsing the world in a cold, lapis haze. In this watercolor abyss, I close my eyes.

*Good night, dew, good night, sweet dew, good night,  
good night.*

Waking up on a muddy riverbank, I see a waterlily brightened by the moonlight. Returning home, I think to myself: how long is the trail of marigold sand along the riverbed, and where does it start?

By my bed, I serve myself a cup of hibiscus tea.

I drop in a sugar cube and watch listlessly as it dissolves.



Claude Monet, *Champ d'avoine (Oat Field)*, 1890, Gift of Michael A. Singer 20

## Resting for the Ancestors, Resting for Myself

By Malik Williams

A woman is sleeping, but the world does not sleep around her. She is suspended in a moment, weightless yet burdened. A yellow dress clings to her body, radiant against the shadows of the past. Beneath her, the cotton fields stretch endlessly, a silent witness to labor that once defined survival. I stand before Charlotte Watts' *Resting for the Ancestors I* and feel an ache that does not belong solely to history, but to something deeper, something personal.

I do not carry the weight of that past in my hands, yet I feel it in my bones—in the expectations to always move, to always do, to always achieve. To rest is to risk being left behind. To stop is to lose the race. And yet, this woman sleeps. Not out of exhaustion or defeat, but as an act of defiance, of reclamation. She sleeps because she must. Because her ancestors could not. Because rest is a birthright stolen long ago, now taken back.

I think of my own life, my own relentless pace. The ticking of deadlines, the expectation to be more, to know more, to succeed at any cost. I think of my mother, who worked until her body demanded surrender, who told me that rest is earned, not given. I think of my grandmother, who held crossword puzzles in her hands, who made meals with the precision of someone who knew hunger too well, who told me to never worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow can worry about itself. Rest was hardly a part of the lesson.

Then, I think of my mother at the end of a long day, curled up on the couch, watching one of her Netflix Korean dramas, drifting off into

sleep in the exact way as the woman in the painting. Her exhaustion weighs on her, yet in that moment, she looks peaceful, lost in dreams before the next day begins again. I watch her, remembering all the times I've nudged her awake, telling her to go to bed, to sleep properly. But she never does. That couch, the soft hum of the television, the world fading away—her swinging bench, her stolen moment of rest. And I realize maybe this is her act of reclamation, too.

But here she is—this woman in yellow, unbothered by the ghosts of industry and labor that surround her. She sways above the cotton fields, her body light, her presence heavy. I wonder if she dreams of them, if they whisper to her as she sleeps, telling her that this is how she honors them: not with work, but with stillness. I wonder if I, too, can learn this lesson. If I can let go of the guilt that comes with closing my eyes and embracing the quiet.

There is a revolution in this image, and I carry it with me as I leave the museum. I feel it in the way I take a deeper breath, my shoulders soften, and the way I decide—just for today—not to rush. To lay down the weight I have been taught to carry. To rest, not because I have earned it, but because I am worthy of it. Because I, too, have ancestors who would want this for me.

And so, I rest.



Charlotte Watts, *Resting for the Ancestors I*, 2018  
Museum purchase, funds provided by the Melvin and Lorna Rubin Fund



Judges note:

*We offer our sincere gratitude to all those who submitted their remarkable poetry and prose to Words on Canvas this year. All of their entries transported us into the world of the canvas, relating the canvas to the outside world, and connecting us through their creativity. Congratulations on the impressive results of your fine efforts.*





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