Editors’ Introduction

Most of the essays, poems and stories in Coastlines answered a call for submissions on the USM Gulf Coast webpage in the Fall of 2008. The contributors represent the full spectrum of the Southern Miss Gulf Coast community, including students, staff, alumni, faculty and Coast residents. The submissions were reviewed by the Gulf Coast chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, which is the international English Honor Society. The chapter was founded in the summer of 2008, after an initial attempt to launch a chapter just before Hurricane Katrina ravaged the campus. Coastlines represents one of their first collective acts to cultivate a literary milieu on the Mississippi coast. These writings are often imbued with that sense of place considered a hallmark of Southern letters, but they also reflect the time, the aftermath of the great August 2005 hurricane, which almost washed USM Gulf Coast from the face of the earth. We did not intend, however, for this volume, to be one of the "Katrina books" that have proliferated in the aftermath of the storm. Although Coastlines certainly testifies to the resilience and dogged endurance of the hurricane-devastated Gulf Coast, it also expresses the regional sensibility of the Sun Belt South, and reveals the diversity, breadth of interests and erudition that typify modern universities everywhere. The collection and publication of this volume, we would hope, contributes to the greater recovery, the broader reintegration of the Gulf Coast community of which it is a part.

Some of the works in Coastlines respond directly to the dynamic of storm and recovery. Thus, Jordan McCrary's personal essay, "A Series of Disasters," places the storm among a sequence of calamities that the author weathered to discover a strengthened identity and purpose. And Claire Hansen's enigmatic, "The Basalt Bison of Mississippi" finds its denouement in the moment that a Gulf Coast émigré, seeing the catastrophe unfold on TV, discovers that she must, absolutely, return home to share the fate of her kin and hometown.

Some contributions invoke moods and conflicts reminiscent of the hurricane and its aftermath. Travis Kurowski's carefully nuanced story, "Sleep" narrates scenes of flood, and torrential rain and a protagonist who struggles to hold on to his sense of what was normal before the deluge. Themes of trauma, grief, and gritty determination, similarly, inform works as diverse as Robin Barnett's intensely personal poems, "Jigsaw Puzzle" and, "Walking the Tightrope" and Carol Stromhetz's erudite study of sexual violence in the Bosnian Civil War, which was originally written for a USM Political Science class in 2010.

Other works evoke themes that are familiarly "Southern". Yolanda Bayless Armstrong's autobiographical essay "Mississippi Native" meditates on the paradoxes of race and color in ways reminiscent of Richard's Wright's Black Boy. M.A. Williams’ coming-of-age story "Shooting a Squirrel" unfolds among the bayous, fish camps and piney woods northeast of Pontchartrain and echoes such works as Robert Penn Warren's "Blackberry Winter." Nat Holman's graveyard elegy "Wire Fence with a Chain Link Gate" infuses a distinctively Southern place--he wouldn't tell me exactly where--with a good-humored dose of the eternal verities of human cussedness and kinship. Nonie Johns "Come On Home" manages to both evoke and poke at the South, its steamy climate, pestiferous fauna and befuddled Yankee snowbirds.

And of course, all the works in Coastlines bear witness to the broadening of sensibility and outlook usual around universities. Each of Katharine Cozzens' three accomplished poems captures an exquisitely defined yet transcendent moment, the sharp images and confessional tone bearing the impress of poets like Robert Lowell. "Dark Times", Timothy Tanner's gently...
sardonic short story watches uncomfortably as a science fiction devotee attains a painful kind of self-knowledge through his encounter with a cult figure. Brian Overstreet’s quartet of sharp, gritty poems take us inside the shrimp processing demimonde on Back Bay, Biloxi, but they say less of the South and more about the grueling experiences of blue collar work and the industrial workplace. And while Jordan McCrary’s playful story "Inside Outsides" riffs on the self-referential qualities of post-modern literary production, Carol Stromhetz’s erudite essay "Rape, Women and War" reminds us, again, that, while language plays, history is what hurts.

I once heard it said, on another topic, that, "We might not be where we should be, but we’re still going, and thank God we’re not where we were." We offer Coastlines as evidence that the Gulf Coast is “still going,” still moving forward. We hope that you agree, and that you savor these writings as we all move forward together.

*The Editors*