

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2009**

2009 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

"Architecture"

Nora Stone

Mentor: Holly Wren Spaulding

Northwestern Michigan College

"Empty Cage"

Rick Manges

Mentor: JodiAnn Stevenson

Delta College

"Missing Mother"

Jane M. Mitchem

Mentor: Bonnie Janeshek

Bay de Noc Community College

Essay

"Spawn of the Schizophrenic"

Julia Lombardo

Mentor: Clark Iverson

Macomb Community College

"Five"

Jamison Knudsen

Mentor: Ron Brown

Delta College

"The Joy of Chickens"

Alice Snively

Mentor: Jim Fatka

Montcalm Community College

Fiction

"Spider"

Katy Haas

Mentor: Jeff Vande Zande

Delta College

"Green Wrapper"

Jessie Kramer

Mentor: Clark Iverson

Macomb Community College

"The Lust of Loneliness"

Mary Giermann

Mentor: Mary Tayler and Gretchen

Cline

Muskegon Community College

2009 Creative Writing Judges

Poetry

Jeffrey Bean
Associate Professor of English
Central Michigan University

Fiction

Emma Ramey
Affiliate Professor of Writing
Grand Valley State University

Essay

John Schneider
Columnist
Lansing State Journal

First Place Poetry
2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Architecture
Nora Stone

That torn greenhouse
was what my mother left
after the divorce,
hived with holes.

We maddened wasps
when we tore the roof.
We killed them
with canned poison.

My half-brothers have
half the world I had
growing up.
My life

halved by divorce.
Now this hole
by the barn, a
red house unwhole.

Judge's Comments

I am very impressed by this poem! Its language is musical, concise, and impactful; its line breaks work effectively with (and against) its syntax, creating tension and surprise; and its imaginative imagery and original metaphors (e.g., "That torn greenhouse . . . hived with holes") resonate powerfully with its emotional content, making the poem memorable and moving.

Second Place Poetry
2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Empty Cage
Rick Manges

Dirt bikes tear the road
chucking arrowheads in the grass,
spraying my rabbit with mud,
her once white coat hiding
in the corner of her cage.
Chert uncovered by neighborhood thugs
lies peacefully in a cedar
box no longer bullied by knobby
tires that dig only for pleasure.
That winter, two sets of tracks in fresh
snow lead away from an empty
cage to the Beck house. Father
Beck knows nothing about a missing
rabbit, picking his teeth he shuts the door.
Wax covers the bottom of young Beck's
yellow sled, blurring down the hill,
shooting him across the road
headlong into a concrete block wall.
Blood colors fresh snow.
Kids fly down the hill to his rescue,
except for me.
Standing by my empty cage
I hope his neck is broken.

Judge's Comments

This poem has a subtle-and intriguingly strange-contemporary fable quality. Its imagery is imaginative and haunting (e.g., the mud on the rabbit's fur, the blood on the snow, the empty cage and broken neck at the end), and its lines and syntax are finely wrought. Its potent verbs and vivid concrete details (e.g. "Dirt bikes tear the road / chucking arrowheads in the grass") bring the scene to life.

Third Place Poetry
2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Missing Mother
Jane M. Mitchem

She hears the chair scrape against the floor as
Her father sits down
And she continues to stare at the food on her plate without
Looking up.
Her brother asks, "What's the score?" through
A mouthful of food and
His questions goes unanswered.
Six, seven, eight
She counts the number of peas on her plate
. . . nine, ten . . .
She glances at the empty chair with
Somber eyes
And for a moment she sees the woman"
In the empty chair and
The woman's laughter echoes inside
Her head
And she is frightened and tries to speak to
The woman
Who isn't there: nor will ever be
Again.
The sound of cheering fills the room as
The home team pulls ahead
And the Three turn their heads to watch the
Instant replay.
No one speaks while the three
Imagine
What it would be like to be anywhere
But here
At this table sharing a meal and sharing
Memories and sharing
Silence.
The play is over and the sound of silver clanging
Against china
Is the only sound now
Serving as a reminder to the three
That once
They were
Four.

Judge's Comments

This is a moving narrative poem. The alternating line lengths work well with the pacing of the poem and allow for several resonant line breaks. The images of the ballgame (e.g., "the sound of cheering . . . as the home team pulls ahead") contrast powerfully with the memories of the "missing mother," creating a poignant, vividly rendered scene.

First Place Fiction
2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Spider
Katy Haas

The thing about camel spiders is that they're vicious. Give them a cockroach, and it'll be decimated in seconds. Camel spiders are vicious, and even though Becky tries, she doesn't understand.

I jump as she swats at the daddy long leg in the corner of the bathroom ceiling with her bare hand. The resounding thwack shoots tension across my shoulders. I remember when I just came home, noises like that turned me into a shivering pile of vulnerability. Now it's just the spiders that do that to me.

"You okay now?" Becky asks. Impatience is laced in her words.

I nod my head and continue brushing my teeth while she wipes her palm clean on a Kleenex but half the spider's body and two spindly legs remain on the wall. My hand trembles around my toothbrush even after she's tossed the Kleenex away.

Head cocked to the side, her eyes are narrowed and skeptical. "I have to get to work. You'll be okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." My words come out muffled by my toothbrush so if there's the lilt of a lie to be detected, it's been sufficiently obscured.

Becky leans toward me and touches her lips to my temple. A hand, soft palm and gentle, touches my cheek and she tells me she loves me. I wince, thinking of the spider there just moments ago. Before I can pull away, she backs out of the room and I'm alone with the corpse of a spider smeared on the wall above my head.

She tries to understand. I know she does. She tries, but doesn't really get it.

Ray, sitting across the syrup-sticky table from me, watches our waitress refill our mugs with steaming coffee. There's a frown on his face. Since he came back home a month earlier than I did, there's been a frown on his face. It was finally just too much for Anna - that constant frown, the haunted pain in his eyes - and she left. Now he frowns a little deeper and I find myself forcing wide smiles whenever Becky's around.

"Thanks," I say to our waitress who's squirming under Ray's stare, and she nods her head, quickly bustling away. Looking back to Ray, I cock my head to the side. "Have you been to your therapist lately?"

There are dark rings under his eyes, his skin slack as he rubs at one eye with his good hand - his only hand. "No. What's she doing for me anyway? Nothing. Still can't sleep." He picks up his coffee and his hand shakes. His eyes are bloodshot.

Looking at him, I'm filled with a mixture of sympathy and the desperate prayer that I don't end up like him: bitter, sleepless, and alone. When my mind's not caught up in memories of spiders, it weaves scenarios of me in his lonely life and I know I wouldn't be able to bear it. I don't know exactly what I'm supposed to do to stop it.

"Lately I've been having nightmares," I say. "Remember when we caught that camel spider and fed it cockroaches? I keep dreaming of that spider."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And I need Becky to kill goddamned daddy long legs for me because they get me all ..." I trail off with a helpless shrug but he nods.

He knows. And Becky doesn't.

"She doesn't get it."

"Neither did Anna. Most people don't." For the first time since we came back after our year in Iraq, there's not anger in his voice. He's stating a truth. Fire is hot, water is wet, and unless they've gone through something similar, people don't understand. "Have you talked to her? I never talked to Anna."

I shove spilled sugar around the tabletop with a fingertip. I don't want to look Ray in his bloodshot eyes and see myself crawling out of the spider web veins to join him in his solitude. "She doesn't ask. I don't know what to say. How to get started."

But I've thought about it often - what's safe to tell her and what's too much. Telling her about the first time I killed another human being and not being able to sleep for nights after seems too much. Unfair to her. I can't tell her how the little girls there were taught to fear us, told of the horrible things we'd do to them if given the chance and I never doubted that some men fulfilled that threat. The thought of telling Becky and looking her in the eye while I went through the things that wake me up in the middle of the night feel too heavy for her shoulders and so I leave them on mine.

"Tell her something," Ray advises and lifts his mug to his lips. His hand continues to tremble. Coffee sloshes over the edge of his cup and splatters against the table, dark and steaming like freshly shed blood.

I consider telling Ray to switch to decaf and maybe the jitters will stop. Maybe he'll be able to sleep. But I know that the sleep that's abandoned him holds nightmares. If he were to shut his eyes long enough, he'd see the explosion again and lose his hand

once more, every night. Again and again, he'd relive what we all want to forget. So I don't say anything. I understand.

All the lights in the house are off when I get home, except for the one in the bathroom. I find Becky there, kneeling on the counter. A wetted Kleenex is in her hand and she scrubs at the wall, rolls of tissue coming free to cling desperately to her fingertips.

"Hi."

She jumps at the sound of my voice and looks down over her shoulder to me. I smile and it doesn't reach my eyes, but she returns it anyway.

"Hey. You're back late. Everything all right with Ray?"

I nod even though I'm not sure. I nod because it's easier than explaining any anxious uncertainties I might have about Ray, or me, or mine and Becky's life together.

Becky turns her back on me once more to frown at the spot on the wall she'd been washing. She brushes away tissue debris and cocks her head to the side. "There. No more spider guts." She shimmies backward off the counter and stands on tiptoes on the cold tile floor. "You're sure everything's fine? With Ray? Or you?"

I nod as I lift a hand to her cheek and meet her eyes. Her eyebrows arch but she doesn't look away. I search her eyes for the desire to leave - the look that Ray had missed in Anna's gaze, or saw and didn't know how to stop. I see nothing except a tiny hint of bloodshot tiredness in the comers, which might just be enough.

"What're you doing?" She laughs and puts a hand over mine, the coolness of her wedding ring sending shivers through me.

I know I'm making her uncomfortable. I know I've accidentally done that a lot since I've come home - the nightmares, the panic, the wall I've begun to build between us. I'm her husband. It's my job to protect her from that, but here we are again. No wonder why she doesn't understand.

"Hey, Becky?" My hand slides from her cheek to come to a rest on her hip and her soft palm stays pressed flat to the back of my hand. "Did I ever tell you about that skunk we caught and kind of kept as a pet when I was in Iraq? We had a camel spider once, too, but. .. Well ... Did I tell you about that skunk?"

She shakes her head and leans back into the counter. "No. But I'd like to hear about it."

In the red, tired corners of her eyes, there's a warmness I haven't seen in months, not even when I bring her the gift of shaky, fake smiles.

She doesn't understand. She doesn't get it. But she tries.

I open my mouth and the sudden flood of words is like an army of spiders skittering free. I feel them restless on my tongue. They burrow into Becky's ears. Her hand tightens on mine and I don't wince. I don't pull away.

Judge's Comments

"Spider" is a skillfully-handled, well-crafted story, and I admire the writer for recognizing that the effects and violence of war can be shown via quiet moments and just through the narrator's everyday interaction with the people around him. This story doesn't focus on the worst-case scenario of a soldier returning from war, but just on a soldier trying to reconnect with his wife. What I admire even more, however, is the use of the spider in the title and throughout the story, which the writer also effectively builds up to and uses in the ending-an ending that ultimately sells the story for me. I love how that ending is open to interpretation: is it a hopeful sign or an ominous one? We could argue either way. This also means that the writer doesn't try to over-explain his/her point and trusts the readers to come to their own conclusions. I appreciate that.

Second Place Fiction

2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Green Wrapper
Julia Lombardo

They built our school over the old play park. Any child will tell you what a mistake it is to build a school over a play park. We sat in our social studies classroom while the teacher tried to tell us about recycling and pollution, while the whole time we could practically hear the crying souls of the dandelions and young trees that had perhaps been standing right underneath our desks. Once in awhile, if you leant your head down while the teacher wasn't looking, you could see the anthills lying softly under the layers of green grass or watch a grasshopper watching you, but then the teacher would turn around suddenly you'd be looking at the dull, smooth tiles under your desk, reaching up towards the front of the room like they were the ones who had tattled on you for not paying attention.

The school yard, once a portion of the park, was no longer friendly and inviting. Cruel pavement that seemed simply to ache to reach up and assault your knees covered it in places, forming a basketball court in one corner, a foursquare game painted on the ground in another. The grass that had survived construction was still gray with cement dust that first autumn, and it shrank into itself when you stepped on it, aching to regain its former life and unwilling to allow any more intrusion on its privacy.

The spindly trees were the same, uninviting. They had cut down the three large trees with the embracing branches, because climbing trees was considered dangerous and unacceptable in a school yard. Even in a play park it was frowned upon, by everyone, it seemed, except you and the trees. The trees that used to stand there wanted to be climbed, to be played in, to be hospitable. I believe they would have wanted you to live in them, even, if your parents would allow that sort of thing.

"Wanna play foursquare?" Jenny asked me that first afternoon. I felt as though something could happen that afternoon, sitting on the very edge of the pavement so as not to offend the grass. I didn't want to play foursquare. Turns out that I happened to waste that recess; nothing happened that day, or for many days after, though I often got the feeling that it would, there in the hot shade of the school building, on the enemy pavement, looking out at the dead or dying grass. I was conscious, one day, of letting my lunch napkin blow off my tray, and not reaching down to pick it up.

I began, even, to throw wrappers on the ground, something that I had never done before. It was almost in defiance of Miss Wolcott, the social studies teacher, who told us every day to throw our trash in the trash, rather than letting it blow across the

green earth. I figured that the earth around the school was no longer green, it didn't matter whether I tossed wrappers onto the pavement.

Surprisingly, this wrapper throwing translated into other parts of the day, though. It crept into my fingers when I sat on my own back porch, walked down my street across the sparkling emerald lawns of my parent's neighbors, and even when I ventured into the woods on the other side of the freeway.

My mother began to find wrappers everywhere, and the teachers at school would frown and scold constantly. I even got a detention, once, from Miss Wolcott. It was my first detention.

I sat in the homeroom during my detention and stared at the floor. I was startled, for the first time, to realize that no grasshopper watched me back when I looked down, though the detention monitor was fast asleep. It was only the blank white tile and I, staring at each other as though we were all each other had in the world.

I walked home from school that day without the feeling that something would happen. It was the first time that I had ever felt nothing.

For the next three days I had that numb feeling. I didn't do anything. I didn't throw the wrappers, I didn't sit on the pavement at recess, I hardly talked, I didn't read or write. I sat on the grass. Though it was the most uncomfortable thing I had ever done, I sat there on the grass until I somehow got the feeling back. It happened on the third day. The third day was rainy, and the grass was washed clean of the cement dust for good. It stood out, green brown, and I stroked it as I sat there, getting wetter and muddier by the minute. I was surprised that no one pulled me up and back inside the school when it started to rain, but it was as if the grass protected me. As I stroked it, it seemed more and more alive. It actually grew a little, and at the bottom of the blades emerged a bright, lively green that slowly spread upwards, reviving everything around it.

I heard a slight crumbling behind me, and turned to see the pavement slowly being devoured by the oncoming grass. It was not deterred when the bell rang, and I had to rise and leave the scene. I don't know how, entranced as I was, I ever made it back into the school, or why I would have wanted to obey that loud contraption that called me back to my academic prison, but something about the feeling that something would happen prodded me forward.

I walked through the door of the school, muddy, dripping, wet hair plastered to my head, bits of the bright green grass clinging to my body all over, and every eye in the school was on me, though no one spoke.

When I entered the social studies classroom, Miss Wolcott was writing something on the board, and the entire room was covered in green, except a little spot where

she was standing. Under her feet the white tile shone like a gravestone in the moonlight.

I watched as a tree slowly unfolded itself over my desk, reaching up to where the ceiling prohibited it from seeing the sky. I pitied it a moment, until my face reached the top, and suddenly ceiling and walls had disappeared. Miss Wolcott stood on her tile and looked around in dismay. I stood under the tree as a warrior stands before his army, and three of my classmates were already entangled laughingly in its boughs. The rest of them were running happily through the rain, rolling in the moist green grass and chasing each other over slippery hillocks. Soon all of us stood together in front of the tree, covered in grass, wet hair plastered down.

Miss Wolcott seemed to grow smaller and smaller, until she was only the size of the grasshoppers who watched us watching them. A bright green wrapper floated down from the top of the tree and I caught it in my hand, and put it down next to Miss Wolcott so that she could crawl onto it. That afternoon, I carried her and the wrapper home in a jar.

Judge's Comments

I enjoyed the creativity of this story. The narrator's voice is believable and helps sell the fantastical plot well. I also enjoyed all of the details of the story, and kept being surprised (pleasantly) throughout. Again, the writer got the ending right-it keeps that creativity but doesn't try to wrap everything up too much. It was a refreshing read.

Third Place Fiction
2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Lust of Loneliness
Julia Lombardo

The sky is a frothy blue color, & clouds are quietly racing across. I can only hear the ugly sound of cars driving by, no song birds.

I look down into the shallow hole, tiny white frail roots stabbing through it. A paper box lies at its bottom. Inside is Skipper, my pet goldfish. He died yesterday night.

Albert fills the hole in, replacing the soil gently. I mark the grave with a rose colored rock that I stole from the neighbor's yard.

This man, so much taller than I, stands so close to me. I can feel his warmth, softly radiating. This man is forty-four years old & is dating a twenty-nine year old woman: my mother. I hardly ever see my mother anymore. She works so late that I'm already asleep by the time she gets home & when I wake up for school she is the one asleep, & she leaves for work before I come back. I saw her this morning though-she said I should flush Skipper down the toilet, that I'm an idiot for wanting to throw a funeral for a stupid fish.

Albert doesn't think I'm an idiot.

It hurts when I sit down, it has for a long time now. The air is stagnant, tainted with the faint dead smoke of pot & fruit flavored cigarettes. This man makes me dinner, macaroni & cheese. It's runny & smelly & squishes in my mouth, & the cheese belongs on nachos, not pasta. The lights are very dim & the ceiling's fan slowly turns, like the second hand of a clock. Albert offers me a beer even though he knows I don't like the taste of alcohol. He tells me it's an acquired taste. I give him a glance & go to pour myself a glass of milk. It tastes funny, it must have spoiled.

He calls me beautiful. I don't know why. I have boyishly short hair that's always greasy no matter what shampoo I use. My breasts are tiny mosquito bites. & I only just had my first period three weeks ago, though that didn't stop him.

I go to my room to do my homework even though I can never finish it anymore. I can only do the first four problems before I begin doodling. Stupid little doodles like fish or owls or flowers or my name in elaborate fonts. & then I begin doodling on myself, on my left arm. The pencil craves, leaving behind a trail of raw pink swelling. I draw a heart with a nail slicing through it. It doesn't hurt to do this. I can hear the tiny plunking of rain beginning to fall onto the roof. Little pellets of shiny water embroider my cracked window, warping the landscape behind it.

There's a phone in the hallway, the color of cranberries with a long curly cord & dusted in oily finger prints. I don't touch it. I know that I should, but I don't.

I look at my fish bowl. Blackie, the black gold fish, is still there, with that clueless look that all fish have. & so are Speedy & Slowy, my pair of sucker snails. The sound of the tank's aerator blurs into the sound of soft rainfall. The bubbles look like particles of diamond suspended in the water. I wonder if fish have souls...

I've never met my father. My mother once told me he died in a car crash, even though there's no name on my birth certificate.

We're so different from them. Us, women. Them, men. Right now it seems that all my peers care about at all is the opposite sex. But they need to stop running. The other side isn't so great. This grass isn't so green.

& yet so strangely, I want this man to want me. Want me more than anyone, anything...

& then he comes into my room. I stand up & push my papers aside. I pull off my shirt & push down my pants & take everything away until I am bare, everything exposed. He does the same, & goose bumps frost my pale skin. & then he holds me hard enough to snap me. Just like he has every night for the past seven months.

Over & over & over again.

Judge's Comments

This story has stuck with me after the first read. It is well-written at the sentence level, and doesn't overdramatize the subject matter, instead focusing on the narrator's motivation and the complexity of the situation. The effect is haunting and moving.

First Place Essay
2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Spawn of the Schizophrenic
Julia Lombardo

There is a certain pain that lingers when I'm not preoccupied by thoughts of my now existing life. Mostly, when I remember my childhood. But nobody can choose the family they are born into, and I can't forget that before now, my life was damaged.

My mom, the way I remember her, was many different things. She had long blonde hair and a deranged set of haunting blue eyes. We look nothing alike. You wouldn't have a clue we were related until you saw our smiles. They overpower both our faces. I never knew my mother before she got sick, but I hear that she was a beautiful person. She never said a bad thing about anybody and even became a vegetarian because she cared too much about animals. But the way I knew her was spacey, erratic, and occasionally volatile. Nothing she did was rational. But I couldn't realize it until now because I'm older.

I was four when my parents filed for divorce. Least to say, I have never seen a real relationship. Somehow after their divorce panned out, my mother ended up receiving full custody. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia by the time I was six. When I was younger, I didn't know what was wrong. You just learn to adapt when you're that age. Her first "episode" happened, and she thought she saw the earth cracking open. She was in a trance as my dad was shaking her asking her what was wrong. She had a smile, and said she was in a forest and could feel the rain upon her forehead. My dad took her to the hospital. They kept her for a week, but she couldn't stay on her medication.

When she didn't take her medicine, things got bad. Often at night we would drive around because she thought someone was chasing after her. That's why she told me she couldn't keep a job, with every job she lost. There was always some man at her work harassing her and stalking her. My dad checked it out and found out there never was a man. Or any of the emails that she said she was getting. The difficult thing about the situation is you can't force someone to go the hospital against their will, and my mother always refused to go. My dad convinced her to go in, and she became stabilized again after her treatment.

We soon after moved into a small house in Fraser. I didn't know anyone at the school and really never made any friends. But things were beginning to look up with my mom, but as always she would get off her medicine. She would have conversations with herself and start laughing out of nowhere. Sometimes she would get really angry and start hitting me and my brother. She constantly was losing jobs and stopped taking care of the house and our cat. I don't want to begin to tell you how the house smelled because no one would clean it. I went to school with wet

clothes that reeked of mildew and wondered why no one would be my friend. I just don't think I had the mental capacity yet to grasp the real picture.

My mother couldn't do daily activities such as laundry. She couldn't keep a job longer than four months, which resulted in no central air, television, or phone. As a child, all you can do is learn to adapt. As I drifted away into classical music and my own thoughts, my brother opted for drifting away into a drunken state. You have to understand that my brother is a very hostile person. He deals with things a bit differently than I do. I don't think that there is another being on the planet that I could ever fear more than my brother to this day. He liked to play games like prisoners when we were bored. He would duct tape me and put me in a closet, close the door, and wait to see how long it took for me to get out. Sometimes he would hit me with golf clubs and think it was funny. By the time I was ten years old, he had broken my arm twice. All this was fine and good until we played prisoners with the neighbor's daughter. Welts from the tape covered her arms. My brother got a call from her dad, and she was never allowed over again. Today, I don't really see my brother. He moved out of my dad's house two years ago, and we never really make an effort to communicate.

When I was nine, a surprise visit from my mother's aunt and great granny ended it all. They flew up from Texas and arrived at our door unannounced. My great granny stayed with us, but my aunt decided to get a hotel because she couldn't handle our house and the condition it was kept. She called social services two days later on my mother, and I was taken out of school. The courts said they were going to charge my dad with neglect if he didn't fight for us. Easy enough, my mother left the state. She took a few items, the cat, and her car and went to the airport without any flight arrangements or notifying anyone. She got on a plane to Texas and went to go stay with her mother and never decided to come back. Our house was abandoned, and that was the end of a relationship with my mother.

Four years after she left she visited us to see my brother graduate. Her hair was in clumps, and her teeth looked as if they had been starting to rot. Her hygiene was disgusting, and we discovered she still hadn't gotten help. Four years later today, she continues to rot inside my grandmother's house. She didn't come up to see me graduate, and frankly I believe it's probably best that way. She does call occasionally, but I get so frustrated with her that I just end up hanging up the phone. You can't have a normal conversation with her. You'll ask her a question and she can't answer it. She will just reply, "I love you," which makes the whole situation worse.

I told you all of this because there is no way that you could ever understand even a fraction of who I am otherwise. Even though I try not to let it show upon my face, I carry this emotional baggage on my shoulders through every conversation, and every task in my daily life. This is what I remember.

Judge's Comments

I could actually feel this author's pain and frustration. Using straightforward, unsentimental language, and without resorting to melodrama, the author manages to put the reader in the shoes of somebody trying to manage an unmanageable problem. Powerful stuff.

Second Place Essay

2009 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Five

Julia Lombardo

Wayne's underground. Wayne's not supposed to be underground. He's supposed to be playing football. He wasn't supposed to leave his house on a Thursday night in August and jerk the wheel of his moped in front of an oncoming car. He wasn't supposed to leave that note and stop my world from spinning. Wayne wasn't supposed to be lying in an open casket on Sunday, wearing a tie that wasn't quite tied right. He should've looked like he was sleeping, but he didn't. Wayne was supposed to be a senior in high school, not a corpse. Goddamnit, Wayne wasn't supposed to kill himself.

We're headed to the T. North Pavilion downtown, where Wayne's funeral will take place. As we arrive, we find a parking spot only a short distance away, and there's endless rows of cars parked all around the pavilion. I walk towards the pavilion hand in hand with my girlfriend Kelsi, both of us dressed in black, and I feel like an adult. For the first time in my life, I don't want to feel like an adult. I don't want to be walking into the funeral of my friend. I want to be a kid. I want to be walking with my mom not understanding the finality of a funeral. I want Wayne to be sleeping. I feel cheated. I feel like my friends and I shouldn't have to walk into this funeral and experience this awful thing. I want to stop, but I force myself to walk on.

As we enter, I have to hug another set of outstretched arms. I don't know who I'm hugging because all I can see is the casket at the end of the pavilion. I want to sit down, so Kelsi and I make our way to the front. Before we sit, I walk to the front row, where the pallbearers are sitting. I'm dressed like them, because it felt right to do so. I hug each of them, one by one. When something this terrible happens, it suddenly becomes imperative to hug all of your friends all the time. I manage to hold back tears through each hug, perhaps because I'm trying to give them strength to carry the body of our friend, the most terrifying thing I could ever imagine doing. It hurts to walk away from them, because I was the seventh man. I know I would've been able to carry him, but it would've haunted me for the rest of my life.

When we sit, I look towards the front again, at Wayne's casket, and it hits me. He's gone. I start to feel sick. Sweat trickles down my back, and my jaw clenches down hard. I squeeze Kelsi's hand, my palm's sweating worse than ever, and I'm aware that I'm breathing in short gasps. I start to panic. Sitting there amongst uncountable masses of people, I try to calm myself. I try to breathe normally and not cry. After a while, I realize how impossible this task will be, and excuse myself quickly and awkwardly. I make my way out to the fence that separates a walkway from the river that runs adjacent to the pavilion. Once there, I take deep breaths, with my back to the funeral. All I can think is that I have to be strong. In a time when it would be easy

to collapse under the circumstances, I know that I must be strong for everyone, even those who don't know me. I stand there with the sun beating down on me for a few moments before I become conscious of the mass of people behind me. I take one last breath, turn around, and make my way back to my seat. Walking away was so much easier than walking back in. I have to everyone in the eyes, and I see the sadness there. The eyes are the worst. I can't stand looking at their eyes. I see right through them and I know what they're feeling. It adds to how horrible I feel. I desperately want to cry, but a stubborn sense of strength envelopes me, and not a tear falls from my eyes the whole funeral.

The service is good. It's short, focusing on who Wayne was. There's a microphone at the front, and the pastor relays that the family welcomes any who would like to speak about Wayne. I know as soon as he's finished that I'll have to talk. I don't want to. I have no idea what I'll say, if I'll be able to finish, or why I feel so possessed to speak, but I know in the end I'll be standing behind that microphone. A few people speak, including three coaches. One of the football coaches, Coach Harper, describes how Wayne handled obstacles. He tells how Wayne did things all at once, not slowly.

"I think he'd want us to get over this the same way. I don't think he'd want us to do it gradually. He'd want us to keep going, head down, full speed ahead."

What he's said is absolutely true, but I can't think that I'll have to let go so quickly. It wouldn't seem right. A few more people speak, and I finally make my way to the microphone. When I stand, I'm shaking. I'm lightheaded as I shuffle to the end of the aisle and walk towards the front. The lump in my throat, which I'm so accustomed to, swells to twice the normal size, and I don't know how I'll even talk. I make it to the front, and I see no one in particular. I'm aware that I'm standing in front of a crowd of people, but I don't notice any specific face. All I know is that my friend is behind me in a box, and nothing is right. I want to try to make things right, even though I know nothing I say ever will. I put my hands in my pocket, clear my throat, and force myself to speak.

I manage to mumble how Wayne took things to the extreme, and how great that was. Regardless, it didn't feel right. I suspect that nothing I would've said could have felt right though. Nothing felt right in that moment. All that mattered was that I spoke, and that did feel right. I'll always regret what I said, but I've made peace with the fact that there's nothing I could've said that I wouldn't regret. Standing there in front of all of those people would've been enough. It was a part of what I had to do to say goodbye. It was me acknowledging Wayne's permanent absence from my life.

After everyone was finished speaking, it was time. The pallbearers, six of my close friends, stood and walked to Wayne's casket, and everyone in the pavilion stood with them. I turned and watched as they accompanied Wayne on his last trip through the pavilion where he used to play basketball. Watching, I wondered how many times my heart could shatter into a million pieces. The rows are dismissed one by one. When I walk through the pavilion, holding Kelsi's hand, I once again feel like

an adult. I'm mortified, mystified, and broken. Whether or not I cried walking out of the pavilion, I don't know. I fought as hard as I could, and let the rest be. Maybe I did cry. Maybe my tears still rest on the cold cement ground of the T. North Pavilion. I wouldn't know. I haven't stepped foot inside of it since that day.

The funeral procession is remarkably long. Countless cars take the journey down M-15 from Vassar to the Millington Cemetery. We travel slowly at forty-five miles per hour, orange flags waving in the sad day's breeze. Cars must have been stopped at the crossroads for the better part of a half hour. For an ignorant moment, I actually feel bad for the people in the cars being forced to wait, and then I remember why they're waiting, and it feels okay. It feels like they're all nodding their heads in respect as we drive by.

The service at the cemetery is even shorter, but the time I spend there seems endless. There's an enormous crowd of people huddled around a small lawn tent that covers a hole in the ground. Wayne's family sits underneath in chairs. The hearse is to my right. The director of Hanlin's Funeral Home opens the back door and the pallbearers take their places. Nothing in my life could prepare me to watch Wayne be carried to that hole. As the casket is slid out, the six of them get a firm grip on the handles. They shuffle along, three on each side of the casket, and carry the body of their fallen friend, just sixteen years old. They lay the casket in its place, and move away, six sad young men, forced to experience the worst of life all too soon. They stand like men, and I'm proud of them. Suddenly a light rain begins, and it mists for a moment, as the pastor says a few short words. When it's time, each member of the family is given a flower from the bouquets on Wayne's casket, and then they file out of the tent, each saying their last goodbye. My self pity vanishes, and I wonder what it's like to lose a son, a brother, a nephew. After saying her goodbye, Wayne's aunt turns and mutters something.

"I can't leave him here like this. No, I can't."

I shut out what's happening, because I don't know if I can leave him either. Her husband walks her away, whispering to her. He's strong because he has to be. When will the strong ones become weak? It has to happen eventually. When will we all fall apart?

After the family is gone, each of the pallbearers walks by. Keif kisses his index and middle fingers, and touches the casket as he walks by, and it fits perfectly. His face holds so much emotion, but none escapes. He has done what I have to, need to, and am terribly afraid to do. The pallbearers have all made their way by, and few by few, people begin to disperse. I stay, staring at the casket, completely terrified. I have no idea how to go about this. My feet are frozen as though I'm standing in a bucket of ice, except that's exactly how I want it. I don't want to walk to the casket. I want to stay right here, ten feet away, so I never have to say goodbye. I'm a coward. Kelsi holds my arm tight, but loose enough so that when I'm ready, I can walk away from her.

Then suddenly, without my mind or my body's consent, I'm moving towards Wayne. It is the longest walk I have ever taken. I take step after step, but Wayne is forever unreachable. I can't make eye contact with anything, or anyone for that matter. Every part of me hurts, and it's all I can do to keep my face from contorting into that of a child throwing a tantrum. I reach the side of the casket, neither looking at it, or anywhere else. My hand weighs a ton as I try to bring it from my side to the top of the casket. I rest it on the edge. I leave my hand there for as long as I can, not sure how, but knowing that I'm saying goodbye. I breathe, for the first time in what seems like days, and lift my hand from the casket. The sweat from my hand has left an outline, and it feels right. I turn my back on Wayne, because Wayne is gone. I walk away from a hole in the ground, thinking of only one thing. My friend's in there.

Judge's Comments

I could actually feel this author's pain and frustration. Using straightforward, unsentimental language, and without resorting to melodrama, the author manages to put the reader in the shoes of somebody trying to manage an unmanageable problem. Powerful stuff.