

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2011**

2011 LAND Creative Writing Journal

Poetry

"Porcupine"
Yvonne Stephens
Mentor: Holly Wren Spaulding
Northwestern Michigan College

"Blue Haze"
Mark Shaheen
Mentor: Dennis Hinrichsen
Lansing Community College

"A Love Despised"
Jane Mandley
Mentor: Dedria A. Humphries
Lansing Community College

Fiction

"A Father's Worries"
Ricky DeBats
Mentor: Nichole Bartel
Delta College

"Water"
John Hartranft
Mentor: Heather Sisto
Mott Community College

"Night Lights"
Bonny K. Lownds
Mentor: Gretchen Cline
Muskegon Community College

Essay

"Letter to Nazim Hikmet"
Sean Case
Mentor: Holly Wren Spaulding
Northwestern Michigan College

"The War with PTSD"
Jasica Opperman-Whitney
Mentor: Carol Finke
Kirtland Community College

"Once a Runner"
Devon Joslin
Mentor: Gretchen Kline
Muskegon Community College

2010 LAND Creative Writing Judges

Poetry

Traci Brimhall's poetry has been published widely. Her books include *Our Lady of the Ruins* (forthcoming from W.W. Norton), selected by Carolyn Forché for the 2011 Barnard Women Poets Prize, and *Rookery* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), winner of the 2009 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award. Currently, she teaches creative writing at Western Michigan University, where she also serves as Poetry Editor for *Third Coast* and Editor at Large for *Loaded Bicycle*.

Fiction

Caitlin Horrocks' short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Best American Short Stories 2011*, *The Paris Review*, and numerous other publications. Her book of short fiction, *This Is Not Your City*, was published in 2011. Currently, she is an assistant professor of writing at Grand Valley State University and a fiction editor at *West Branch*.

Essay

Todd Kaneko's stories and poems have appeared in *Puerto Del Sol*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Portland Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Blackbird*, *The Huffington Post*, and elsewhere. Currently, he teaches in the Department of Writing at Grand Valley State University.

First Place Poetry
2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Porcupine

Inspired by Fleda Brown's poem "Dock"

Yvonne Stephens

Say porcupine, pickle, quill:
they are all second cousins once removed,
the way you and I might be cousins,
how we love bacon, crossword puzzles,
and crumple newspaper to light the woodstove.
Feel the way they pick the tongue
like a French kiss with braces,
but turn soft, like a fish bone composts
into soil, and ripens into tomato.
A porcupine snaps a kosher dill,
stabs a sheet of paper with a quill
and pencils the message, "If I could speak
my voice would sound like caterpillar frass
falling through the canopy. " This may be
a good place to stop. It's true,
a porcupine would have lovely
handwriting, a perfect calligraphy.
He writes to remind us that, once,
there was no other way. Since we can't
lick a stamp, let's cheer for the porcupine
who chews the bark of a healthy tree,
shifts it from the chainsaw, to the insects
and birds. Let's give them the salt they crave
and die for on the roads. Here I am hunched
over its carcass collecting quills. Here I am
hunched over my dog, pulling quills from her face
with pliers. Porcupines turn their backs
toward their foes, which is how I enter this cold lake,
and become wrapped in a pelt, soft and sharp.

Judge's Comments

What struck me about this poem was its profound and vivid imagination, from a porcupine writing about how its voice would sound to quills picking the tongue like a French kiss with braces. The specificity of detail was remarkable. I love the crossword puzzles, crumpled newspapers, and the pliers used to pull the quills from a dog's face. Funny at turns and moving at others, "Porcupine" is astounding.

Second Place Poetry
2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Blue Haze
For Red and Juliet
Mark Shaheen

his fingernails were yellow as
 the ceiling in this
 boarding house room
 where the white man next door
had not been seen for the past week
 and was, what's more, dead or
 strung out.
 either way
that unmistakable smell of death
 cut through the blue haze
 of Big Red's room,
 a great fat saxophone player
 outa New Orleans,
 who lived over me
and when he wailed at night,
 His great rhythmic mass
 made the ceiling bounce
 little bop-quakes.
 Coltrane
Cannonball
 Gillespie
Bird
 Monk
blaring all night through the
 worn needle of
 the scartchy phonograph.
 and the best time
was when we
 sat smoking, eating pig jowl,
kraut,
 blood sausage
blackened onions,
 blackeyed peas with butter and cayenne,
 soothing our blistered throats with
 the cool cool cold of a
 pabst blue ribbon.
 and the saddest time

was when Red moved downtown
replaced by a young man
who paid his dates to
beat the shit out of him.
I thought,
there goes the neighborhood
and within weeks
moved to another rooming house
where traffic noise at night
pressed against my temples
like a gun.

Judge's Comments

"Blue Haze" is a remarkable poem. From the first sentence whose syntax unwinds for seven lines, I was hooked. The world of this poem is made real by the poet's excellent choices of language and image. The poet also has a remarkable ear for the musicality of the line and a great use of sensory details that goes down as smooth with the "cool cool cold of a pabst blue ribbon".

Third Place Poetry
2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

A Love Despised
Jane Mandley

Someone turned off the porch light.
I cannot make out the name on
The road sign. I see a faint B.
Or is that an S?
I crawl on my hands and on my knees.
My hands have memorized all of these
Sidewalk cracks and roots of trees.
The fence I run my fingers on
Suddenly grows cold, and I know:
This is it.
But someone turned off the porch light.
I cannot see the walk, the roof,
The chimney tall, the windows white.
I cannot see the summer days,
The crickets sing, my mother's pies,
A home of love, a love despised.
Someone broke the fence's gate;
Someone left it open.
Someone cut down all the trees
And left the flowers broken.
I walk through ashes on the ground,
Right through this pile of waste.
The house has died. No cry. No cough.
Someone turned the porch light off.

Judge's Comments

In "A Love Despised" the poet grounds their loss in the real. The speaker is lost in the place that should be most familiar—the home where they've known love. I was impressed by the poet's ability to stay with the central metaphor and resist over-explaining the loss. I also admired their ability to use subtle, irregular rhymes to texture the poem with sound.

First Place Fiction

2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

A Father's Worries
Ricky DeBats

A gust of wind whistles through the cracks in the window. A lone red leaf clings desperately to the screen. Chains on Alex's swing set chatter and whine. My eyes blink. The leaf flutters off to its final resting place. I pull my arm off the window frame staring at the indents that have tattooed on my forearm. Closing my eyes I run my hand through my newly trimmed hair. My eyes open widely, the feel very foreign to my normally shaggy hair. I run into our bedroom tossing open our closet door. I grab the first hat that catches my sight and pull it on my head. Sighing in relief I look down at the beige floor, and spread my toes open sinking them into the softness that only new carpet can produce. A reflection of light catches my eye. I kneel down, the floor boards creaking in protest to the displacement of my body. Brushing away some stray clothes I find our wedding photo. A smile crosses my face.

I wore my newly acquired uniform beaming with all the pride in the world that came with it. Emily's dress was something from a fairy tale. Long and flowing, with symmetrical designs in the snow white fabric. Her smile shone through her veil. She laughed so loud when I pulled down the white silk over her face. Her parents were aghast when we picked this as our wedding photo. Emily smiled and said. "It's a real moment of happiness. Who can argue with that?" A real moment of happiness, I placed the photo back on the nightstand before making my way back into the hallway.

On my way to the kitchen a draft seeps in from the window, setting a chill in my bones. This window had been on my to-do-list for a month. My face narrows with determination. I march to the kitchen and slump down nearly encasing my body in the cupboard to extract a tool box. Its light shade of red and small patch of rust on the bottom gave it the clever nick name of Tomato. "John get the tomato and help me fix this damned thing." Often I'd wondered if my decisions would have made him proud. The only one who could answer this now was the picture that hung in the spare bedroom.

It was sunny June afternoon. The smell of freshly cut grass hung in the heavy humidity of a Michigan summer. It was a tradition to visit the old man before I'd ship out. He had his annual John's going away barbeque. We'd sit and drink Budweiser, eating hamburgers till we wanted to puke. He sunk deep into his rocking camping chair, taking a long drag on his cigar. He liked to pretend they were Cubans, even biting off the tip on some occasions. They were swisher sweets at best. He let out a puff of smoke adjusting his badly fashioned Hawaiian shirt. No matter what kind of clothing we bought him he kept coming back to the same red shirt. Telling us, "it's what real men wear, not that garbage you see those poor bastards get stuck in at those damned department stores." After a moment he looked intently in my direction before glancing down. "You know, kid when I met your mother." He

said ashing his cigar, then placing it back into his lips. Pain crossing my fathers face was new. To break the awkward silence I told him about my first date with Emily.

"Emily's the real deal Dad."

He scoffed. "They're all the real deal until you marry one." He said his mouth full of cigar.

"Bases?" His questioning eyebrows raised in a creepy fashion. Nervously I scratched the back of my trimmed hair. "None actually. I got food poisoning from the restaurant and rushed home." He roared a laugh and dropping his cigar from his mouth. Leaning forward choking a bit he grabbed his cigar and wiped it off. Taking a few puffs to keep it lit he smiled back at me.

"Whisked her off her feet did ya?" I smirked, "The funny thing was, she showed up at my place the next morning with soup and toast."

My father smiled out of the right side of his mouth, clamping down on his cigar with the other.

"Do you know what you call a woman who serves you breakfast in bed?"

I rolled my eyes at another one of my dad's bad jokes. He tilted his head back a little expelling another cloud of smoke.

"A keeper."

Pulling out a hammer I examine its black electrical taped handle. I stare at its chips and dents. I glance over at our family picture on the kitchen wall. Alex had just gotten over a cold. We couldn't keep his sleeve and nose separated. Emily was run ragged trying to take care of him. Juggling her work and parenthood was proving to best her. I had just gotten home from drill. Blissfully ignorant, it seemed perfect. I lower my head looking at the stains on the stove. Before I know it I'm scrubbing last night's taco meat spices off the left burner. I hear a door shut outside in the driveway. I hear Emily's familiar tone.

"Honey please don't slam the door." She switched her voice from "Emily" to "mom." My smile faded quickly as I grabbed my forgotten tools and headed to the hallway. I began tearing off the second piece of two by four when Alex shoved the door open. All of our winter coats hung haphazardly on the back of the door. Their extra weight swung the door back into Emily's face. She then kicked the door open her face narrow with anger juggling brown grocery bags. "ALEX!"

"Sorry mom" echoed from his room. She walked past me plopping the bags on the kitchen counter. She returned to the hallway and shifted her weight to her right side. This was going to get unpleasant quickly.

"Finally getting to that window huh?" She flicks a stray hair out of her face and secures it behind her ear.

"Yeah, figured it was going to get cold soon."

"Why today John? I mean.." Emily closes her eyes then opens them up with frustration seeping from her sockets. "You knew about Alex's parent teacher conferences tonight." My posture straightens and I turn taking in her full wrath.

"Oh god I completely forgot."

Emily scoffs. "Convenient." She takes a few steps away.

"Seriously Em, it just slipped my mind, let me get ready real quick and." Before realization kicked in, Emily turns back to me. The jingle then clang of her keys hitting the floor startles me. Tears are forming in her wide eyes. My hat was now in my left hand. My hand grazes my clipped hair and I close my eyes.

"When?" Emily's voice shakes.

"Two days" My voice filled with defeat. Saying the words out loud was finalizing my guilt, and tension over the last few weeks. I felt free and that freedom was now crashing down on me like an unmanned plane. Emily's left hand meets her mouth. Her breathing quickens. "Two days." She begins to blink tears away.

"When were you going to tell us? Huh?" She walks up to me and punches me square in the chest. Breath quickly escapes my sternum and I slouch over. "God damn it John, what are we going to do? What will we tell Alex?" Her body presses up against mine each word is a fist against my rib cage.

"I'm sorry."

"Thanksgiving is next week, Christmas – for how long?" I place my chin on the top of her head.

"A year, maybe more." I listen to my wife weep, soaking up her tears with my shirt. I want to do something. I sit in silence stroking my wife's hair. Pain etches into the room like textured ceilings. The wind howls through the window.

Judge's Comments

"Show, don't tell" is well-worn writing advice, but "A Father's Worries" shows exactly how effective it is in a skilled author's hands. The small details in this story—newly-shorn hair, a broken window—add up to a powerful portrait of a family without heroes and villains. In energetic, creative prose (a sick kid's parents "couldn't keep his sleeve and nose separated," for example) the author movingly depicts real people who care about each other and have tried, and perhaps failed, to do right by each other.

Second Place Fiction

2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Water

John Hartranft

"I married you for your brain, not your inseam," she used to tell Steve, scrubbing the top of his head with her chin. "Good thing," he would always reply. Then he would place his hands on both sides of her head, pull her down and plant one of those kisses that left her blushing and knock-kneed. "Now cook something edible, woman, or I'll explain the Coriolis Effect to you again."

She'd never known what would happen once dinner began. Steaming corn on the cob might begin a conversation about cloud formation, while gravy carved canyons through the mashed potatoes. Steve once stood asparagus spears on end in a bowl of cauliflower to demonstrate the shadowing effect of a forest canopy. Everything they ate together became something to talk about.

Then came the eleven-hour drives to the research station. Steve's thesis took longer than he expected and the grant money dried up. Their first pregnancy was lost and the second had progressed through troubling signs. Phillip arrived early, surveying his new world with quiet interest, both pleasing and worrying his young parents. After that came Steve's leukemia, the radiation and chemotherapy. They lost the house, his position and what was left of the money. One day Gloria awoke and found she had lost him, too. Now, with only little Phillip to talk to, Gloria missed Steve most at dinnertime.

When he was four, Phillip could set the table, but did so in a different way each time. If Gloria set the table with the forks and knives just so, Phillip would wait until her back was turned and rearrange the table settings, watching for her reaction as she sat down. Their eyes would meet and he would smile and shrug his little shoulders, enjoying his dinner joke without saying a word.

Once Steve's mother visited and told her, "Steve was like that. I never knew what he was thinking when he was little." She paused, adding, "He'll be fine. It just takes time." Phillip was five now and every day Gloria wondered if her son would ever talk about his world as others do.

The new house was small, exposed and weather-beaten by long summers beneath the Midwestern sun. It was protected by nesting swans in the pond behind it, fiercely including Gloria and Phillip's back yard in their own. Every evening she and Phillip would walk to the edge of the pond and leave a handful of cracked corn in the hollow of a stump. After they left, the male swan would paddle over, survey the yard with an expressionless stare, march deliberately to the stump and feed. The female would follow in turn, until her wait on the nest began. Gloria watched them both, remembering what that was like. She ached to stand at the stove, keeping dinner warm while Steve stood at the sink behind her, scrubbing sap

and dirt from his hands, telling about the lives of the insects and animals that lived beneath their feet.

Phillip had learned to read and to count. He would carefully leaf through the pages of old National Geographic magazines he found in the garage, reading aloud the photo captions and announcing the page numbers to his mother. Encouraged, Gloria would count the telephone poles that circled the pond while they walked and ask Phillip for help. Phillip would turn, look at her and look away, announcing after a long pause what the next number should be. Then he would leap to the ground, scoop up an insect or a toad and stare at it in unabashed wonder. His open palm would rise to Gloria's waist and he would whisper, "Look."

One day Phillip looked across the yard to the pond. The sun danced low across the water, which was building to a low chop in the afternoon wind. Phillip squinted into the light for a long moment and asked his mother, "Why is the water sparkly like that?" Gloria realized with a start how long it had been since he asked such a question. She pursed her lips and thought about what to say, suddenly missing Steve more than she had in a long time. He loved explaining the wonders of nature to anyone who would ask. She squatted in the long grass and looked her only child in the eye. It was up to her now.

"Do you see the wind blowing on the wheat in Mr. Klosik's field over there?" She pointed to the west and Phillip followed her direction, his head gently rocking to match the swaying rows of wheat. "The wind is pushing on the surface of the water, too. That makes waves." She pivoted to the pond, looking back to see Phillip still fixed on the wheat, his arms now in the air as if flying, swaying with eyes half closed. Gloria touched his elbow. His eyes opened wide and he smiled at her without saying a word. She pointed to the water and waited for him to look south. He looked at her a while longer, as if waiting on her to understand, then turned placidly to look at the pond again, his elbows and hands slowly conceding to gravity. She wished Steve would walk across the dry, brown grass and say something.

"If the water is smooth, it's like a mirror, and you can see yourself in the surface. But if the wind makes waves, then the sunshine bounces off in all directions and it looks like that." Phillip turned his head away from the pond to look at his mother as she spoke, but his eyes did not meet hers. He seemed to look right through her, past the roof on the garage, past the trees and clear out of town. He slowly blinked and settled his focus on her face. She noticed and touched his cheek to welcome him back.

He smiled slyly at his mother and bent down to pluck a handful of dandelion stems, seeds pulling loose in the wind.

"Mom? I think the sun is tickling the water and the water is laughing. That's why it looks like that." He said this with the gentle conviction of a monk explaining the unknown to a novice, without expectation of comprehension but still pleased to help. Then he burst into giggles and tickled his mother's chin with the dandelion stems, seeds flying everywhere, catching in her hair and swirling in the column of quiet air trapped between them. "C'mon! Lookit!" He ran toward the male swan standing near the stump. The swan backed away into

the water and stationed himself just off shore between the nest and Phillip, guardian of their common world. Phillip sat on the stump, picking up corn and throwing it toward the water. The swan kept his distance, silently noting Phillip's location.

Gloria walked to her son in peaceful resignation, wondering which genes had won to create this content child who saw things but said so little. She wondered what Steve would have made of him. She sat on the old stump, put an arm around her boy and rubbed the top of his head with her chin. Dandelion seeds drifted down on Phillip, who carefully picked each one up and tucked them into his shirt pocket. He leaned into his mother, pulled one seed out and began to explain to her how the seeds flew through the air until they dropped to the ground. "Then it rains and they grow roots and the leaves come out. The swans don't like them. They like the corn."

Gloria watched Phillip's face, grateful for this summer shower of words. "What else do they like?" she asked.

As the swans watched from the pond, Phillip told her about the floating watercress, which he called water grass. He said the swans didn't like the other people who stood at the edge of the pond and watched them. They wouldn't let the geese get anywhere near the nest. Sometimes you could see the eggs when the mom stood up. They didn't take turns on the nest. And on he went, telling her of the life of a swan and the dragonflies that flew low across the water, the big willow tree that bent in the wind and the birds that lived among the little branches that dropped to the ground every day. Finally he was silent and laid his head in his mother's lap. His breathing slowed and he curled into her arms.

Gloria gathered him up, arranged his head on her shoulder and stroked his hair. She told him about his father, the long drives to the research station and the way birds flying straight through the air appear to turn as the world spins in a circle beneath them. Silence settled on them both. Phillip spun slowly in her arms, pushed himself upright and said quietly, "Mom, tell me about Daddy again."

Judge's Comments

This moment from a family dinner tells you all you need to know about "Water": "Steaming corn on the cob might begin a conversation about cloud formation, while gravy carved canyons through the mashed potatoes. Steve once stood asparagus spears on end in a bowl of cauliflower to demonstrate the shadowing effect of a forest canopy." With a wonderful sense of detail, and of warm, human characters, the story takes on a lot—the death of a husband and father, his quiet son, a mother's worry about her child's happiness. It uses the natural world to resolve the story in a way that is touching, but not melodramatic.

Third Place Fiction 2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Night Lights
Bonny K. Lownds

When she finally came home, opening the door quietly and slipping inside the darkened single-wide, she only just remembered to relight the fire in the tiny woodstove. Then she exhaustedly felt her way in the dark to her room and fell into bed; sleeping in smoky clothes with soot coating her fingers like an ancient secret.

The next morning when her father made his painful journey to the kitchen, she was already at the table. He turned up his nose at the bowl of Cheerios she offered, almost pouting. "Do you want me to fry you an egg instead?" she asked, searching his haggard and disappointed face for answers.

"No, that's okay," he answered, removing the cap from one of his numerous pill bottles. "I'm afraid nothing's going to sound good to me today anyway." He flipped on the small television and sat down at the table to watch a news anchor in flaming pink lipstick inform them they were scheduled for more snow. "Did you remember to light a fire last night?" he inquired.

"Why? Are you cold?"

"I'm always cold now. So, did you remember?"

"Yes. I lit a fire last night."

"Is it still going then?"

"I suppose so."

"Good girl," he admonished and returned his gaze vacantly to the television screen. Flames now filled the 8" by 12" frame as the news anchor began to discuss a story about recent arson activity. The girl moved to change the channel; but her father stopped her, his hand leaping to close over hers. His eyes filled with the glorious chaos of the blaze as he sat with now rapt attention, forgetting to release her hand. She observed him out of the corner of her eye as he ravenously stared. When it was over, he let her go and stood to turn off the TV. "You would think those people would learn to do something better with all their money than build mansions that burn to the ground," he mused with hollow satisfaction as he shuffled out of the kitchen. "Don't forget to light a fire tonight," he intoned over his shoulder before continuing away.

Hours later she stepped out into the dark, letting the night embrace her as she walked. Absentmindedly she stretched one leg, then the other; she had a long way to go before she

came to the part of town with Escalades in the driveways. She let the backpack, slung casually over one shoulder, thump into her with every quickening step, enjoying the sloshing sound of the can of gasoline. She held the box of matches tight in one hand and let a smile flicker over her face. Later, after she'd watched her handiwork for a while, she would go home. She would remember to light a fire.

Judge's Comments

This short-short story packs a punch. The reveal at the end could have been only a "gotcha!" moment, a surprise that the reader easily forgets. Instead, the writer weaves plenty of clues into the story, and gives the central relationship, between a protective, angry daughter, and her ailing father, real emotional resonance. The big reveal feels natural and affecting.

First Place Essay
2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Letter to Nazim Hikmet
Sean Case

Dear Nazim,

I wonder if we only fall hardest for those who fill the gaps in ourselves. If we're all just roving the earth with gaping holes in our beings, sockets where the pieces growing out of other peoples' triumphs will fit, snug and tight. I read your work, Nazim, and my spine wobbles, I feel like I am connected to some larger part of the world - some share of existence that calls for far more effort than I tend to possess. Jean-Paul Sartre remarked that your poetry conceived of a human being as something to be created, something purposeful. Your talent makes me feel that purpose inherent in the art of speaking out to the world, to the spires of justice and community and presence that I am so attracted to, and yet I have no real enthusiasm or plan to see done. Certainly I make my fair share of statements, both written and public, in support of the ideals I profess to adhere to... and isn't that all the poet seeks? Isn't that what your poetry is invested in - bearing witness, making a tribute to the world that could be, the world that is, beneath our feet, under our tongues, friendly and waiting to be initiated?

You have such a way of taking the humblest observations, the most mundane particulars of a single afternoon, and giving them poise, taste and texture. The experience we've all shared becomes experienced, through the page; the words easy to consume, so smoothly crafted I scarcely feel my eyeballs moving over the open page as I read. Even in the images I don't understand, I am able to realize I don't have to "understand" in order to know what they mean. What they mean is what I feel. Your poetry declares itself; I experience the sensation of knowing, living and becoming aware that I can exist with intent.

I wonder if there's a special allure to you, Nazim, not only because of the experience of incarceration we've shared and both write about, but, more to the point, why we each had that experience. After serving a handful of shorter sentences on trumped-up charges, you were sentenced to twenty-eight years in prison because Turkish military cadets were reading your Epic of Sheik Bedreddin, an homage to peasant rebellion:

...And as the water

slips through his fingers

and returns to the lake,

he says to himself:

"The fire in my heart

has burst into flame

and is mounting daily.

Were my heart wrought iron, it could not resist,

it would melt...

I will come out now and declare myself!

Men of the land, we will conquer the land..."

Caught in the pincers of a tyranny, you went to prison for choosing a noble cause and giving it the energy of deed, writing in kinetic exploit, with a readiness to suffer at the hands of an unjust system in an attempt to affect change on that system. Your friend Pablo Neruda wrote of your treatment after your arrest:

"...Nazim was condemned to the punishments of hell. The trial was held on a warship. He told me he was forced to walk on the ship's bridge until he was too weak to stay on his feet, then they stuck him into a section of the latrines where the excrement rose half a meter above the floor. My brother poet felt his strength failing him. The stench made him reel. Then the thought struck him: my tormentors are keeping an eye on me, they want to see me drop, they want to watch me suffer. His strength came back with pride. He began to sing, low at first, then louder, and finally at the top of his lungs. He sang all the songs, all the love poems he could remember, his own poems, the ballads of the peasants, the people's battle hymns. He sang everything he knew. And so he vanquished the filth and his tormentors." (Memoirs, St. Martin, pp. 195-96.)

You were not content to accept your lot and vegetate in the institution. You spent your sentence detailing the menial portions of penal life, penning letters to your wives as if you had only just been torn from their arms, lending an essential dignity to the forgotten and the condemned with a futuristic free verse unheard of in Turkish literary circles of the time. In 1949, Pablo Picasso, Paul Robeson, and Sartre formed an international committee to campaign for your release. In 1950, you began an eighteen-day hunger strike when the Turkish parliament ended its session without passing a general amnesty, which eventually worked to secure your freedom.

I went to prison for pummeling another sentient, innocent human being; for reaching out from the abysmal pit I'd buried myself in and trying to drag someone else down with me; for being a monster. I didn't go inside sporting a mantle of victimhood, but for making someone else a victim. And every step I've taken in my life since that night, eleven years past, has been stained with the cognizance of having caused such immense trauma. No one petitioned for my release on the grounds that I didn't deserve to be locked up; no one cared when I stopped eating; no one should.

Which invites my query: is my attraction to your poetry, Nazim, at least in part due to the difference in how we came to be where we were? Am I furtively hoping to leech from your accomplishments, to impart your energies to my own, to be like those star fuckers who believe themselves special because they screwed Robert Plant when he was still the golden god? Is it fair to adore you so? Is it honest?

My convict father once told me that not many people go to prison (in the U.S., anyway) for or with a hefty set of political predilections; political prisoners are few and far between in our country. But a large percentage of those who go to prison end up adopting a political stance while locked down, and take on the function of political prisoner, having come at it backwards.

I found myself in prison. My self. I found the person I'd known hints of in my youth - the man who actually cared about others, about the world - but had forfeited it to drugs, meaningless sex, destruction as a means of assertion, impulsiveness. For reasons I still can't fully explain (perhaps owing simply to the tremendous threat of the prison sentence they hung around my neck? No motivation like the pure fear of never going home again) I made actual, genuine changes. I dug myself out like a fossil; cautious as an archeologist, I brushed off an inch of dirt a day for ten years. My true ideals had their chance to take command, and I tirelessly put in the work to obey them. Liberalism, radicalism, environmentalism, psychology, and getting absolutely, immeasurably lost in literature and poetry... these things I (re)learned to love and admire and worked to see made into a reality around me, so as to always leave a place always better than I found it, to be satisfied in the small moment, the pure pleasure of drawing cool breath in winter, in feeling the muscles expand when I stretch in the morning. Your poem, *On Living*, speaks to my newfound maxim:

Life's no joke,

you must live in earnest

like a squirrel, for example,

expecting nothing outside your life or beyond,

you must concentrate wholly on living.

(...)

You'll take living so seriously,

that even at seventy you'll plant olive trees

not just to leave to your children;

but because, although you fear death

you don't believe in it,

so great is the power of life.

Or at least this was the message I sought to broadcast to those around me, those I sensed on the cusp of (or already long past) giving up completely. Even when I wasn't able to believe in this idea of being aware of the conscious power each of us holds over our presence in the world, I still retained a visage (a mask, at times) of belief, or stupid blind faith, in the theorem. And it wasn't hard; harder to get started than the maintenance after, actually. It sounds funny and more proud than I am comfortable with, but, despite what I'd been arrested for, I've always been a temperate being, a loving and earnest type, someone who sought to take care of those around me before and beyond myself. I suppose it's fair to say I never really wasn't that person - I just learned to ignore it, turn it off, and suppress my brighter side in adherence to a manufactured reptile.

Prison gave me occasion to get back in touch with a more genuine nature. The problem was (remains) guilt over what I'd done to get there. I've felt as if every good I've gained was an unearned advantage. Like I was privy to some underground knowledge I had no right to be aware of.

The Turkish regime sent you to prison for being a communist, for abiding by what you believed in. Because of your status as political prisoner, you were able to view and write about the prison experience as someone apart from the proverbial fray (but still as much a part of it as any other). Your observations of what it was like in solitary confinement, what inequity abounds in that setting, could be read as a true and objective interpretation:

How many others are in this place?

I don't know.

I'm alone far from them,

they're all together far from me.

To talk to anyone besides myself

is forbidden.

So I talk to myself.

But I find my conversation so boring,

my dear wife, that I sing songs.

And what do you know,

that awful, always off-key voice of mine

touches me so

that my heart breaks.

(Letter From a Man in Solitary)

I remember being in a single-man cell with absolutely nothing to do but drowse on a concrete slab until my spine ached; nothing to watch but acrylic peeling off the walls on broiling summer afternoons. I feel it like I am there, again.

Reading you, somehow, I believe that the reader who has never been there can feel it, too. There's that old bromide about not being able to know an intense experience (war, molestation, prison, etc.) without having survived it... but I believe your poems, Nazim, disprove this idea.

Nazim, I have tried to communicate the very particular misery inherent in spending a decade on the same square patch of dirt and asphalt, and yet, no matter how lucky I might strike with my portrayals, how succinct or tangible I can manage to make the experience, there's an underlying current of utter bullshit that comes parceled with my writing. One that says I am whining, that I am only writing in order to whine; one that translates my account of prison life into a series of grouching about the "unfairness" of having had to be there in the first place. It says I haven't any right to complain, because, unlike you, Nazim, I earned my place in the penitentiary, which means I forfeit my right to bitch about the circumstances.

Perhaps my infatuation with your poetry has vicarious leanings. Perhaps I admire you so because of the differences in how we came to our similar life experience. I want to have been you, Nazim Hikmet. If I had to go to prison (and surely I did not), I want it to have been for something noble, something just, something bigger than myself.

Perhaps by reading you, by putting myself in the chair you sat in when you wrote those words, I get a chance to feel that way - like I'm actually worthy of the ideals I've adopted, like I didn't sacrifice my chance to be a good person because I've done terrible things. I just don't know.

Works Cited

Hikmet, Nazim. *Beyond the Walls, Selected Poems*. Trans. Ruth Christie, Richard McKane, and Talat Sait Halman. 3rd ed. 2002. London: Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 2007. Print.

Hikmet, Nazim, and Carolyn Forché. *Poems of Nazim Hikmet*. Trans. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk. 2nd ed. 1994. New York: Persea Books, 2002. Print.

"Nazim, Hikmet." EBSCOhost. Columbia University Press, 1 Oct. 2011. Web. 15 Nov. 2011.

"Nazim, Hikmet." Poets. Academy of American Poets, 2007. Web. 15 Nov. 2011.

Judge's Comments

There is a delicate intimacy to this epistolary essay written about the poetry of Nazim Hikmet. The voice is honest and mature as it takes a short examination of the life and poetry of Hikmet and braids it together with a brave examination of the self. The essay is frank, courageous, and passionate as we get not only the writer's intellect at work on the page, but also the writer's heart confessing regret, desire, admiration-the writer's life and Hikmet's poetry illuminate one another so elegantly. The writer says "I found myself in prison. My Self," and we, the readers are so lucky that this essay shares that self with us.

Second Place Essay

2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The War with PTSD

Jasica Opperman-Whitney

Specialist Travis Opperman, a Purple Heart recipient, of the 41st Engineer Battalion for the United States Army knows that freedom is not free. Lives are lost, and families are ripped apart all in the name of freedom. Many military personnel come home from war and continue to experience the horrors of the battlefield over and over again. Dark nightmares, flashbacks and overwhelming anxiety are all part of daily life when one suffers with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As Specialist Opperman, a sufferer of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, states, "The hardest battle has been since I've come home."

Visibly, my brother, Specialist Opperman, is a strong and handsome man. He dons a pair of dark aviator sunglasses. (You can't catch him without his shades anymore.) His body is covered with graffiti-style tattoos that bear such words as "end of days," "pain," "fear" and "permanence." His hands shake, almost always, a common condition for people who suffer with PTSD. Travis swallows hard as he begins to discuss PTSD and how this condition has changed his life: "It affects every single factor of your life. I am very positive of that. Do you know how hard it was for me to admit that I was different than was before I left? I didn't want to believe I changed, but I was completely changed." Travis rubs his hand along his face as he sits back on the couch. "People would tell me all the time I'm different and that I changed. But I was like, no, no you don't know what you are talking about; I'm all right."

In July 2009, Travis headed for the sandy war zone located in Afghanistan. While on his tour of duty, he was shot in the chest, and his convoy ran over two improvised explosion devices (IED). In March 2010, when his platoon hit the second IED, Travis received a head wound resulting in Traumatic Brain Injury. Due to the explosion, his back and legs are riddled with scars. After returning home, though the Kevlar vest is off his body, he still feels the weight of the war. At times, the dark reality of war consumes his every thought and haunts his life, regardless if he is asleep or not.

I asked Travis when he first acknowledged his disorder. He replied, "I was driving. I had my buddy Mihalov with me who was already diagnosed with PTSD. I was feeling nervous, edgy and sketchy. . . I was freaking out. He [Mihalov] kind of laughed because he knew what was going on with me. Mihalov told me that day, 'You need to go talk with someone because you have PTSD.' That's when I started figuring out he was right, but I kept denying it to myself. It took a long time to accept what happened, you know, with everything."

When asked how he would describe PTSD, Travis thinks for a moment before responding, "It sucks. Everything you look at, everything you do is completely different." My brother pauses for a moment before continuing, "You overanalyze things, and it's really, really difficult." He shakes his head and runs his shaking hand across his face, "I find myself spacing out. I'm looking for bombs in the 'frick'n' road when I'm driving. I know I am home,

but these are the kinds of things I find myself doing. I'm waiting for something to happen. Some days I can't even go to work." He continues, his voice quiet, "It's seeing the uniform, and knowing everything we have done as a company over there, it makes it hard." As he shifts in his seat, Travis says, "When I leave work, I know there are going to be repercussions. But I do it for my own good. I don't like the way it makes you feel." He seems to sense my upcoming question, so he elaborates further, "The adrenaline rush constantly. Even hearing a gun click or a dry fire when there is no ammo in the weapon that stuff makes me flip out." The visual scars are obvious when you look at Travis, but under his skin lies the most painful injury, the immense pain he feels in his heart.

Many sufferers of PTSD are often viewed as weak due to the stigma of weakness associated with this condition. When I ask Travis, if his platoon mates have labeled him as weak, he answers without hesitation "Yeah, absolutely. I was in a team leader position when we got back until everyone found out I was dealing with these problems." A shaking hand slides under his sunglasses and wipes a tear from his eye. "They took me out of my position. They pushed me to the side and let other E4 Specialists walk all over me because they considered me broken. You know, like there is nothing we can do; he [the PTSD victim] is just not material anymore. That's bullshit to me because it fucking hurts. You don't feel accepted."

Travis encountered nearly a year of grueling abuse from his platoon mates. The specialist would receive phone calls and voicemail as rounds were lit off in the background of the messages to remind him of the constant sound of gunfire that he endured for so long in Afghanistan. They would use his heightened sense of anxiety to make him feel paranoid, whispering comments to him like, "Did you hear/see that?" and "What's that over there?" As they deafened his ears with the sounds of explosions, his platoon mates' saliva would splatter his face. These brothers, (many service individuals refers to their peers as "brother" to symbolize how close one becomes with one's peers) would intensify his paranoia and make combat noises to see what would play out, sending Travis into a mental breakdown, where he lost days while experiencing a dark flashback. Due to this event, Travis was institutionalized until he was transferred to Haven, a hospital specializing in care of soldiers suffering with PTSD, located in Colorado.

"You walk around, and you can tell everyone is talking shit about you and your problems. Like when I had my mental breakdown." I reach over and touch my brother's hand as I comfort him. "People would walk up to me and make explosion noises, and shit, in my ear. I couldn't respond to this. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't speak. I just walked around like a zombie or something." Travis begins to cry softly as he wipes the tears streaming from his eyes. "It's bullshit they did that bullshit to me. It was unreal. It's hard to deal with stuff like that."

When I asked Travis where he sees himself in ten years, he begins, "The memories are the hardest part of having PTSD. You make a million memories over there. I don't know how else to describe it, but it's complete craziness and organized chaos." I can tell he is looking in my eyes even though I can't see into his eyes hidden behind the dark aviators. "Believe me, in that one year, everything matters. You live every day, over there, not knowing if you

will live or die." Travis touches his face again, and at this point, I realize this is a form of self-soothing for my brother. "The memories are never going to get out of my head, but hopefully, I can deal with them better." Travis smiles slightly and says, "I won't give up; I'm too much of a fighter. I will fight through the symptoms for the rest of my life if that is what it takes even if I feel like this forever." Then with the strong voice that can only belong to a true American hero, Travis states, I'd never take it [serving in Afghanistan] back no matter how hard it is. I would never take it back even knowing I have these consequences on my mind." The tears flow from behind the sunglasses as he says, still in that strong voice, "I have never been so proud to do something in my life. I would never take it back because I love America so much."

I am proud to be Specialist Travis Opperman's sister. I love him beyond words, and I will support his choices and decisions (whatever they may be). I may not have been out in the battlefield with him, but I have fought this PTSD war with him, and I will continue to until I die. I hope, after all his pain and suffering, Travis takes the time to get to know who he is now, not who he was or who he is told to be from authority, peers, family or even himself because my brother deserves to know the strong, brave and beautiful person that I see.

Judge's Comments

This essay introduces us to the writer's brother, a veteran of the conflict in Afghanistan. Through this profile, we get a good understanding of her brother and the daily experiences of a man with PTSD. More than that, however, what comes across is how the nature of the writer's curiosity about PTSD stems from a need to understand her brother. It's not a portrait of a man who is broken, as it is a declaration that Specialist Travis Opperman is very much loved.

Third Place Essay

2011 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Once a Runner
Devon Joslin

The end. I wish there was more to this story, but there is not. I had this crazy notion that I could learn something new by writing this paper. I had thought I could maybe figure out where I went wrong. I had hoped that keeping a running journal every day would help me on my arduous journey. I had hoped a lot of things. However, my journey has come to a close. This is the end. It is often said that the man who works the most diligently improves the most. So, let's try something; let's pretend this story did not end yet. Let's go back to the beginning. Let us pretend it is still the spring of 2010, where my journey began.

Spring 2010

"What I want is to be number one!" I exclaimed to the news reporter at the GMAA City Track and Field Championships in the spring of my junior year. It was time to run the 800m. After losing the 1600m run I knew I couldn't just sit back and relax for this race. The starter lines us up, then fires the gun, the battle has begun. According to the pre-race announcements I was supposed to win, but Coach Smith had told me not to become over confident and take the lead early, and it would have been wise to listen to him (he is arguably the best distance runner that Reeths Puffer ever produced, and in 1992 he qualified for the Olympic Trials in the marathon). The first 300 meters pass by quickly. I am still in the lead. Out of the corner of my eye I can see a person in blue coming on me fast. I have never heard of this competitor so I let him pass me at the 400 meter mark figuring he would burn out and I would win with ease. He didn't slow down. I didn't want to settle for silver, so I chased the gold:

One hundred eighty meters left: I retake the lead and try to pull away.

One hundred fifty meters left: the pain was unbearable; the runner in blue challenges me for the lead.

One hundred twenty meters left: The boy in blue passes me with authority and pulls away, and I can hear two more behind me.

Eighty meters left: I bow my head and violently swing my arms hoping for a burst of strength.

Twenty meters left: two more competitors line up next to me and try to pass.

Ten meters left: I can't hold on, the two runners pass me. I cross the finish line. No gold, no silver, no bronze, I have finished with nothing. I decline to be interviewed after the race and go to be alone.

I guess I can't always be a champion.

Something was gone. The edge that had once made me a lion on the track was now gone. After the two mediocre performances that day I had considered walking out on the sport for good. My spark was gone.

Winter 2010

I'm 17, a senior at Reeths Puffer high school, and I am on my way to decide my future.

Coach Smith, now the head cross country coach at Muskegon Community College, receives a knock on his office door. I am standing in the doorway as he finishes his phone call. He then flags me in.

Keep your cool. Don't seem overanxious. Play hard to get.

"Have a seat Devon."

"Why did you want to see me Coach?"

"Did you talk to the Cornerstone Coach yet?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He offered seventy five percent tuition, and room and board."

Smith grins menacingly, "That is a pretty good offer."

"Yeah, I guess it is, isn't it?"

"You know, I can remember the day you came out for the cross country team. Coach Peters almost didn't let you on, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember you telling him I was decent at track and he should give me a chance. I like to think I was an awesome freshman distance runner!"

We both laugh for a moment.

Smith turns and looks out his office window and lets out a sigh. "Yeah, you sure have come a long way since then."

"Yes. Yes I have."

"I think you still have a lot of unused potential."

"What do you mean 'unused?' in case you haven't noticed; I ran for team USA last summer, I am the fastest cross country athlete of the last decade at Reeths Puffer, I think I am running pretty damn well!"

So much for 'keep your cool'.

"Calm down, I meant that in a good way."

"Sorry Coach."

"I called you in here because I think I can help you find your racing legs, you are a great 'runner' but I can make you a better 'competitor', not to take anything away from what you have done..."

"I don't understand what you mean, should I be insulted or flattered?"

"For a chunk of change can I call you a Jayhawk?"

"Look man, you haven't said a word to me all year; now you just throw an offer like that and expect me to say yes? Two weeks ago you wouldn't even come watch me race. I don't understand you man!"

"Well, I don't understand you at times either."

"...Alright..."

"I'll have your letter ready for signing this afternoon, if you want it anyways..."

"Okay."

I leave his office grinning. Got 'em.

Four years ago I found freedom. I found an activity that let me express myself. Running is a simple act: you just put one foot in front of the other...very fast. It is simple enough that I can focus all of my energy on it. Focus enough to train through a brutal Michigan winter.

Spring 2011

A miracle happened! I survived the Michigan winter training and I got hurt. It's okay! I needed the time to reflect on things. I had made running the most important thing in my life. It had eventually gotten to the point where I would wake up and ask myself "how is my running going?" if the answer was not good, my day would suck. Getting hurt was a blessing. It tested me in more areas than just running; it tested my will, my mind, and my faith.

I had reduced my training routine from 65 miles per week to 10. The regional track meet was around the corner. I had two mediocre performances so far in my senior season of track: a fourth place finish in the 1600 at the GMAA city meet, and a third place finish in the 800 at the OK Black Conference meet. I was not ready. I'm sure Elijah was not ready when he outran a chariot 70 miles to Jezrel in the Old Testament, but the hand of God touched him and he took off. Regionals was my chariot.

...And I won...

It feels good to be back on top again.

Judge's Comments

This essay is adventurous in its form as we learn so much about the writer. The snapshots are effective in creating a collage of the writer's life as an athlete—the cockiness of victory, the humility in defeat, the dedication to running. What is most striking is how the writer steps outside of the trappings of a standard essay in order to imagine what an essay can do. It's strongest where the writer uses the form to bring forward the most important element of the essay: not the races, not the competition, and definitely not who won—it's ultimately that examination of the writer's self that makes this piece successful.