

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2013**

2013 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

"Transgender"

Author: Jennifer Lance
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Muskegon Community College

"After the War"

Author: Angela Nichols
Mentor: Karrie Waarala
Lansing Community College

"Brief Encounter"

Author: Inney Prakash
Mentor: Nadine Davis
Delta College

Fiction

"Mending Shards"

Author: Laura Richards
Mentor: Karrie Waarala
Lansing Community College

"Simple Little Things"

Author: Noelle Parlette
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Northwestern Michigan College

"Where She Belongs"

Author: Faylynn Ames
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Lansing Community College

Essay

"Fruits, Leaves, Roots: Deconstructing Eden"

Author: Kaitlyn Linsley
Mentor: Jill Reglin
Lansing Community College

"Girl Scouts or Child Labor Force"

Author: Rod Patrick
Mentor: Jill Reglin
Lansing Community College

"That Green Light"

Author: Zac Jones
Mentor: Martha Petry
Jackson Community College

2013 Creative Writing Judges

Fiction

Katey Schultz grew up in Portland, Oregon and is most recently from Celo, North Carolina. She is the recipient of half a dozen fiction prizes, including the Linda Flowers Literary Prize awarded by the North Carolina Humanities Council. Her debut collection of stories, *Flashes of War*, was published by Loyola University Maryland and recently awarded Book of the Year in Literary Fiction by the Military Writers Society of America. Katey lives in a 1970 Airstream trailer bordering the Pisgah National Forest. Please visit www.kateyschultz.com.

Essay

John Mauk has a Masters degree in language and literature from the University of Toledo and a PhD in rhetoric from Bowling Green State University. He writes and works at the intersection of rhetoric and fiction. He is a college instructor and an avid student of philosophy. He has two collections of fiction, one available and one forthcoming on Black Lawrence Press. He has three college writing textbooks: two available, one forthcoming on Wadsworth/Cengage. He currently teaches at Northwestern Michigan College. Please visit johnmauk.com.

Poetry

Holly Wren Spaulding is a writer and editor, former professor of creative writing and founder/director of Poetry Forge, where she mentors emerging writers. Her work has appeared widely, including in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Witness* and *The Nation*. Her collection of poems, *The Grass Impossibly*, was awarded publication through Michigan Writers Cooperative Press. She is the recipient of two Pushcart nominations, five Hopwood Awards and numerous residencies, grants and performance opportunities. Please visit hollywrenspaulding.com.

First Place Poetry
2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Transgender
Jennifer Lance

Once apple born
I rolled from the smooth womb,
unto polished floors and
bright neonatal lights.
"Now,"
the doctors told my mother,
as they hauled me from the quaking
chasm,
"all your dreams will come
true." A magic
wishing apple, I was
there for the first kiss. Go

ahead, clap your hands
I'm ready to do my puppet dance. The truth
is, it was only temporary. After
a glass coffin puberty
things began to show
and the mirror knew

as the prince bent over it's sheen,
reflecting to where he lie
beneath,
beautiful woman, fairest of
them all.

J
udge's Comments

"Transgender" is a poem of discovery that employs surprising diction from the first line. The poet repurposes a myth to link the unfamiliar (to most) experience of transgenderedness with an familiar fairy tale in a deft rhetorical move that bespeaks a sophisticated understanding at the core of the poem. I admire the clarity of music and imagery in lines like "Once apple born/ I rolled from the smooth womb, /unto polished floors and / bright neonatal lights." A lesser writer might have been lazy, assuming the heft of the subject would carry the poem. Instead, we gain a genuine insight with real imagination.

Co-First Place Poetry
2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

After the War
Angela Nichols

It's been weeks since I took off my mud-caked boots.
I threw them in the fire,
watched the leather crack and burn.
It did not feel like absolution.

The house is standing behind her.
Yellow, with white shutters
She is working in the garden,
collecting carrots from the earth

Her hands have grown callused
from a trowel as mine have from a gun
I pause at the gate,
fingers trembling on the latch.

Judge's Comments

Sometimes the plainest language is exactly the right language for the task and so it is in this quietly moving poem about returning to ordinary life after military service. The unembellished images are strong and clear, anchoring a potent emotional experience in concrete details of the physical world. The one place the poem departs this realm is to make the simple statement that "it did not feel like absolution" when the symbol of military life, boots, were burned. I believe it. This poem earns trust quickly, and convincingly. Throughout this poem, the poet employs restraint to good effect, trusting the reader to grasp the significance of the experience shared, such that the image of a trembling hand on a garden gate says plenty about the complex feelings that must arise for veterans under such circumstances.

Third Place Poetry
2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Brief Encounter
Inney Prakash

She says it in the stupid way that

Young girls say

Stupid things

To stave off the boredom

Of being stuck at home on a summer's day.

"Let's get married!"

In the hammering rise and fall of her

Sing song pixie squeal

She says it like she's the first person to

Ever have the idea,

But she doesn't really mean it and when I say

Yes darling let's

I pretend I don't either.

Judge's Comments

Here's a seemingly simple poem that gives way to a delicate understanding as the reader comprehends that the speaker of this poem actually loves the young girl who stupidly says things like "Let's get married," perhaps without meaning it. The poem succeeds at building suspense as we proceed through details of a summer day where boredom sings in the air. I admire the emotional risk taken the final line, as well as the decision to stop there. Nothing else needs saying.

First Place Fiction

2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Mending Shards
Laura Richards

His grandfather knelt outside Basil's open bedroom door. Shards of glass sprinkled the hallway floor reflecting the newly woken sun onto the walls and ceiling. The dark blue wallpaper cooled the sunlight, and turned itself into a flat, pockmarked moon — a moon surrounded with sun and stardust. In his white pajamas, Basil felt like an astronaut on a foreign planet.

"Whoa, boy. Stay in your room 'til I finish sweeping," his grandfather said, raising his hand toward Basil.

The stardust was neatly swept up and stationed in a pail. An overturned side table lay nearby with one severed leg. Basil hadn't remembered the table falling over last night. But the crashing mirror had been loud enough to cover other noises.

"Should've left the mirror in the bedroom. One of us must've jarred the table o' bit on our way to bed last night," his grandfather said, shaking his head. "Probably was me 'n my clumsy footing."

Basil didn't say anything. There was nothing wrong with his grandfather's footing. He did sway a bit when he walked; a result of his years as a cattle rancher back before he married Basil's grandmother and settled for a life of herding soybeans. He didn't bump into things, though.

"Come on, boy." Basil's grandfather huffed his way up off of his knees. His bent hand pulled up on the grey hallway molding a little below Basil's shoulder on the wall. "Go get some shoes on and milk Eunice. I can hear her bleating from here."

As his grandfather turned and walked heavily down the stairs, Basil leaned out of his doorway and picked up a tiny glass shard wedged in a floorboard. Its sharp edges pricked at Basil's fingers as it blinked and sparkled innocently.

The barn lay behind the house at the edge of a soybean field. Its peeled outer walls and moss-covered shingles had been one of the first things to greet him when he had arrived at the farm, so he was told. He only remembered Eunice: her insistent nose nudging into his pockets, and her course hair against his neck. The morning after he arrived, his grandmother had found him huddled in a stall with his arms around the goat. She said he was a little gift.

Basil sat on a stool in Eunice's stall. The glass shard he had collected earlier dug into his skin underneath the lining of his pants' pocket. He blinked a few times and pushed a bucket

under Eunice's udders; the pain was his penance. She shied to the right, beating her hooves into the ground. Repositioning the bucket, his hands slowly worked up and down her leathery nipples, just as his grandfather had taught him. The bucket wobbled as Eunice's hoof batted at it. Basil's fingers pressed on a hard lump. It bulged at the end of a nipple and squirted into the bucket. A grating scream emitted from Eunice and the bucket flew out of the stall. A line of red milk streamed onto the straw-covered floor.

When he slammed into the back screen door of the farmhouse, Basil was breathing hard. His grandfather stood bent over the kitchen table squeezing wood glue onto the cracked mirror frame. Basil had been next to him a year ago and helping to glue the hand carved pieces together the first time. It had been a birthday gift for his grandmother before she had sat in bed surrounded by dark red crusted handkerchiefs.

"There's blood in Eunice's milk," Basil gasped.

His grandfather straightened; his gaze never left the table.

"I'll call the vet," his grandfather said. "You go stay out there with 'er."

A sparrow sung cheerfully from on top of the barn door as Basil walked back in. Eunice's stall was thick with a stifling darkness. Despite the sunny day outside, the windows were a hazy brown. Wrapped in layers of dust, they cast no more light than a dying flashlight. Basil knelt down and whispered Psalm 23 into the goat's twitching ear. He didn't know if God approved of reciting scripture to goats. It couldn't hurt, though. His grandmother used to read whole chapters of the Bible to her handkerchiefs. The Book still lay on her night stand open to her favorite passage, which his grandfather sometimes read softly: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."

Basil knew she was dead by the time he finished reciting the psalm. Her twitching ear had slowed and stiffened, and her body lulled forward over her tucked legs. Basil mangled a few straw pieces poking her prone form. His hand started ripping at more pieces of straw around her on the floor. What right did they have to be there digging into her? It was like the moon from last night. What right had it had to be on his grandmother's mirror?

Basil stood up and pressed his shoulder against the wall. Jamming his hands into his jean pockets, he felt glass shard rip into his skin. Slowly, Basil worked his hand out and stared at the thick liquid dripping from his fingertips.

"Hey, now, let me see that." His grandfather's wrinkled fingers grabbed his shoulder from behind.

"It's fine. I'll go wrap it."

Basil tried to pull away, but the old man's arms held him firmly and carried him into the house.

Judge's Comments

In "Mending Shards," a young boy seeks the approval of his grandfather and comes face-to-face with the intersection of his youthful views of the world and the painful reality of loss and death. The writer moves deftly through scenes and descriptive detail, planting powerful imagery that grows in significance and impact as the story progresses.

Second Place Fiction 2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Simple Little Things
Noelle Parlette

*There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down on Camelot...*

"Hey, Lady Shakespeare, when's your ride getting here?"

Sharon's raspy voice abruptly wakes me out of my trance, my comfort. We're sitting under an elm tree in Central Park: my home, by day, for the past three months. Sharon lights a cigarette and puffs away. My brother is late again. John always tells me he'll be here, once a month, at twelve o'clock. Noon.

"It's Tennyson." I say.

"What?"

"You called me Lady Shakespeare. I'm reading Tennyson. I hate Shakespeare."

"Well, sweetie, that's the only writer I know shit about. Too bad you can't stay for the concert tonight. I think it's Joan Baez. Probably too old for you to remember, huh?"

She inhales another tunnel of smoke and starts chuckling, then begins to cough, suffocating her larynx and shrinking her vocal chords until all that's going to be left are tangled, dry weeds.

I think she's trying to kill her voice on purpose. She told me that she used to sing in church as a kid, and then stopped when she realized that she could at eighteen, leaving and never looking back. I used to sing sometimes around the city when John would let me borrow his guitar, but now he's worried I'll sell it for food or God knows what. When I didn't have his guitar I'd use keyboards at different places, but then, there's the matter of appearance. I kind of look like a person without a house or a job, or people to look after me. My family picks me up faithfully every so often and takes me home. I don't see what the big deal is. I'm always in the same place.

"So, Hannah Banana, why do you keep going back there if you don't want to?" Sharon asks in her hazy voice, bringing me back to the present.

"My dad's birthday is tomorrow," I say.

It's not a lie because June fifth was his birthday. He would be fifty five this year. Over-the-hill so to speak. Even though we're considered friends, I haven't told Sharon much about me. Probably because she is always talking about herself. I've noticed that most of the people out here like to talk about themselves. Because now there's nothing stopping them from saying everything. Sharon is fifty and she likes to burn Bibles for fun. She's kind of psychotic like that. No one really knows where she came from. She once told me some really sick shit had happened to her at the church her father ministered. Her parents never found out about it because the guy who did it faithfully taught Sunday school on the side, but I would say she definitely has some resentment against The Almighty. She sometimes walks the streets alone at night with her blade and her lighter, goes into churches that are open for sanctuary and finds Bibles and burns them to a crisp after throwing them into small piles. She hasn't been arrested for it yet.

"It's freedom of speech," she always explains to Tom, our religious man.

Tom is in his fifties like Sharon, like my dad would be. He's kind of the new kid on the block, no pun intended. He has been all over, as far as a homeless guy could get. As far west as L.A., and he grew up in Illinois. His excuse of being around people like us is so he can save souls and be like Jesus, who, in all fairness, was homeless himself. He is currently working on Sharon's soul, but I don't think she's ready to give up the whole burning-of-the-scriptures ritual. Despite their stark differences in religion, I think Sharon gets along the best with Tom. They like to laugh hysterically together at the random magazine clips Louis shows them in his journal. His pictures are a part of the memoir he's writing about his experiences in Vietnam.

Louis was a professor of British Literature at Stanford in the sixties until he was deployed to service in Vietnam. You wouldn't think he had once been a distinguished English professor to look at him, with his sodden grey hair, his ripped army jacket that he never takes off, and his yellow-rimmed eyes so sunken with grief and denial that they are almost glued shut. He tells us stories of things that happened there, but only in the daytime because at night he is "busy writing" by flashlight and the glare of advertisements that never sleep. I don't think that he sleeps at all. He came back from fighting after two years to find that his wife had left him, and soon after he quit his job.

"I just got up and left. They wanted me to check into the hospital. To the mental health care unit for people who are sick in the head, but I'm not sick. I'm not," he had so emphatically told me when we first met. I don't mind if he is crazy, though. He's the only one I can talk to about the authors I love.

But of course he is sick. Everyone who stays out here when they don't have to is sick in some way. It's just that none of us can explain why.

Somehow we've all managed to find each other in this world, and strangely enough, it works. Looking past the pale, drawn faces and dingy clothes, they're the most normal people I've ever met. Sure they have their problems and horror stories, but it all fits me just perfectly. I know I should think of myself as better than them, but I can't get away.

Sharon smashes the butt of her cigarette into her hand to feel its harsh warmth and she stretches, gesturing ahead of her. She's wearing a sweater, but it's June. Why everyone thinks it's cold enough to wear scarves and sweaters is beyond me.

"That your brother, kiddo?"

A medium-built, olive-skinned man of twenty-five, two years older than me, gets out of the car and waves over to me. I smile and run my hand through my hair, trying to spruce up, and hug Sharon goodbye.

"Don't stay away forever," Sharon laughs lightly, but in her clouded grey eyes there is sincerity. There might even be some desperation in her smoke-filled voice.

"Yeah. Tell the guys bye for me."

I approach my older brother timidly at first, but he seems to be in a good mood, so I lunge at him and he gives me a bear hug. He hugs me just like Dad did.

"Hey, kid. What's new?" he asks with pretend nonchalance.

"Ah, you know, fighting off thugs with my mad skills. Um, eating out of trash cans," I joke. If I don't joke about it then it gets serious, and then we have nothing to say to each other.

"Nice," is his joke. Humor runs rampant in our family.

We hop into his sleek Cadillac and set out. Our drive is cloaked in silence. I look out of the shaded window, past the high-towered buildings and fenced-in apartment lots. Past respectable citizens with faces in their Blackberries because they have board meetings to be at on time. John never has to be on time, really. He's the CEO of our dad's thriving business in a prestigious clothing chain, so our family gets nice discounts on clothes. I prefer wearing shirts that cover my ass and a pair of baggy jeans that need a belt now just to stay up. I like the feeling of being swallowed up by my clothes.

It takes us half an hour to reach the house, but we make it, unscathed by the ever-bustling city of mayhem. It amazes distant relatives and even more distant friends that I live only half an hour away from my home, and yet I choose to remain on the streets. I always smile brightly and tell them honestly that it amazes me too. It would be nice to live here. It's a massive refurbished Victorian home. My mom loves the Victorian style, with two tall, ivory towers overlooking almost all the rest of Ditmas Park, with two trim trails of flowers leading up a stone staircase, with a double-sided door engraved in translucent glass barricading intruders. It's a castle fit for important people, and welcoming to those less-deserving. It's fit for a princess whose head aches whenever she tries to wear her crown. It reminds me of when I was little and my mom would make me wear those metal headbands with the fake diamonds. God, those things dug into my scalp, but they kept my hair out of my face.

John takes my little backpack of worldly goods and I rush up the steps to see my mom and sister. My mom isn't home, but I climb the stairs to Amy's room. She has one of the tower rooms overlooking the ocean. We've always shared that room, and, even though neither of us lives in it now, I always go there first.

I carefully open the door and almost tiptoe in. It smells like vanilla and fabric softener. My old bed is the same. It's facing the tower's window, with the stupid mini-canopy I "designed" for it making it appear lacy and feminine. Our vanity still has pictures of past celebrity crushes on its mirror. There are lace curtains at the window, and my mom has kept it open to let the cool afternoon breeze in. She's so old-fashioned. I go to the window and lean out, wondering how far I would have to lean until I fell into the past. I close my eyes and breathe in the fresh air, when a loud shriek pierces my right ear lobe. I jump at the sound, and Amy runs out of her hiding place behind the closet door and almost chokes me in her embrace.

"Oh my God, seriously don't ever do that again!" I shout. But I'm laughing.

"Sorry. Hey, you cut your hair!" She pulls on said hair.

"Yeah, I was kind of sick of it, so..."

Amy lunges onto her old bed and leans back on her wrists. "It looks great, Han."

She scans my face for signs of differences, but her big brown eyes only sparkle with complete joy, like always. We share the same eyes, my dad always said. Hers are more oval and mine more slanted, and her nose is bigger and mine is bonier. Our lips are both full, and our lashes are long and dark. Two smile lines are beginning to gently crease her mouth. Two lines of a different kind crease my brow.

Her eyes brighten suddenly. "Hey, do you wanna' see him?"

"Of course, why do you think I came a day early?"

"Oh, yeah. Let's go downstairs," She giggles like a child.

We go down to the living room and my mom is there, her glossy brown hair curled to her shoulders, with only a few streaks of grey, her oval grey eyes tender and quiet. In her arms is a blanketed bundle.

"Hey, sweet girl." she says in a warm whisper. We hug, the sleeping baby between us.

"Hannah, this is Caleb. We named him after Rob's dad, because of course we had to. You know his family is so big on tradition, but it's good for him. It fits him," Amy says proudly, adjusting his blanket.

Mom gives him carefully to me, and I cradle him in my arms. I peer down into his tiny face, so smooth and beautiful. I hesitantly kiss his soft forehead, and he squirms a little. His mouth opens, and I lean in to smell his breath. It smells so pure and warm. Then I finally cry. I cry for everything.

Judge's Comments

In "Simple Little Things," a homeless youth shares her day-to-day existence with readers and then sharply contrasts her chosen lifestyle with that of her siblings, who live in suburban comfort. Holding a newborn in her arms, the narrator realizes the costs of her decisions. The writing is surprising, clever, and vivid. This story feels like the beginning of a delightful complex, realistic character about to change directions in life.

Third Place Fiction

2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Where She Belongs
Faylynn Ames

She went back, all of her worries out front, tattooed in her eyes, as she sat down on the furthest bar stool from the front door. She had promised not to go back, the whimpering, the complaining, god; the tears. It was enough to make any moral human being respect what was asked of her, but Marion knew it was all useless. The bright lit sign hung inches above the door could be seen from any window in her office building, two miles away. A beacon, stability in the ever shifting world, a prize after a long day of listening to useless rambling about things Marion could care less about.

She had tried not to see the sign or think about going back but every time she had climbed into the cab, she was dropped off here and Marion hadn't the nerve to tell the driver he was wrong, and that her address was the opposite way. Then she'd stand out front, a statue as her hand held a cigarette to her mouth and didn't drop until it was out and stale. Marion would begin to walk away, begin the four mile walk back to her house but she'd be pushed into the building and through the door, a force no one else saw.

They always had her cocktail waiting, a martini, three olives, dry and extra dirty. As to ward off the evil spirits lurking around her she'd cross her chest, a catholic born, and swallow the first one whole, draining each lasting drop. The second was placed in front of her, already made and the empty glass swiped away. She never did eat her olives, the taste dried up in her mouth but she liked the look of them floating in the triangle shape of her glass.

There was a band tonight, blues wallowing in the thick atmosphere, the large paned windows beyond them reflecting the backs of the players. Heads were bowed over instruments, fingers picking at the strings. One man stood in front, swaying back and forth as his soft voice carried through the microphone, echoing. Marion watched him, felt his gaze slide over her silhouette and into a vast unknown of his choice as the words radiated throughout the bar.

Sitting there she felt like she was young again, her short gray hair transforming back to her long blond tresses curled around her angled face, her short plump body changing into her slim willowy figure she had dieted and exercised regularly to get. Back then she had men swarming around her, fighting to get her hand, even though she was happily married with children. Back then she highlighted her virtues with makeup and clothing, obsessed with the latest style and covered her body with the best perfumes.

Now she slumped against the bar, her body overweight from excessive eating and less exercise, the graying hairs pinned back sporadically against her wrinkled head. Now she didn't care what she wore, the floral dress wrapped around her like a potato sack, her old shoes scuffed and rattled with holes. Her foot tapped softly, its rhythm far from the rhythm

of the band, notes behind, her free hand picking at an old scab on her ear as she shifted her eyes from one table to the next. A young couple sat next her at the bar, hands held tightly, heads pressed together as they laid quick kisses on each other's lips.

She remembered when she had been like that, heart fluttering in her chest and butterflies playing within her stomach as she held her boyfriend's hand, stealing kisses each moment she could. Her boyfriend quickly turned into her fiancé, then her husband. The day she became his by name was one she'd never forget. He stood there, at the end of the aisle, hands behind his back and the biggest smile across his handsome face. Marion had been nervous but when she placed her hand in his it had disappeared along with any doubts.

They had four children together. It would have been five but the first one died at childbirth. She could still recall the grief, her husband's tears abandoned as they caressed the still babies face. He held her for a long time, whispering to her before the nurse finally took her away. The funeral was quick just the two of them, a whole day they sat at the marker staring at the cool gray granite, holding each other.

"Marion." The deep voice carved itself into her brain, pulling her out of her deepest memories. She turned her head and saw them, standing there in their white uniforms. Inside Marion giggled, their face of deep disappointment thrilling her. As they watched her, Marion sipped her drink, the cool liquid burning as it cascaded down her throat. Throwing money down on the bar, her empty glass slapped on top of it she stood up, unbalanced by the alcohol. One of them, his hand cool and hard grabbed her arm. "We have been looking for you."

Judge's Comments

In "Where She Belongs," the writer moves deftly between the past and the present, painting a picture of a conflicted woman strained by her personal history. Using powerful verbs and efficient, vivid descriptions, the writer paints a bleak, emotional world in a matter of sentences, carrying readers into a dark, fascinating world.

First Place Essay
2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Fruits, Leaves, Roots: Deconstructing Eden
Kaitlyn Linsley

I. Fruits

Cherimoya

It looks like a breed of artichoke with grenade, full of oversized poisonous seeds. Cherimoya tastes like milky pineapple, with hints of Fruity Pebbles. You'd think, then, that it would be paradise to chew, but that's not entirely the case — not most recently. Digging into the leathery hide with my nails, scraping the flesh off the bony seeds with my front teeth, I suddenly experience my first moment ever of eating fruit while thinking carcass.

So I drop the bitten cherimoya from my hand in both surprise and disgust — at myself for the thought, and at the fruit for fitting the thought. For a second I feel a certain shame. But then I proceed to pick it back up again; I can't just throw it away. As I slowly suck piece by piece past my lips, I look at the ground out the kitchen window.

And, at the time, I think of nothing — not how I drip fruit juices down my chin like blood, or how pomegranates stain like such raw bleeding; not how the ground I see outside, between blinding patches of snow, is the living made from the previously decomposed. No, at the time, I am haunted by how short the jump between an experience of paradise and a realization of earth.

Apple

The Crimson Gold looks like an apple, but does not fit the ideal of the palm-sized weight. Really, the Crimson Gold is more like a crab apple, a tiny lookalike with a different taste — closer, I think, to tart berries, with undertones of cocoa.

To be red outside and white inside is the idea behind the derogatory term "apple" used amongst Native Americans — referring to someone who has lost connection with their roots¹. I wonder, at times now, about my inner color and taste: whether it is constantly changing with the fruits, and whether I would be judged if it could be known.

Or my outer colors, for that matter. I currently have red scars ("stretch marks") on my inner thighs from rapidly gaining some much-needed weight. They have already started to fade away. But if they don't disappear entirely, these scars are known to transform into a silvery white — a permanent mark. In the M. Night Shyamalan film *The Village* (2004), red is referenced as being "the bad color" ². Whether the red of my leg fades or turns to white — a scar of two stages and tones, a double-sided coin — I will have inhabited the bad color. I will have worn the contrasting red-on-white colors of a bitten apple, a partaken fruit.

Watermelon

But our perception of colors would depend on where we find ourselves. A few months ago I found myself by a hospital bed, in which my aunt was fighting leukemia.

When she asks me what I've been up to, I share about my comical new ability to eat entire watermelons. But as I speak, my words do not evoke in me comedy or the colors of watermelon. Instead, I am weighted down with visions of hospital-bred melons, painted in swatches of maroons, teals, and beiges from visitor furniture and wall-hangings. The outer rind is as hollow as this plastic bed frame. The seeds are as big as these dry-swallowed pills my aunt prefers planted in her pudding, and the thin juice could fill her IV bag. That's the thing about fruit: it can be heaven, it can be paradise, but just as often it's painted in the colors of wherever I find myself.

Grape

I have never tasted wine, but I've recently developed a taste for slightly fermented fruit — the grape more pungent, cherimoya more sour, the cantaloupe nearly caramelized. Even when I do not let fruit ripen or rot to that extent, I prefer most of my fruits so sweet that the outer skin of the thicker fruits might develop patches of mold. Various French and Italian medieval saints were known for partaking (with religious fervor and relish) in the bodily discharges of the infirm and the lepers: scabs, pus . . . things less sightly than a furry papaya³. The look of the fruit can be deceptive. The fruit in the Garden may not have been ripe yet. But you might not have known until you shook the tree, to try that first time.

II. Leaves

The taking-part is what opens the doors to significance and visions. One can, it is possible, take part in church communion before the significance can truly settle in. To drink and eat of the First Holy Communion is an important tradition and outward stepping stone for young Catholics. In some Eastern Orthodox traditions, the communion experience becomes visionary with references to Christ hanging on the cross as a cluster of holy grapes, the resulting wine his blood⁴. In the poetic tradition of Rainer Maria Rilke (in a letter to a friend), the Christ-vision surfaces as "the one who is coming, who has been approaching from all eternity, the one who will someday arrive, the ultimate fruit of a tree whose leaves we are" ⁵.

To think that a man symbolizing the divine incarnate — an earth-swallowed God — could be depicted as a deep purple fruit (a royal hue, to be sure), punctured and left on the wood to ripen and release holy saps . . . But I've learned, if I have learned anything, that the waiting is half of the eating. You open the tomb — the pantry door, the brown paper bag or covered fruit bowl — to rediscover the now-ripe, slightly scarred-and-bruised food: the fruit for which you forgot you had been waiting, its leaves plucked and scattered and trembling.

III. Roots

In his *Signature of All Things*, Giorgio Agamben claims that his topic of the signified is rooted in the paradisiacal Garden "as Adam, in Eden, was absolutely unmarked, and would have remained so had he not 'fallen into nature,' which leaves nothing unmarked"⁶. In so far as fruit — whether apple, fig, or pomegranate — played a central role in their falling, I wonder about the ground and the water beneath that tree and their own role in handing down the mark. When God turns to curse Adam after cursing the serpent and the woman Eve, the very first scriptural line here is actually cursing the land: cursed is the ground for your sake⁷. The land was between the man and woman, part of them; did not contribute to the sin, but took the punishment-I think, for the sake of leaving the real wrongdoers hungry. And thirsty.

I suspect that my taste buds have evolved according to the water content of a fruit. I enjoy semi-dried fruits like wet dates, but if I eat too many I always crave melons afterward. The French poet Paul Claudel wrote that "everything the heart desires can always be reduced to a water figure,"⁸ and the novelist-thinker Isak Dinesen followed up by writing that "the cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears, or the sea"⁹. Every desire at our roots seeks to be watered, seeks to be cured.

*

When eating fruit I will often experience this sensation, almost a sound, of river waters streaming through stones, of waterfall curving the edge. Like approaching something. But I can never eat enough fruit to reach the sensation of having arrived. Every time, I'm brought to put some down... to leave some melon on the rind... as if my initial desire for the fruit — what felt endless and insatiable — was proved inaccurate by the fruit itself.

To desire is to eventually realize that you don't. You walk through your wants, your fruit-studded groves, and reflect that when the roots on a tree absorb water, they're performing a mechanism. The tree needs the water. But when you eat a fruit with its water, half the time you are exercising choice, because half the time you do not immediately need the water or the nutrients. St. Augustine (as quoted by Fr. Cornelius a'Lapide) puts it this way: "The thirsty earth, and the burning rays of the sun absorb water, each in a different way; the one because of its need; the other by its power"¹⁰. It's as if we tend to perform like the solar excess, a star, which heats (not eats) planets simply because the planets happen to be there. It's our power play. It's what got us here. And it's high time we dim the lights.

*

Reverse. What happens if I take the bitten apple from my mouth-or the sucked fig, the grape, the staining pomegranate — and hook its stem back onto the branch? Is there redemption in nailing the scarred fruit to the wood? to mixing their sap?

And what if, furthermore, I shed my leaf-coverings along the roots, as I walk backward, out of the gate of the garden?

My eyes might quiver upon reclining to that spot where they say we first kicked up the dust like a wave. Because when my eyes recline fully once more — once they are sealed like scrolls — the grains of sand will have settled into those marks between my legs. We

weren't meant for scars. I could allow for sea water and rough sand to undo at least one layer of skin.

To peel it like a forbidden fruit.

And so I return to nature her mark.

¹ Language Realm: Free Translation Resources. Last modified January 14, 2013.

²The Village. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan. 2004; Centerville, DE: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.

³Traig, Jennifer, Devil in the Details: Scenes from an Obsessive Girlhood (New York: Little Brown & Co., 2004). Web.

⁴Roman, Dr. Alexander. "Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross". Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

⁵Rilke, Rainer Maria. Carrothers Family: Letters to a Young Poet excerpts.

⁶Agamben, Giorgio. The Signature of All Things: On Method. Mit Press, 2009. Web.

⁷Genesis 3:17

⁸Bachelard, Gaston. Water and Dreams: an Essay on the Imagination of Matter. Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture, 1999. Print. 133.

⁹The Painter's Keys. Robert Genn. Last modified January 11, 2013.

¹⁰Catholic Apologetics Information.

Judge's Comments

Linsley's writing is both rigorous and delicate. In this essay, she goes way beyond common intellectual reflexes and reveals the secret layers of plant life. The essay is botany, gastronomy, and philosophy all working in sophisticated harmony. We learn a good deal about everyday plants a good deal more about our relationship to the leafy stuff we might otherwise take for granted.

Second Place Essay

2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Girl Scouts or Child Labor Force
Rod Patrick

There was a time when people everywhere looked at Girl Scouts with admiration and respect and waited eagerly for that tiny hand to knock at the door, announcing the delivery of their Girl Scout cookie order. My own sisters were Girl Scouts, all four of them, and, since they were born three years apart, brought a great span of the cookie sales industry into our home. Years after that my own daughters entered the world and began their own careers as Scouts. As time went by, however, I began to see more and more how the Girl Scout program was rooted in money, or perhaps, I was just able to see it more clearly as an adult. As an adult I was able to see just how insanely lucrative a career in Girl Scouting could be, especially at the corporate level. Oh, there was still some camping and crafts but as "cookie season" neared, those activities all but halted, and the girls were schooled in marketing strategies to ensure peak sales. Not one word is mentioned as to how the funds generated by these sales, on behalf of a 501c3 charitable organization, would be greedily gobbled up by upper management.

Next to donations from the United Way, a nationwide charitable organization based in Alexandria, Virginia, the cookie sales program is still the greatest source of income for the GSUSA. It must be understood that Girl Scouts in most areas are eligible for a share of the United Way's distribution of support funds, but the United Way Foundation makes it clear that there will be absolutely no fund raising efforts through cookie sales while their own campaign is underway. The division of the American citizen's generous donations has become an exact science with some very well-defined turf boundaries.

Over the years of my personal involvement with Girl Scouts I had some very eyebrow-raising revelations. The first and perhaps most "sledgehammer subtle" came when I entered the program as a leader. There were several training seminars to attend before becoming a trusted member of the leadership group and I must admit, that more than a few were fun and Girl Scout oriented. The sobering moment came when we each had to submit to a criminal background check. I was surprised at the emphasis placed on questions regarding money: Had there been any convictions for embezzlement? Had there been any arrests with charges reduced or even dismissed for embezzlement?

I don't recall any questions regarding sex crimes or violence against children, which I would have considered to be primary concerns. Then there was an entire meeting dedicated to the sales of cookies. Graphs and charts were displayed with professional flair. A "Cookie Cupboard Mom" was appointed for the cluster, (the assembly of all GS troops in any given community is called a cluster) then a Cookie Mom, usually a volunteer, was assigned to each troop. As I sat and thought about what was taking place, I ran some figures through my head. My childhood experiences had seen only my own family's level of involvement amounting to, perhaps, three or four hundred boxes of cookies. Now I was

looking at twenty troops with roughly twenty to twenty five girls in each. Let's say four hundred girls total. Multiply that number by maybe two hundred boxes sold by each of those girls, and that represents eight thousand boxes of cookies. Now multiply that number by the cost of \$3.50 a box, and the resulting figure comes to \$28,000.00. That's an amount reflected by just one cluster, but let's do some math with the national membership number of 2.3 million, and the amount grows exponentially to \$644,000,000.00!

I turned to the GSUSA website to see if I could find more information. First there are the basic FAQ's along with GSUSA responses.

Who bakes Girl Scout cookies?

Currently, two commercial bakers are licensed by GSUSA to produce the cookies: ABC Bakers and Little Brownie Bakers. ("There's")

The retail chain, Family Dollar, sells a line of cookies that look remarkably similar to Girl Scout cookies. They also taste very much like the Girl Scout treats. In fact the ingredients are exactly the same! Of course, the baker is not listed on the package other than to say that they are packaged for Family Dollar. I suppose it's worth mentioning that they cost exactly half of what the Girl Scout cookies cost.

Does any of the money from cookie sales go to GSUSA?

GSUSA is paid a royalty for use of its licensed trademarks by its licensed bakers based on gross annual sales volume. ("There's") Taking this statement into account along with the information on the Family Dollar retail price it would appear that the "royalty" could be at least half of what the Girl Scout retail price is.

What portion of the cookie revenue is shared with the group selling the cookies?

This decision is made by each local Girl Scout council, so the portion varies from one council to another. Nationwide, girls receive an estimated 10 to 20% of the purchase price of each box of cookies sold. ("There's") This might be the one and only factual account. As I recall, the girl's troop retained 25 cents per box up to a pre-determined number with an extra 5 cents per box after that number was reached as an added incentive. Be that as it may, even with this one and only, "factual account", it only forces children to work harder for less than sweatshop wages.

I will take this time to make a positive statement on behalf of the Girl Scout institution. Girls who stay with it and finish with a silver and gold award, have a huge advantage, career-wise. These awards are equal to Eagle Scout, and are a great reference on any application, be it a school or job query. Staying with the troop also builds teamwork skills, and, if the troop's activities were organized properly, that is a great sense of accomplishment for each girl involved. Scouting does, in fact, build better girls.

Taking a look now at the career opportunities within this corporate giant, we find Anna Maria Chavez, the new, and current CEO of GSUSA. She's a former council CEO from Texas,

and worked at one time under Janet Napolitano, of Homeland Security fame. Her income, according to Isabel Vincent, of the New York Post, is nearly four hundred thousand dollars per year. "Chavez came on as CEO on Oct. 1, 2011. She was paid \$98,000 for three months of work in 2011 - out of a salary of \$393,380 for a full year. She also received \$71,906 in "other composition" that year, including expenses to move to New Jersey, and retirement-plan contributions, according to tax filings" (She's). "Chavez spent \$65,000 on a comfortable new throne for her 17th-floor Fifth Avenue office", and , "She ordered the renovation of the executive restroom to include marble and slate finishes and new glass doors for the shower" (Girl). I see this as reckless spending of GSUSA funds through and through.

Let's return once again to the cookie sales figures and the income of Ms. Chavez. First, that huge number that I presented, let's just cut that in half. After all, if Family Dollar can sell them for half of what GS can, there's a high probability that the remainder would fall under the description of "royalties" as mentioned earlier. Let's say it's \$322,000,000.00...that's what child labor generates annually for GSUSA, at a minimum. Take another peek at her office chair and lavatory facilities, and one could almost imagine Saddam Hussein or Mummar Gaddafi relieving themselves there. Now, onto the income that Ms. Chavez barely squeezes by on: \$393,380.00 annually! That's nearly one hundred and sixty thousand boxes of cookies sold exclusively by girls under the age of 18 just to pay one person's salary.

According to the watchdog agency, CharityNavigator.org, GSUSA is a listed charity for your tax deductible donations and is documented on their site with an overall score of 52.36 out of 70 and a financial rating of 45.06 out of 70. That's a sad statement in regard to an outfit so financially motivated. For the sake of this iconic, national institution, and certainly all of the girls involved, the future of Girl Scouting depends on a sweeping move out of the boardroom and back to the campfire where honesty and integrity will once again be found, and greed can be swept out with the ashes.

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Vincent, Isabel. "Girl Scouts Staff in Revolt Over Cookie Monster Boss" New York Post Online: 10 Feb 2013. Web. 19 Oct 2013.

Judge's Comments

In this argumentative essay, Rod Patrick does more than condemn a popular organization; he explains how that organization's longstanding appeal helps to camouflage its business practices. He offers a focused claim and he manages to get us beyond our easy acceptance of an everyday artifact: the Girl Scout cookie.

Third Place Essay

2013 LAND Creative Writing Competition

That Green Light
Zac Jones

The Fitz and I go way back, probably at least seven, eight years. I haven't read all his works yet but I think I'm inclined to understand them better than most, the tragedy of surviving. We had to read *The Great Gatsby* back in high school, junior year I think, though at the time much of it didn't sink in. Subsequently Mrs. Bowen made us watch Robert Redford's movie adaptation, and the only part I can remember now is that guy from *Law & Order* offering a clipped "Yes" in response to some question, as if that was the only thing that ever was or ever will be said on the issue. But I can forgive that, being the '70s. I'm a little torn between Mia Farrow and Carey Mulligan, honestly, both Daisies Buchanan. The former caught more of the elegance of the time, the latter more of the personality. Decisions.

But *Gatsby*: I identify with him now, though, considering my current situation. I live essentially alone in a large house, described as a "mansion," and I even go by another name — James Gatz, Jay Gatsby; Zac Jones, Gucci. More and more I seem to be turning into a Fitzgerald character...beautiful and damned. And like Nick Carraway, I had my own crack-up of sorts and could probably write a lengthy dissertation on booze. All these things just ring with The Fitz's lyrical skepticism.

Anyway, probably two, three years later (who can be sure anymore, going so far into the past?) my then-girlfriend Shauna and I walked about The Book Exchange, having jobs and thus that privilege of discretionary money, and there she found two of F. Scott Fitzgerald's other novels, *Tender Is the Night* and *This Side of Paradise*. Which side of paradise I was on at the time, I never am too sure about anymore. Some days it seems that was the peak of all that could be, a glowing green pasture; others, it seems so dismal, tarnished by the end and everything after. I'd like to think I'd fit in with Fitzgerald, having that sort of wondrous disaster he so seems to annihilate his characters with — it feels oddly biographical to read them, now.

Or rather — to have read them last year. Shauna and I broke up, and I chased after her, trying to recover that beautiful quality that was us. In the interim between November and February she considered bobbing her hair while I took to buying all sorts of books - probably fifty in six months, though I hardly read any at first. Then one day I picked one up, then the next, and the next...I found Shauna's books by happy happenstance at The Book Exchange. As I began to read more and more I did all that I could to win her back again; I fought bravely and seemed to have won...

Shauna,

I got this book for you because the title, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, defines all the places I want to take you in this life. Emerald hills, silver seas, the far side of Creation, this side of

paradise...The secret and faraway places that hide around corners and under beds, the places only lovers can find. You are the sun, my only sun, and I can have no greater achievement than to make you burn crimson bright, to raise you high in the morning and ease you to rest at night.

To...to...Always to love you.

— Zac

I read the inscription to her in the bass room after the first of the last Starfleet Ambassadors performance. She nearly cried, and thanked me. At about this same time I had just finished one of those books and had made about half through the other, though which came first now escapes me. Irrelevant, really. They became a sort of premonition though, taking into account all that followed. The one man lost his love to another, a doctor who had finally 'cured' his wife, who had become (or had always been) more a patient; the other, she chose security over affection. And of course there existed the parallel between Gatsby and me, Shauna and Daisy; she had been unofficially dating another man from work. Shauna did all these things at once. But for awhile I managed to have won her over again, as she saw the man I was then becoming, the one before the one who wrote these pages. A man in transition, but better than what he once was.

I took a semester off after everything happened, and in retrospect I think I'm entitled, considering. I'm having a devil of a time with this "pursuit of happiness" thing, old sport. After all, it's not every day the woman you've loved so fiercely leaves you not unexpectedly, but still shockingly, and it's important to be able to get one's bearings from time to time. I did, but then my bearings got me, too. I started to fall in love with someone else, a gal called Hollywood, if only by me, and so when Shauna came back five months after her extraordinary exit in July, it was also shocking, though not exactly unexpected. We tried something else, but it didn't last. She tried to reclaim something she had lost now in me, something I had lost...There came physical satisfaction, but in the end even this couldn't rekindle that smothered flame, and in February I choked off, detached and almost unfeeling, the final gasps of smoke.

I found an old copy of The Last Tycoon and during the spring semester read through it on campus between my classes. I couldn't identify with anyone in this; I just felt sad for them, Cecilia pining after this man, Monroe working himself to death and chasing after his own unattainable paragon of beauty. And me of course, the last tycoon of something not yet definable. And Hollywood.

The thing they don't tell you about living alone is the... impressing silence that follows in the wake of a sea of sound, the only roughened waters you've ever known. Here I sit on the living room floor like so many other nights over the last few weeks, watching over the houses I've taken on. This one, the larger one, is comfortable, well-furnished but not overly, with paintings of old London in the rain or in mid-afternoon, granite tiles, a kitchen the size of my old room... Just me though, all these lights shining for none, as I wait for the tiny green LED at the top of my phone to blink on, to quell the crashing silence. It's strange,

funny almost, to think of. I get so excited to live here... when I tell people. I tell them, "Yes, I live in a mansion now, free of charge," and they don't even believe it. It almost is unbelievable, even to me, this stroke of luck...

But when I come home and turn the key and disarm the system and change the lights around and sigh and roll up the blind and throw my coat over the back of a chair and sit and roll my sleeves up and adjust my tie and watch the clouds going by for a few minutes, it feels like Gatsby's dream, this dream, both of us in this large house with the lights shining and no one around and the party all over... The party ended, I guess, back in the summer when I decided to stop drinking so much and learned how to tie a Double Windsor, back when so many of us were chasing after some sort of epic grandeur, down through our own roaring '20s in the midnight hours as young women made their debuts, when all the green lights are put out and they just blink yellow, red. Trying to create our own Babylon, a city of vice and waste, and me one of few honest men in it.

After flirting with and possibly nearly avoiding alcoholism during the spring and summer, I went out one day to Ann Arbor, not looking for anything particular but just with my usual bag of tricks slung over a shoulder and my umbrella in case of rain. I found again a bookstore, Literati, went in, browsed, came out with my bank account twenty-plus dollars lighter and two of Fitzgerald's books; the final missing novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and a posthumous collection of writings with the oddly relevant title, *On Booze*. In the first few weeks of the new semester I picked up the latter and read his thoughts, following him and Zelda down through the gleaming art deco tunnel of the Jazz Age, the aftermath of "The Crack-Up", his six months' sobriety.

After being described as "brilliant and beautiful" by Hollywood, the one following the girl I had just destroyed, and her in turn destroying me for no other reason than her own convenience... Is it surprising I took up glass in hand and said "Cheers"? An altered state of mind seemed just the thing for a broken heart, and I heartily pursued this the first night of runners-up syndrome, and then a few days after that, and" ...

One day I woke up and looked at myself and decided to stop acting pathetic-after all, there are no second acts in American lives. I started writing again, a little at first, but in the advent of college courses more and more, churning out page after page, so many thousands of words a week... Almost pathologically, I turned this into its own story, a small piece here or there, as they all fit into something else, into each other. So many hours those green lights burned under my right wrist on my computer as I divulged the modern version of an old tale, of sin and suffering and crises and disaster.

...It helped.

An inordinate amount of time was spent listening to *The Great Gatsby* soundtrack, long before I ever saw the most current incarnation. Particularly, Florence + The Machine's "Over the Love," and that one haunting line at the beginning of each chorus, Now there's green light in my eyes... I listened to it in the CD player in the bathroom, I listened to it as I drove. And Lana Del Rey's question, ever unanswered, Will you still love me when I'm no

longer young and beautiful? So many I could ask that question to, and never get a reply. They all run away, it seems, and that green light keeps shining over the waters, blinding me.

Then a random call came and I had "movie night" with some friends, a couple who seemed to be getting along, a welcome change of pace from so many other disastrous romances, even if not my own. They had rented a few movies, including Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of Gatsby. When they asked me to pick one to watch, obviously, I chose him. As I watched though I also carried on a sporadic conversation with Hollywood, slightly elated - yes, even now - each time that tiny green LED flashed on and pulsed slowly... much like Gatsby's green light across the bay there, at the end of the Buchanan's dock. Blinking slowly, like the last unblinded eye of God, watching and knowing, revealing nothing.

I really shouldn't be here right now. I'm playing hooky today, called off work and went out, did nothing particular but have lunch, not-quite flirt with a middle-aged woman ("You're 42? You look 35 to me,") and peruse books and then write some more at Jackson Coffee Company. As I walked from Night Light to The Book Exchange I thought of something. I kept feeling drawn back, remembering *Il Grande Gatsby*, wondering why. I guess because so often it feels like I'm chasing that green light of his, happiness perhaps, but so often these days it feels unattainable, like I try to communicate the simple idea happiness to people, but in another language, Italian maybe, and it doesn't quite translate. *Il Grande Gucci*, I thought with a brittle smile. Brittle like the leaves blowing about, or the wind cutting through my shirt. My coat and tie protected me a little - one made of silk, one of space-age fibers, one bought on sale, one bought resale. Not surprisingly, people comment on the tie more.

I realized later the irony here - the necktie, now become a sort of personal symbol of adulthood for me, worn while doing something wholly irresponsible. I make enough money in a given day to feel the impact the following Thursday, payday, and I realize next week will drag on through meager portions of leftover pizza and frozen dinners.

In the classics section I could no longer find *Il Grande Gatsby* — someone must have bought it — but ironically enough, after so many pointed and fruitless searches from times past, I did find *The Great Gatsby*. I thought of a friend of mine who wanted to read more and better literature, so I picked it up, though not entirely sure who it was for - I already had the one copy at home. Another book, *Treasury of Great Short Stories*, contained another of Fitzgerald's works, and I took these with me, among others. How bizarre that I should find the one I can actually read, looking for the other, wanting purposely not to be able to read it but to have it, in a foreign language.

I walked back from the Coffee Company, thinking about Mr. Fitzgerald and hefting his book in a plastic bag - was that a Mercury Tracer? Shauna drove one of those... In all the years I knew her, I spent so much time in that car, going places, coming home. Then I got my own car this year. I don't think she ever took a ride in it. Had I known things would end so soon after, I would've driven her just about anywhere, some small recompense for all the miles she spent in the other seat. But there were two men in the car, and that seemed

uncharacteristic of her, though my perception is skewed on the matter, but they did run through that light in a hurry, just as it changed from green to yellow...

I tossed my things in my Honda and drove. As I approached West I pulled into the right lane almost on a whim and started on the way home. Strange, that I should think of both houses as "home"; probably from having spent so much time there; probably because I've settled in here.

At the school zone on Rives Junction they threw down some grit to roughen up the road for the coming winter. As I went on I looked ahead to the next car, a semi-familiar Chrysler. Is that my dad? Funny how all these years I've spent trying to turn my back on all that he implies and then this, now, driving after him. But I couldn't be sure; I couldn't read the license plate. It all felt so surreal. Turned out it was him; he parked behind my mother's car for once, as if to make my parking easier now that I wasn't there. Inside I spent some time explaining the whole living situation to my parents, restlessly, reluctantly, relentlessly. I collected some things for the return home — "home" home — including the other edition of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Beautiful and Damned*. Slacks, books, my Colibri jet lighter, vaguely reminiscent of art deco. Ties.

I had more to say, so much more that could have been said, but I held back as they held back interest in my writings — so much paper, so much ink to them; so much more to me. The admonitions my mother offered felt more familiar than the woman herself — "Don't drink and drive, always wear a condom." Words of caution, ever to protect us from ourselves; this is the language of a mother, foreign as it sometimes sounds.

I drove home on the last words of lukewarm farewells — "Love ya." My father called me several days ago to check on me as I annotated "Babylon Revisited" in the kitchen; I was at once baffled and pleased and mildly annoyed. I always used to want fruitlessly to be closer to my father, but when he offers a token of concern now it seems so artificial, like a tin coin, I don't want to accept it. We had a stilted, halting conversation that never truly began: "How are you?" "Fine." "How's things?" "They're alright." "Just wanted to check in on you..." All that time, wanting to come closer and never knowing how, and now, all this distance and not wanting anything. So often I tried to show him something of myself, a piece of music or a short story, like *Gatsby* extending a hand towards that light, and his casual dismissals, and then this one time he reaches out instead I don't know how to respond... And after the deceptive green LED, pulsing, pulsing...

Home. Yes, here. The phone does not ring; only the yellow lights glow. I want to write, but instead sit at the piano for a time and improvise chords and progressions, trying to remember the beauty of things once played; some on a piano for Hollywood, some from computer speakers for Shauna or my absentee father, these sounds now only for me, to fill the imposing silence... I pace across the cold granite tiles and hardwood floors and thick carpets, so similar and so different from that other carpet at that other house. Eventually there is nothing left for it but to sit down and write this though, beautiful and damned as I am, done with Babylon's lures but still not sure which side of paradise I am on, watching

the night fall tender now and those green lights glowing into my wrist, as I write — ceaselessly, one might say — into the past.

Judge's Comments

This openly personal exploration reveals more than Jones's relationships. It shows how he grapples for meaning in his life. His willingness to detail his own uncertainty and struggle is matched by a playful — and often lively — dance with syntax.