

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2015**

2015 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

"I am Not a Weapon"

Author: Elizabeth Enos

Mentor: Margery Guest

Montcalm Community College

"Ode to O'Keefe: Inspired by "Ram's Head
with Hollyhock" by Georgia O'Keeffe"

Author: Walker Afton

Mentor: Gretchen Cline

Muskegon Community College

"The Fall of Man"

Author: Emeline Rose Houle

Mentor: Barbara Clauer

Lansing Community College

Fiction

"Mona Talks"

Author: Rana Makki

Mentor: Ruth Ann Schmitt

Henry Ford College

"Trouble"

Author: Kristine Groth

Mentor: Teresa Scollon

Northwestern Michigan College

"Summer Boys"

Author: Brittney Arafat

Mentor: Ruth Ann Schmitt

Henry Ford College

Essay

"The Passing"

Author: Cruz Villarreal

Mentor: Pamela Warner

Lansing Community College

"Pecker at the Winder"

Author: Elizabeth Banyon

Mentor: Sarah J. Smith

Lake Michigan Community College

"That Red Plush"

Author: Zildjian A. Olson

Mentor: Bill Milligan

Bay College

2015 LAND Creative Writing Judges

Poetry

Paul Rodgers's most recent published work is a poem that reflects on the impact and legacy of Joseph Beam and the writers of the *In the Life* generation. He is currently working on a novel.

Fiction

Dr. Nancy Owen Nelson is an established and respected writer of essays, stories, poems, and books. Her latest book is a memoir titled *Searching for Nannie B.: Connecting Three Generations of Southern Women*. Her poetry has appeared in *Graffiti Rag*, *Lyceum*, and *South Dakota Review*. Her creative non-fiction has appeared in the *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Lalitamba*, and *Roll: An Anthology*. Dr. Nelson edited the book, *Private Voices, Public Lives: Women Speak on the Literary Life*. A supporter of local literary arts, Dr. Nelson offers writers workshops with Springfed Arts in metro Detroit.

Essay

Ruth Haller earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Concordia University Chicago and a Master of Arts degree in English from Eastern Michigan University, and she is currently completing a Doctorate in English at Wayne State University. In 2011, Prof. Haller received the Eastern Michigan University Arts and Humanities Award for "Enflame Our Hearts to Love Him: Sensuality, Violence and the Body in Medieval Devotional Writing." Her professional presentations include topics as varied as: "'Vaine Lusts': Bodily Agency in Elizabeth Clinton's *The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie*," "Using Student Samples to Teach the Reflective Argument," and "Digital Humanities on a Budget: Baby Steps with the Next Generation."

First Place Poetry 2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

I Am Not a Weapon
Elizabeth Enos

I
Am not a weapon
To be used against myself.
These moments from my past
Are not knives
For you to stab into my soul,
Twisting the blade deeper with every scene.
This personality of mine
Cannot be torn into pieces
For you to shine a spotlight on;
I will not be made ashamed
Of the parts
That make my whole.
I am not a weapon
To be used against myself.
Beneath this face,
At the core of my being,
The foundation of this person I am
Is solid.
Built upon the corpses
Of the people I used to be,
Of the faces I used to wear
To escape the onslaught
Of a mind you turned against me
Once.
I am not a weapon
To be used against myself.
I took the sticks and the stones
And built the walls to protect
The recreation,
A rebirth from the ashes and destruction
You left in your wake.
And yes, I died
But a spark remained,
An ember to flare into existence
This person with the passion and the will
To survive, despite your efforts.
Here I stand.
A patchwork soul, once shredded,
Still haunted by the echoes of depression;
An uncertain mind once twisted,

Still questioning the meanings and intentions;
A puckered heart, crisscrossed with scars,
Still uncertain of the reality of love.
But try, if you feel the need,
To tear me from this place
I may not be perfect or complete
But I plant my feet firmly on this ground
And root myself to the truth of me:
YOU WILL NOT TOPPLE ME!
Because I am a weapon
That can be used against myself
No longer.

Judge's Comments

Strong, self-assured voice. Love the tension between the self and the world's influence on the "I".

Second Place Poetry
2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Ode to O'Keeffe

(Inspired by "Ram's Head with Hollyhock" by Georgia O'Keeffe)

Walker Afton

O, sweet widow of the East,
how lonely you must be.
Your gentle roots spread
among the desert sands,
your stem intertwined through
the eyes of that beast of burden,
the sun-bleached bone, all that
remains of the gentle giant
who once claimed you as its
own. The clouds above open
their petals to shower you
with dewy nectar.

Judge's Comments

Simple, yet powerful. Nice use of language, soft tone, great use of imagery.

Third Place Poetry
2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

the fall of man
Emeline Rose Houle

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 o
 y
 o
 u
 think it to ok a serpent
 for me to want to sin? you think
 I couldn't tell—the eyes that glowed,
 the voice deep as the pits of hell?
 no. I knew what I was doing. I
 knew what the apple was. the
 devil is just an excuse all the
 priests like to use, because
 they can't imagine a woman ever
 wanting to sin. it tasted good, the apple.
 crisp, bright red flesh giving way to the
 tender white innocence underneath.
 I was tired of the garden. betrayal
 never tasted so sweet.

Judge's Comments

Short, yet powerful. Good use of imagery. Voice is clear and rebellious, yet respectful.

First Place Fiction

2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Mona Talks
Rana Makki

I realize that there are a pair of well-worn men's brown loafers in front of the door next to the shoe cabinet that were not there before. What's going on? The plates are clattering in the kitchen and I remember that I haven't said anything yet so I quietly shout-out, "Assalam wa alaikum."

"Mona, ta'ali," Nana yells back to me, and I realize we have guests. I hope it isn't another mother trying to claim me for her son. I hang my jacket on the coat hanger as I head to the dining room but first, I look at my reflection and I don't like what I see. I pinch my cheeks and straighten my hair, trying to contain it. Maybe these suitors are better than the former ones.

Why is there a guy at the table with my grandma? And why isn't she wearing her hijab? "Hello," he says to me smiling, but it doesn't come out right. The bald man next to my Nana has tan skin and sad eyes, and his smile begs for forgiveness, but for what? Did he steal her favorite recipe?

"Hello," I reply.

"My name is Mason," and then follows with, "but you can call me Muhsin," when he sees Nana tense, and I know that this stranger is important to us, somehow.

"Mona! Don't be rude, talk to him," Nana yells at me but I can tell that she isn't really mad.

The man with the sad eyes looks up, "She looks just like her mother...beautiful."

"You know my mother? Wait, who are you?" The second I finish that sentence, it hits me. I see scar on his cheek and round eyes that when he was younger, would've broken a billion hearts. My mother's mystery guy.

"I'm your uncle," he says quietly and even though I figured it out, it still shocks me. "Mona...Go bring the tea, and bring cookies for our guest," Nana orders and my body moves without me telling it to do that.

"Why are you here, Muhsin?" Nana asks. I sit the tea tray in the living room and sit by her on the sofa. Her gray hair in a messy bun and the wrinkles on her face look deeper than usual. "You decided to betray the family. You were engaged to my daughter, and you decided to leave her to marry a kafira. What do you want now?" Her voice getting louder.

"Khala," he says, voice filled with regret, "I'm sorry for breaking of the engagement to marry Christina but I loved her. I couldn't marry a woman I didn't love, and I'm sorry for angering the family but I'm not sorry for marrying someone else."

"Love? Love comes after marriage. It's haram to love without marriage." Nana says.

"Khalas, what happened in the past is over and cannot be changed. But, how is she? How's Ahlam?" he says.

Ahlam? That's my mother. My dead mother and from the looks of it, he doesn't know what happened. "Ahlam," Nana says hollowly, "Ahlam and Khalid died in an accident."

Nana ignores the shock on his face and continues, "She wouldn't have died if you would've just married her."

"Hold on," I interrupt, "you were supposed to marry my mother?" I ask Muhsin, and

his eyes look sadder. "Nana! Why didn't you tell me this?" I look at her sharply and that's when I notice her hands are knotted together, as if trying to crush an invisible force.

"I-I thought you knew," Muhsin says and starts to tap his fingers on his knee.

"It's not your business to know," Nana says but she doesn't look at me when she says it. She blinks a few times trying to hide her tears.

"Mona," Muhsin says hesitantly, he picks up the glass of water, looks at it, and puts it down, as if he forgot what it was for, "why don't you give me and your grandma some privacy?"

"Yes Mona, habibi, I'll talk to you later," Nana agrees.

I leave and as I leave, I hear Muhsin telling Nana about his life with his wife, Christina, and does he say kids? My grandma is quiet but I know that he reminds her of my mom and her past.

* * *

It's 7 a.m. and I haven't slept yet. My brown eyes look like the darkness of a cave and the bags underneath are the mountains. I take my hair out of the pony tail and start brushing it, and it hits me that it is really long but also, it's bland. Its reddish hue is nothing interesting and the length, I can't do much with it.

I head downstairs for breakfast and I stop when I realize that Muhsin is still there. I thought he left but I guess Nana made him stay. I think as I see him making himself at home that my grandma is incredibly 'aware' of the non-Arabic culture because inviting a guy to spend a night who you haven't seen in years, that's not weird at all. He's wearing a suit and it shows how big he actually is. He's probably a little over six feet and he has a belly, like all Arab men.

"Sabah al khair," I say, entering the kitchen and it catches him off guard.

He smiles and says, "You look just like her, you know. When she was your age, she was filled with life." He takes a sip from his cup of tea.

I grab a mug and pour me some tea. "Don't talk about my mother like you cared for her; apparently, you didn't even love her enough to stay." I take a sip.

"I didn't leave your mother because I didn't love her. I left her because she didn't love me," I catch my cup before it tips over, "What? Nana said that you left her for Christina."

"That's what we decided to tell your grandma," he chuckles as he traces the opening of the mug with his finger.

I go to take a seat next to him, "You...what?"

He looks at me gently, like a doctor giving good news to a parent, "Your mother didn't want to get married but your grandmother wouldn't let her back-out. She wanted to wait on marriage and follow her dreams." He smiles, recalling back memories. "It's easier on her reputation if I backed out, instead of her." He takes a slow, long sip of his tea.

"Is that how my mother got to finish college and work? By not marrying you?" I say, maybe, I could be like my mother. I lean in and put my elbows on the table and I see the wind blowing outside and I think that maybe, just maybe. There's a chance for me after all.

He pushes the chair back, stands up and sighs, goes to the sink and washes his cup but not giving me an answer.

"Well," I say, "Is that what you're telling me?" I repeat, getting excited. I curl my fingers, hoping, and that's when Nana comes in.

"What are you two talking about?" Nana asks still in her night gown and waddling to sit next to me at the table.

He kisses her cheek. "Khala, I'm just telling her how much like her mother she is," he

winks at me and I take that as a yes.

* * *

As I take a seat in my Art class, Doctor Puckett motions for me to come to him; I untangle myself from my numerous bags and as I'm walking towards him, I almost trip by stepping on one of my shoe laces, he chuckles to himself as he scratches his wizard-like beard.

"You beckoned?" I ask him with a smile

"Indeed I beckoned you over," he says it with a smile, "I just didn't want you to hurt yourself on your way here."

"Well, it'll please you to know Doctor, that I did not hurt myself"

"I called you to ask you about your piece that you showed me last time, "The Invisible Handcuff" he looks down on his notepad while saying this

"What was wrong with it? Is it not good? I can fix it!" I'm starting to fiddle with my shirt, and pull the loose thread from my pants.

"No no not at all, nothing is wrong with it, actually, and I hope you don't get offended by this, but I took the liberty to submit it to the School of Fine Arts," He slowly pulls out papers from a folder behind him, and I see paint on his hands and wrists, "They sent in this for you to see"

"What is this?" I'm hesitant but he insists on me taking it. It's a thick envelope that is very much official.

"They loved your piece so much and asked for more of your art, so I sent them your old assignment," He's looking at me, waiting for my reaction

"And..? What's with the envelope?"

"They want you to be a part of their program. I mentioned to them that money might be an issue but they're offering you a full ride to go to their school." He says this with pride in his eyes, "I know it's a few hundred miles away but it's an opportunity you shouldn't miss"

How will Nana respond?

* * *

As I open the door, a couple of children are running around and plates clatter. But why are there even kids in the house? The children look American but with a certain Arabesque tint about them.

"Assalam wa Alakum" I say too quiet for anyone to hear.

I go into the kitchen and there's an older woman with shoulder length blonde hair, and blue eyes sitting next to Muhsen smiling politely. That must be Christina.

"Hey Nana, I'm home" I say with hesitation.

"I don't have dinner ready. Next time call before you come," Nana says scowling at Christina.

She has her hair up in her signature bun but instead of her usual house gown, she has pants on and an apron covering her shirt, "for once, she's home on time," she rolls her eyes at me but then I see her eyes going up and down as if to check for any...damages, "go change and help me get ready for dinner, we have house guests that decided to surprise us," she looks sideways at Christina in the most obvious manner.

"Hey Muhsin," I say smiling gently seeing how tense his shoulders are by how his sitting, "Hey, you must be Christina. I'm Mona." I shake her hand and she smiles grateful for a friendly face. She gets up to give me a hug and says,

"I've heard so much about you from Muhsin," My grandma freezes slightly as she's cutting the onions, it's as if Mushin talking about me is a volcanic eruption. "You are nothing like he described. Much prettier," she laughs.

"What could've he had said about her? He only met her once," Nana spits out the words, "He must've been thinking about my daughter, his first fiancée," Muhsin's head snaps to her as she says this.

He talks to her in Arabic, I hear "please" and "stop" and the rest is lost on me. "Excuse me," I head to leave the room, "I'm off to change"

After dinner, as we sit around the table in the living room, drinking our tea and the kids are sleeping on the sofa, intertwined with each other. The girl's head is on her mother's lap and the boy has his feet on top of his sister.

My grandma starts talking about her friend Ibtisam and how she has a daughter that is getting married soon. She says it while looking at me, as if trying to tell me, get married now. She tells us how Ibtisam's daughter's husband is a nice fellow with a good job and how her daughter will finally be a woman and this is where Muhsin interrupts.

"A girl doesn't have to be married in order to be a woman, khala" he says as gently as he can without offending Nana.

"No! A girl will always be a girl until there's a man by her side to protect her from society and takes care of her" She smacks down her mug and it surprises me how it's still intact, "Anyways, I will not argue with you about your ignorance," she says this while looking at Christina, telling her that she is a mistake that shouldn't have happened, without actually speaking.

"Nana, why did you mention this random friend of yours and her daughter?" I try to get her back on the topic and take a sip from my neon green mug. That was my mother's favorite color.

"Well, Ibtisam invited us to her daughter's wedding and I know how much you love weddings, so you're going. I also bought you a dress, so you don't have any excuses.

* * *

I go to up to my room and as I get ready for bed, I hear a knock at the door.

A familiar voice says, "Oh, assalam wa alaikum Muhsin."

"Assalam wa alaikum Khala," I can see him as he kisses Nana on the forehead.

"Wa alaikum alsalam, where's your kafira today and her little demon children?" she shoots out. "Khala, ana mush hina ashan hatha alkalam," I don't understand what he just said.

She sighs and I swear I can see some of her soul coming out with that exhaled breath, "Muhsin, why are you here?"

"I need to talk to you about Ahlam," he says in a solemn tone

I can't keep still. They've been talking for over two hours now and I'm too afraid to eavesdrop.

I'm so deep in my thoughts that I don't hear my grandma knocking and when she lets herself in, I jump in surprise.

"Hey child," she says gently, and I'm immediately suspicious

"What's going on?" I can tell she's nervous, she's fiddling with her wedding ring on her finger, turning it round and round.

"As you saw, Muhsin and I were talking," she says in a low voice, "he told me about

your mother...my daughter," she looks down and stays quiet. But then she starts again, "I always thought I knew her best, but I guess she didn't trust me enough to tell me herself about not wanting him."

"Nana..." I wish I had something to say to her.

"I called Ahmed's family and cancelled all the arrangements," she smiles with a vacancy in her eyes.

"Nana, I'm ...sorry about everything, ana asif,"

"I know," she stops playing with her ring and gets up to leave, kisses me on my forehead and before she walks out, she says, "Tomorrow is a new day, we need to start preparing for you to go to school" and she shuts the door behind her. I get off my bed after she shuts the door, and pull out the prayer rug to pray.

Judge's Comments

The main character is a young woman who, through the uncovering of family secrets, is able to grow into herself despite cultural limitations. The dialogue is realistic and the characters well-drawn.

Second Place Fiction

2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Trouble
Kristine Groth

Trouble walks into the bar, pulls short-shorts up, halter top down, and is carded even though she's decades over legal.

Tonight, you are Trouble.

With tightly primed curls and imitation kohl around the eyes, you scan the mass of writhing bodies on the dance floor for potential drink donors.

A voice whispers in the back of your head, seemingly familiar, like someone you know but can't place. The sound is lost as the music shifts from a rock to country song, but maybe it's the reverse—it's all become a blur lately. You hear that guitar strumming in your ears and forget all about it, smiling at the buzz it generates along your skin. It goes well with the one already started in your brain, hours before you left the house.

A chorus of motorcycles flares up outside, drowning out everything close to the door. Leather fills your nose before someone bumps you out of the way by accident. You stumble, but just a little, as the fringes on his jacket brush past.

In the dim red and blue-tinted lights, nobody meets your eyes. Looks like that first drink is on you.

Wading through the fog of bar perfume, your fingers caress smoky tendrils, remnants of spilled alcohol and cigarettes threading between them. The hint of vanilla on your wrist vanishes in the other scents. You reach up to touch your immaculate hair, but even the humidity won't ruin those perfectly intact strands—held in place with half a can of hairspray.

You lean on the polished counter after nearly tripping on the uneven floor, easing carefully into a barstool with cracked leather along the back. The bartender takes your order as you toss your head, hoping to catch someone's eye as blonde locks dance on the tops of your bare shoulders.

Someone is staring at you, but when you turn to meet them, your eyes have to shift down a foot. You frown as a little girl tilts her pig-tailed head, her hair as pale a shade as your own.

She plays with the hem of her black dress and swings her feet while you try to determine if it's hypocritical to say the bar is no place for her.

When your drink comes, you knock it back as sweat drips off the can and onto your fingers, and then the child is forgotten. Swiveling your chair, you watch the throng of people moving together. The music thumps the floor underneath, and your open-toed sandal follows slightly off-beat. The dye that made it black as soot is fading, so your mouth forms a pout at the thought of having to color them again.

But then the flash of a smile drags your face upward and the crook of a finger coaxes you off the chair and into the mob of bodies.

A new town is a new start, but you haven't really changed anything, have you?

You weave to a song you can barely hear, fingers of one hand clutched in a man's red flannel while the other presses a new drink to your forehead. Sweat rolls down your neck, into your shirt, and a stranger's breath ghosts your ear. The music changes tracks, and you chase the donor of the next round of drinks.

This one buries his nose into your tanned neck, still bronze from afternoons lying

in the sun. Coconut wafts from the wrinkles in the skin, mirrored along your body, but there are no crow's feet around your eyes.

Suddenly, he reaches around you, and even over the music you hear the flick of a lighter. Laughing, he pretends to set your behind on fire. You break down into giggles, too, but it's not really that funny.

A whiny, panicky cry follows, and your head snaps up as you look for that kid. But you don't see anyone.

Nature calls, so you push away from another faceless stranger and stumble to the bathroom, drink in hand. You almost fall, once, but you were never really steady on your own feet anyway, were you?

The bathroom door groans as you pass under a string of lights. The sound mirrors other stall occupants as you finish your business, drink carefully balanced between chin and thigh. The chilled drops running down the glass trace the spider veins in your legs.

In front of the mirror, your nose twists as a sickly smell churns your stomach. The flu must be coming on—it's been going around, you hear. You drown the feeling with another drink just as your stomach gurgles.

A hand brushes down your front, over the red of your shirt and smoothes out a wrinkle in your shorts. You haven't eaten in two days, but your middle is thin and needs to stay that way.

It's harder to lose the weight now.

A shadow moves in the corner of your eye, and when your vision focuses, you see the child in the mirror behind you. Her pigtails are drooping a little and need to be tightened, and there are some crumbs on the front of her dress. Someone ought to be keeping track of her, but nobody's there. As she stares blankly at you, the hairs on the back of your neck prickle.

You shiver as you leave, and goosebumps erupt on exposed skin as you rub your arms. The siren call of people shuffling on the floor amidst the deafening music lures you back into the heat.

But even molten fire rushing down your throat doesn't make the uneasiness completely go away. When you spiral to the next person, the world tips a little and your drink almost spills.

You clutch onto a shirt when it's hard to stand, and your head starts losing to gravity as you get a good look at your red-painted toenails.

A whisper of your name snaps your head up despite the reeling. Not ten feet away is the little girl. As people mill around the dance floor, they push her around, bumping into her small frame. Her lip wobbles and you frown. This is no place for her.

The girl's eyes turn glassy, and she holds out a hand to you as a couple knocks into her hard, shuffling her back into even more people. In the dim light, she starts to disappear, even as she reaches.

You try to reach back, but you're still holding onto the shirt and there's nowhere to set your drink. Somehow, your feet won't gather under you, even as tears roll down the girl's cheeks. The child never stops reaching, but eventually, she's lost in the crowd.

But you're not going to take her hand, are you?

Judge's Comments

The second person narrator addresses an aging "party girl" who is forced to look back on her former, innocent self. Though her life is not resolved, we see her question whether she can change her direction in life. The description is strong and realistic.

Third Place Fiction

2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Summer Boys
Brittney Arafat

His skin is a soft golden brown; sun kissed my mother calls it. "If the sun can't resist laying her lips on those summer boys, what chance do we have?" She is always saying things like this. I scrunch my nose at her not really caring what kind of boys she is interested in kissing. We are watching the television in the kitchen, my mom chopping carrots while I pour liberal amounts of dish soap onto the sponge, then lift a grime covered spoon and dip it into the water. Some ad is on with two young people dancing on the beach. The boy smiles, his commercialized pore-less skin lighting up beautifully in the sunlight.

My mother sighs. She looks sad and perhaps lonely; her blue eyes an ocean of un-spilled tears. She gets this look a lot these days since my father left. When she sees me watching her she plasters on a smile. "Yes, I'd love to plant my lips on that one. But you can't trust those summer boys. They're like your father, always chasing down a new wave."

I pull a pan into the sink, submerging it into the foamy water as I drag the sponge over its steel sides and bottom. It's hard to admit it, but I know where she's coming from, as I watch this summer boy walking across the television screen. He is, in every right, absolutely beautiful. I want to know him, want to press my lips against his shimmering brown skin too. I envy the sun. I look back over at my mother, an emotionally broken soul, standing in the kitchen. I reach for the hand towel, drying my hands before retrieving the remote control and flipping the television off. Summer boys are like the sun, they only burn you in the end.

"I want to go see a movie." Mom announces after dinner. "There's a great clip playing down at the dollar theatre, a love story."

"Gross," I mumble, and she just smiles. I love it when she smiles. I change from my house clothes. I choose a loose pair of jeans and a t-shirt, arranging my brown hair in a tight bun at the top of my head. Mom is in a short denim skirt and a pink tank top. Her dyed blonde hair cascades down her shoulders, swaying back and forth as she walks. I slide on my tennis shoes and wait patiently as mom straps herself into her six inch heels, then head out of the apartment into the night.

Mom's heels click when she walks. They make a loud clomping sound against the pavement. The frogs down by the river are croaking, calling to their mates from across the waterways. We walk down to the gas station on Main St. It has become a tradition to buy snacks there before the movies to hide in our purses because the popcorn and sodas are always too expensive at the theatre. The night air is thick and humid; I wipe my hand across my brow, sighing in relief as I push the door open and am hit with a cool breeze from the air-conditioner. The bell chimes, announcing our presence.

"Hey Zoe," says the boy behind the register. His name is Luke, the perfect embodiment of a summer boy with tanned skin and dark hair. He goes to my high school and has been my crush since we moved here when I was eleven. I smile at him, my eyes trailing to the floor when his cinnamon colored eyes meet my gaze.

"Hey," I say. When I glance back up he's grinning and watching me. I quickly escape down the candy aisle, my cheeks burning with heat.

"Hey cutie!" says mom. She's still at the front of the store with Luke. "Hey Mrs. Miller, what are you guys up to tonight?" Luke asks. "Going to catch a movie, you want to tag along."

Luke laughs, "I would but the cash register isn't going to watch itself."

I grab a handful of candy bars and a bag of chips, and head back the register. Mom is leaning across the counter, the contents of her shirt clearly visible to Luke. "I got the snacks. You want anything else mom?" I ask. Mom doesn't reply. Feeling irritated I nudge one of her heels with the toe of my shoe. She only ignores me.

She's moving her hips back and forth now, like a cat, ready to pounce across the counter onto Luke if he makes any sudden movements. Luke doesn't seem to notice, or if he does, he's ignoring her. I feel a pang of embarrassment. Why does she have to act like this?

"Hey Zoe, I was wondering if you have time, could you bring by your science book? We have that test on Monday and I totally forgot my backpack at home."

"Sure, I'll do that right after the movie." My voice comes out like a shrill and I quickly clamp my mouth shut.

"Could you study a bit with me too? You know, if you have time."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak again. I feel like my heart is exploding in my throat from excitement.

"You going to be stuck here all night?" Mom purrs. "Yes Ma'am." Luke replies.

"Maybe I'll come back and keep you company too, would you like that?"

My brief sense of euphoria is squashed, like a bug against a windshield. I slam the candy onto the counter, and leave the gas station, bell chiming loudly as I leave. I can hear mom's heels clicking as she tries to catch up.

"What is your problem young lady?" she snaps, yanking on my shoulder and spinning me around.

"What's my problem?" I scream, "That's Luke, the boy I've been telling you that I liked since the 5th grade."

"Yes sweetie, I know I was helping you."

I shake my head in disbelief. "Helping me? You were flirting with him." "I wasn't" she argues.

"I get why dad left." I growl. Movie forgotten, I run home.

I can hear the water running, and mom crying in the bathroom. She always uses the water to try to drown out the sound of her tears. I cover my head with my pillow. I want to be mad but then another part of me wants to comfort her. She cries so often these days about dad leaving.

Knowing I'm the source of her pain tonight makes my stomach turn sour.

I set the pillow down and leave my room, walking down the hall to the bathroom. "Mom," I call, tapping my fingers against the door.

"One second sweetie," she says. The water turns off. A few moments later she opens the door, her face red and splotchy from the crying.

"I'm sorry," I say, but she just shakes her head. She looks like she might cry again as she pulls me tightly into an embrace.

"No sweetie, I'm sorry," She says, her voice shaking.

Mom puts a kettle on the stove, hot water whistling from the spout as she prepares two cups with tea bags and sugar. She pours the water into the cups, a sweet aroma lifting in wisps of steam.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" She asks, as she slides a cup to me from across the table. "There is a handsome young man in need of your textbook."

I smile as my mom winks conspiratorially at me, but I shake my head. "No, Luke's a summer boy. As soon as another wave comes by he will forget all about

me." I laugh, but the sound catches in my throat when I see the look on my mom's face. It's a mix of utter shock and sadness.

"Oh sweetie, what have I done?" She says, covering her face in her hands. "Luke is a summer boy, but he's not your father. Not all the summer boys are like your father. I see the way that boy looks at you. You are the only wave in his ocean."

I can feel color rising in my cheeks, as I stand and walk around the table to wrap myself into my mom's arms. She holds me tightly, her hand brushing against my hair. When she finally releases me I grab my backpack, and head out the door.

Judge's Comments

This is the story of a conflict between a daughter and her mother over how the daughter should view men. Action and dialogue are believable and the description detailed. The resolution is believable and reveals the growth of both daughter and mother.

First Place Essay

2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Passing
Cruz Villarreal

Dismissed guilt, put away the hangman's noose, my mother was dying and there was nothing I could do.

How does a man seek redemption for the sins of the boy? He can't. So I live with regrets. They linger like the smell of rotting debris; no matter how many times I try to disguise the scent, it remains. Regrets over being powerless, regrets over ignorance, and regrets over poverty. I should have stayed home and done more. I ran away because I was tired of our way of life.

I left home at 18. I visit but never stay. Leaving was an attempt to escape misery, something the poor are rarely able to do.

I was 20 when she died. What chance at life or happiness did she really have? Born into migrant life, an on-again, off-again education. And while still bright eyed and full of dreams, she marries a wetback. That's what her family called the man she chose to run away with. Run to where? Shattered dreams and a migrant shack in a cold winter state. She bore ten children who she could barely clothe and feed. The children were the consequence of indulging in the one thing still not denied the poor—sexual intimacy. But none of us complain about our shot at life.

Earlier that day she sent for me. She needed money to buy cough medicine; some bureaucratic quack in the name of expediency prescribed it for her condition. An autopsy would later reveal she died of congestive heart failure complicated by pneumonia. The hospital's cruel response, "why didn't you get her here sooner?" We were children. We depended on her. We followed her lead. She endured the discomfort because she feared another bill she couldn't pay. It was only desperation that made her ask for outside help. It was too late. So, I say she died of poverty.

She had reached out to me in a failed attempt to find relief. I had none to give. Mama is sick, all she wants is cough medicine to ease her breathing. And I can't help cos I'm broke.

I'm not broke now, but it's too late, and I'm left knowing her death could have been prevented if the times were gentler.

More often than not, I imagine what it feels like to slip away, to drown bit by bit as fluids too difficult to dispel even with incessant coughing fill the lungs. How horrible it is to suffer as she did. She must have anguished over what life would be like for those she would leave behind if she died; children who still depend on her for protection. She knows that poor children, especially her kind, have few champions or heroes. In the end it would be children aiding children, clinging to any scraps the American dream would toss under the table.

The morning of that fateful day I went to her side. I walked into the same rundown house I ran away from. There, Mother sits in a chair huddled in a blanket, surrounded by the worried faces of children. She shows me the prescription and asks, "Can you pay for the medicine?" I have no choice but to look down into her tired brown eyes; I want to tell her the truth, instead I say, "I'll see what I can do." It's easier than saying no. She is silent and has nothing more to say. Maybe it's to conserve her strength, or maybe it's because she knows the truth. I'm as familiar to her as her kitchen. She knows what it's like to open a pantry that's empty, yet she needs to check one more time, just to see if there is something hidden behind an empty jar. She understands scarcity and the word no, it's as common to her as mending worn-out clothes. Most of her life is plagued by rejection and

disappointment. She's grown accustomed to the word no—I can't utter it. But she knows no relief will come from me.

After I left her side, I know she must have shed tears, not for herself, but for the children nestling at her side. I imagined her gently caressing their hair, comforting them the way she used to comfort me.

The tender pecks on the cheeks will forever be gone. No time to get it right or explain why life is the way it is. She begins to slip into darkness and I'm not there.

On the night she passed, it was up to my little sister to find a phone and call for the ambulance. Inside the howling hearse, Mom is scared, so my sister reads a Psalm to her. The one that talks about valleys, shadows and death. Mom believes in God and always travels with a Bible. So, my little sister sits as close to mother as she can, and reads to her over the cry of the siren. I still have the tear stained bible that marks my sister's grief. Brave little girl. Scared, crying little girl.

Mama knows she's dying and needs to hear from her God, and there is no better sound than the innocent, angel like voice of her daughter. My mother, the one who held my hand in the dark, might have been reaching out for mine, and it wasn't there.

I arrive at the hospital. I soon stare at the woman who bore me, fought with me, and loved me. She is unconscious; the white pillow that supports her head serves as contrast for the dark black hair that cries out—I'm still young. A plastic mask covers the beautiful brownness that reveals her heritage. Plastic tubes and wires make themselves part of her being; what surrounds her are expensive mechanical symbols of a wealthy society. There for her death, but not for her life.

The blue apron that bares the stains of flour and the scent of fresh tortillas, is replaced by a sanitized death shroud in the guise of the hospital gown. Then a crash cart wheels into the room and we are ushered out. A little while later the death masks file out in funeral like procession; mama's struggle is over—death has won.

The nurse cleans her up, and says, "Take as long as you need." What we need is unattainable—our mother. Instead, what lays before us are the remains of a frail body on a stainless-steel gurney with white sheets neatly tucked around it. No way to say I'm sorry, no way to say good bye, no way to be redeemed. She has run out of time and so have I.

My father touches her cheek, and in a choked, childlike voice, says, "She's still warm, she can't be dead." The disbelief wells up in the green eyes that must have enslaved my mother's heart and made her stay with him, even though he drank too much and made too little. He is driven to tears. This is the second time I ever see him cry. The first time was when my grandfather died. He felt helpless then too. He grieved his father's passing from a million miles away. He was in a country that didn't want him. He was saddled with debt. He had a family he tried to support with a dead-end job that left little means at the end of a long week. All his misery and anguish must have been building up in his heart. I watched as he grabbed his shotgun and went outside into the darkness and pointed it to heaven and had each shell speak his mind to an absent God. The thunderous booms of the shotgun covered his cries, and when the gun spoke no more, he fell to his knees and cried. Now, my mother is dead, and I understand the painful helplessness that death thrusts on a soul.

But this night, this painful night, I shed no tears. There is no time; I have a pauper's funeral to plan.

The funeral director was nice enough to accept what the county was willing to pay. Their service included a coffin made of pine covered in grey velour; I placed my hand on the coffin, I can still feel the course texture of the cloth. We managed a large flower arrangement of palm fronds and white lilies. We placed it on her casket, hoping to hide the shame of poverty that was the grey coffin. I am the second oldest of ten, and at twenty I buried my mother

Back then I believed in a God, so for the funeral I find a holy man to speak the words that are meant to comfort and appease. I don't recall his words, but I can still see my little sisters cling to mother's coffin, wailing as if somehow the intensity of their cries will penetrate the veil of death and summon back our mother. I stand silent as others pull my sisters off the anchor of their existence so mom's coffin can be lowered into the cold ground. They resist, clinging to the one person who truly loved them. They cry out, "please God, don't take my mother." They still expect some divine presence to change the laws of the universe and give their mother back to them. But mama never wakes; yet their cries still echo in my mind.

With my sisters restrained, they lower the coffin. I watch as mother's remains descend.

There is a large pile of sandy soil beside her grave. I know that soon she will lie beneath its weight. I hear a thump rise from below signaling her arrival. Then I hear the pound, pound, pound of sand that will forever entomb her inside that wooden box.

My eyes are tearless, even though my heart swells with grief at the realization that her body will rest in the bowels of a grave that can never be warmed, even by a million eternities of sunlight. No longer would she share the warm embrace of mother and child.

Painful regrets are all that remain from Mother's passing. But at least she no longer fears eviction or how to feed her children. She is in the one place the poor always manage to find peace—the grave.

The tearless angry boy that didn't cry then, is the man who now weeps when he relives the hardships that befell his sisters after Mama died. I am the one who was absent while my sisters suffered humiliations dealt them by ravenous wolves; men who stole their young innocence while my sisters suffered in the secretive silence the poor are so familiar with. The memory shames me.

We buried Mama in a pauper's grave; no headstone to herald her existence. I hear that the rich and the poor are on equal footing at death—it's a lie. The rich are regarded, and the poor forsaken. I know we are all born to die, and from our first breath we begin to pass. But why can't the passing be more pleasant for everyone?

Judge's Comments

In this essay, the author beautifully and painfully meditates on maternal love while simultaneously wrestling with economic injustice, familial obligation, and regret.

Second Place Essay

2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Pecker at the Window
Elizabeth Banyon

Whap. Whap. Whap. "Pecker!" I shout, running towards the drumming noise coming from the top of the stairs. I almost reach the top landing, but stop short a few stairs, crouching down to be the observer of the banging. Light pours thorough the glass onto the white walls of the stairwell. Air plants hang in glass bubble vases on the wall, which seem to float. Looking up to our large square window that's almost the size of the wall itself, I see the greens of Michigan's summer leaves outside. Hunter, kelly, sap, emerald. Then the creator of the racket. An impressive crow-sized bird with its dark body and brilliant fiery red head, the mysterious Pileated woodpecker. He's right up to the window. The source of disturbance stares at me with his beady black eyes, head cocked as if to say, "What are you looking at?" This bird. This great interruption.

It's a rare Friday morning. Quiet. Everyone else is away. The noise of the morning rush, replaced by the sounds of a familiar, muffled trumpet coming from the Henry Kloss model one radio signaling the Diane Rhem show is about to begin. Smells of rich, warm coffee fill the air beckoning me to the comfort of that first sip. A book lies on the old reclaimed wood of my kitchen table, ready to be dissected. Then wham. This pernicious bird and its destruction. This isn't his first visit. He's been here before, rapping at the window. I know he's a male by his distinct red mustache. It's not carpenter ants he's after, his usual and most coveted meal, no, he's a territorial bird. He's after the other male reflected in the window. Then manages to get distracted and rips away at the decorative lining that seals the window edges. "AAAAaaarrgggghhhh. You little fucker." Lunging out with great force, I slam my hand hard, pressing at the glass to scare him away. For a moment, it works. He flees yelling a sound of "waa" warning the other creatures of my presence, landing gracefully on the side of a nearby decaying oak tree.

I rise up on my feet to observe the woodpecker in his natural habitat. He looks different in the tree than he does at my window. A red Mohawk, the whole Iroquois confederacy would be jealous of. A jet-black body with bold white striped down his neck. Magnificent.

The bird's scarlet head moves. His long neck pulls back far from the tree then he aggressively strikes, crumbling bark with his sturdy bill. Foraging and focusing on finding food. The bird's feet grip as he pulls them to increase the strength of the blow. He hammers away at his job. Pounding, drumming, pulsing. An impeccable design was given to the woodpecker, protecting him while he works. All woodpeckers have an enlarged brain case, so the brain sits above the level of the direct hammering impact. The skull's frontal bones and muscles located at the bill's base act as a shock absorber. He pecks with the sounds of an old typewriter at work. After some time, he stops, the sound is gone like a period at the end of a sentence. Now he'll use his large tongue to extract the ants. This bird is confident and determined, despite what anyone else thinks. It's his duty to drill holes in the tree. It's his right.

Alexander Wilson writes that the woodpecker's favorites are 'the deadly crawling

enemy that form a lodge, between the bark and tender wood to drink the very vital part of the tree'. He's right, the woodpecker is not the tree's enemy, but rather its protector. Eating insects that would destroy it otherwise. Man has confused this over the years. In fact, it is only when they are nervous or excited that they will rap on any surface they happen to be upon. The poor bird doesn't know or care that he's destroying my window, nor should he. Maybe calling the woodpecker a fucker was a little harsh.

I can learn from the woodpecker, focusing on my obligations. Doing my best to concentrate on what's in front of me. What am I destroying by my ignorance? It's inevitable that my imperfections will seep into the relationships I breed. How many times did I not stop to think about what I might be ripping away at? It is my children I will unintentionally damage the most in their fragile childhood. Just as the Piliated preserves the tree, I too try to protect. What will be perceived of my good intentions in time? What of my faults? The woodpecker is unable to undo the wreckage he causes to my home. Will I be able to undo mine? I can fix his destruction. Who will fix mine? Forgiveness?

I've tried to rid this exquisite bird by hanging tinfoil in the windows. I've yelled, screamed and cursed at it, but at this moment, I want the bird to stay and do his job, and I would like it if he could teach me how to do mine.

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Judge's Comments

This piece very thoughtfully and skillfully uses the natural world to craft an insightful lesson for the writer's own life.

Third Place Essay
2015 LAND Creative Writing Competition

That Red Plush
Zildjian A. Olson

My uncle on my father's side was a big nerd. My dad only has one brother so it doesn't really matter what his name is. We never really talked much. We never spent a meaningful amount of time together either. He shit his pants once on his way to work at Goodwill. That's the kind of person he was. He played a lot of video games and lived on welfare. His favorite color was yellow and he was bad at guitar hero. There was this one time when I was much, much younger, where I went to the grocery store with him. He told me about how hot he thought this one red-headed girl was. "Oh, the things I'd do to her," or something. A few years ago, he called me at around 6 o' clock P.M. I didn't recognize the number apart from the area code. I answered it but I still don't know why.

He told me it was him and, as you'd expect, I was pretty annoyed by this phone call already. There I was, trying to eat my fucking taco bell, and I have to talk on the phone to my uncle. What a thrill--

He said, "Your... Your dad is in the ICU in Green Bay. He tried to hang himself. He might not make it." He was probably crying I don't remember.

I replied, "Okay," and hung up. That's what happened, I swear.

You can never be too sure of what someone has to say before you hear them say it. I had to go tell my mom and it was a whole ordeal. She drove me up to Green Bay. It was surreal. She didn't mind when I asked her for a cigarette. I was only seventeen but it didn't bother her, I guess.

So, we got to the hospital in Green Bay. There's two, or three, or something, but we were at one of them. Anyway, we get to the hospital and we take the elevator and there wasn't even music. It was such a bore. We get to the room and it's the whole thing. You know, the white room with the doctor that doesn't seem like they care at all, and that ghastly white linoleum floor. I mean, they act like they do, but it's acting. They might care deep down on the inside, near their secret heart, but not on the outside, not to any perceptible degree. That room was so fucking high up. I couldn't even make out which car was ours through the window it was so high up. The machine that made noises I didn't understand was making noises I didn't understand. That machine making noises and my dad with his aubergine choker, spotted red. He was wearing one of those hospital gowns and I could see his dick and everything. My mom told me to talk to him but what could I say?

"I'm glad you're not dead right now even though you wish you were." That's what I was thinking anyway.

I don't really remember much else, not because I'm traumatized, or whatever, but because nothing important happened. I looked at him and then we left. We've spoken on the phone. He used to call me from prison and we'd talk about spending time together. He got caught up selling heroin, or something. I haven't seen him since Green Bay though.

Anyway, that's why I stopped doing my assignments in college. They didn't really care. I never told them anything, but nobody ever asked. I already paid so I didn't matter

anymore, I guess. There's something about being in bed for 19 hours a day that you don't really have time to go to class, or tell anyone about why you're not going to be there. I spent a lot of that time reading. It was good for me, I guess. Good readers make good writers, or something like that.

My favorite color used to be green, but I don't think I have one anymore.

Judge's Comments

This author offers a poignant reflection on the hidden and unrecognized circumstances which can disconnect and burden people.