

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2016**

2016 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

"You Have a Right to Say No"

Author: Kayla Johnson
Mentor: Molly Campbell
Bay College

"A Time Before"

Author: Gloria Niles
Mentor: Ruth Ann Schmitt
Henry Ford College

"bulletproof"

Author: April Carlton
Mentor: Denise Hill
Delta College

Fiction

"After"

Author: Angela Dawe
Mentor: Karrie Waarala
Lansing Community College

"Awaybound"

Author: Malik G. Clifton
Mentor: Ruth Ann Schmitt
Henry Ford College

"Waiting"

Author: Rob Linsey
Mentor: Karrie Waarala
Lansing Community College

Essay

"The Stains on the Surface"

Author: Brittney Arafat
Mentor: Ruth Ann Schmitt
Henry Ford College

"American Machines"

Author: Nicholas Folcik
Mentor: Jennifer McCann
Bay College

"Tangent of Ninety"

Author: Altair Boonraksa
Mentor: Mark J. Galik
Lansing Community College

2016 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 2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

You Have a Right to Say No
Kayla Johnson

Turning and spinning
Men laughing and cheering
Her heart beating faster
Their hands they come closer
A soft voice inside gently whispers
You have a right to say no

Still she keeps dancing
Men keep on grabbing
Regretting and wishing
Her breasts are men's failing
A voice inside whispers silently
You have a right to say no.

Dressing and changing
Someone knocking and yelling
Her heart it stops beating
The door quickly opens
An urgent voice inside screaming
You have a right to say no.

Ripping and tearing
Voices teasing and jeering
Her insides are screaming
Their hands moving faster
A hurt voice inside still saying
You have a right to say no

Pushing and shoving
Her back against a wall
Moaning and groaning
Her mind far away
A voice barely heard speaks
You have a right to say no

Sobbing and crying
The men pleased now leaving
Thinking and knowing
She puts the gun to her head
A calm voice breaking through the pain saying
You have a right to say no

Judge's Comments

Strong narrative voice, great use of descriptive language. The "action" of the poem is moving, yet complex in emotion. Writer does not simply take us through an experience, but also on a journey.

Second Place Poetry 2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

A Time Before
Gloria Niles

Dust-covered boots, labored navy pants,
Men standing united with purpose
amidst broken armored pieces.
A commonality of pausing
before the lens to capture a moment.
A workman's playground where talents and
physical exertion resolve impairments.
Focus on disconnected body parts
waiting to be melded, metal-to-metal.
Together, brothers, friends, and comrades.
GM factory workers now businessmen.
Sometimes gathered in a football
huddle, ruminating, seeking the best
play or direction for completion of a
Chevy Impala. Calls to action, moves
to be predicted, Team-mates, without
negative input.

An unlikely lover of country
music, Dad whistles to songs that tell
stories of heartbreak and struggle,
"Are You Lonesome Tonight?"
Harley motorcycle road trips with
three brothers.
Sharing wisdom, Dad says,
"Be careful what you say and do.
Hurt can be forgiven
and apologies accepted, but
harmful words are never recovered
once released into the universe."
Expose a time
before life grows heavy
before Alzheimer's erases memory,
before weak hearts stop ticking,
before cancerous blood cells leave bodies
without any redemption.
Smiles of men to be vanquished
and left speechless with only
survivors to recall better days.

Judge's Comments

Sentimental tone, reflections of a time gone by. Writer gives both place and space to a time when the common working man had pride and assurance in himself, work, and skills.

Third Place Poetry
2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

bulletproof
April Carlton

i speak in waves
which drown you
and i rise like
mountain ranges
that want to tower.

raindrops fall from my lips
and i conjure a storm
from my mouth

i shake like thunder in reprise
the spark of lightning in my eyes

i speak in bullets
because i am afraid
of being too protected –
too sheltered.

i can only hope you are bulletproof
and that you can find shelter
from my hellish storm
and that you are able to rise
above my crashing waves.

Judge's Comments

Exemplifies the power of language. A balance between nature and nurture. The writer ultimately stresses the need for "expression", whether good or bad.

First Place Fiction
2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

After
Angela Dawe

Everything was beige, dusty and dry and barren. Everywhere she looked, beige, almost unbroken, for miles and miles, as far as the eye could see. They'd crossed into Texas a couple hours ago, but the way the scenery remained unchanged made her feel like she was in some sort of space-time wormhole thing, like in one of his beloved *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episodes - as if what she had experienced as hours had in truth been merely an instant, and they hadn't covered any distance at all.

Neither of them had spoken since the gas station near Dead Women Crossing, when he'd asked her to hold the hood open while he checked again on the oil situation. He'd frowned at the dipstick, but then, apparently satisfied, he'd nodded to her without actually looking at her, and she had let the hood drop and gone inside to pee. The bathroom had been tiny; its smell was that of something beginning to rot, and one of its fluorescent bulbs had flickered intermittently, but it had been no dirtier than any of the others. She'd noticed it didn't have a diaper changing station.

Now, she shifted gingerly in her bucket seat and felt him glance at her, but when she looked back at him, his eyes were again on the road, his face expressionless. She wished for the thousandth time the stereo worked.

She stared out the window at all that beige.

She wasn't even aware she'd started humming until he quietly began to sing along, eyes still on the road, hands still at 10 and 2.

It's memories that I'm stealing
But you're innocent when you dream
When you dream
You're innocent when you dream

They would take I-40 all the way to 93 and down to the Shell in Wikieup. Her sister would meet them there and collect her and her suitcase full of needlessly stretchy clothing, and then drive her to her hometown, Nothing, and the trailer she'd grown up in. She would stay there for a while, she wasn't sure how long, maybe a month, maybe longer, maybe a lot longer. And he would drive alone back up 93 to I-40 and whatever awaited him in LA. The weeks would pass, she would improve, the world would continue to rotate on its axis. And one day, she knew, this whole "unfortunate episode" would be a distant memory, the pain maybe not quite gone, but easier to ignore, its sharp edges blunted by time.

She didn't look at him, but she kept softly humming, and he kept quietly singing, and somewhere deep within her, in a primal place so beyond thought that she would go on

to live her whole life without ever realizing it, she was aware of a tender, shattering truth: that this moment would never end. Just like he'd always said when she'd teased him about the holes in his science fiction plots, time did not work the way people thought it did. No matter what happened, no matter where she went, no matter how old she got, even after she died and her body had turned to dust and everything she'd ever known had burned and crumbled and been forgotten, she would still be in this car with him, still on this stretch of highway, gazing out at this endless beige; she would still be sitting motionless while he steadily drove, his eyes on the road, his hands at 10 and 2. She would always be humming their favorite song while he sang quietly, as they traveled thousands of miles, never moving at all.

Judge's Comments

This is a powerful piece about loss and going on. The writer provides with subtle hints the nature of the loss (should I say "loss of a child"?) with deft description and understatement. The subtlety, however, does not diminish the realization that the character's pain will not diminish over time.

Second Place Fiction

2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Awaybound
Malik G. Clifton

I didn't look back as I untangled myself from my fathers' grasp, and bolted for the front door, losing my vintage Zeppelin T-shirt for the effort. I blew through the threshold, unintentionally, but satisfactorily taking the screen off its hinges along the way. I tripped from the impact sending a cloud of red dust billowing into the air, as I smacked the so loose dust. I placed both hands flush on the ground pushing up with all my might. The fall had hurt my hip, not my head I knew why I was running and I knew why I couldn't stop. I had barely taken another step, stopping briefly to wince from the pain, when I heard his voice from the door way, "You get back here, you little shit".

I hadn't known I could move so fast, to be fair I had never tried, never had a reason to until now. My bare feet pounded the dirt loudly, as I made my way up the path away from the farm. I hadn't known just how much I hated how far back the house set from the road until now. What would I do when I got to the road anyway hitch hike? Hide out somewhere for the night? Get hit by a car? I couldn't see anything past the corn which grew like grass around our house, and was 20 times as high. Yeah getting hit would be the most logical thing to expect, and maybe it would be for the best.

"Turn your ass round boy," my father said, "Whatever waited for me at end of the road was much better than what was behind me. Even death. I barreled toward the street I could only imagine how sore the soles of my feet would be afterward. They were hitting the ground hard enough to send shockwaves through my calves."

"Please don't hurt em Guffy, it's not his fault!"

My mother's voice strained out in the distance. My mother's figure stood perched in the illuminated rectangle which I made out as the doorway of our house. The singular light source left the normally bright red paint, and vibrant white carnations that adorned the front side of the one story farm house, dim and lack luster. It was fitting It'd be such a pitch dark night the last time I'd see this house because that is how I'd remember it from now own. She seemed to be heaving for air, it was too far to tell. Her mouth was a gape as she leaned forward in her scream, her favorite dress, the one with the white lilies was ripped at the neck.

"Was she crying?" I thought.

The feeling of uneasiness that had rose inside of me at the sight of her distress, but was quickly replaced with the pain of her betrayal.

"Her tears weren't for me, they were to wash away the guilt."

I pulled my eyes away from her, feeling my heart drop as they fell upon my dad who seemed to be half way between the house and me. His left hand still clenched the tatters of my favorite shirt. In his right, the now splintered bat he had bought me for my first little league game. He clutched the ruined remains of what I held dear, it was an almost gallery worthy shot. His sandy blonde hair danced rhythmically in response to his stride his weasel like face was beet red and his chest lounged and contracted wildly, struggling for each breathe. Smoking had done me better in that one moment than it had for him in 20 years.

I turned my face forward looking for any sign of asphalt in the dark of night, the thumping sound trailed off and then went dormant. "Had he given up, finally?" It didn't matter at

this point, a translucent oval of light came into view, and it was my beacon to freedom. I pushed my legs as hard as I could. The deep thumping of my bare feet against dirt, turned in to a loud slap as they met the road. I tried to stop running, but my momentum kept me stumbling forward. I over shot myself half way into the ditch on the other side before my legs cooperated, I bent forward taking short deep breaths, trying unsuccessfully to compose myself. I made it to the street and I didn't get hit by a car,

“What now”,

My torso glistened with sweat as I tramped ever forward, under the luminous oblong pillars. Hands jammed tightly into my front jean pockets, as the occasional speeding car's careless breeze failed to cool me.

“Piss ants” I thought, “It was the least they could do for me”. Though in their absence the road felt eerie.

My movements were like a river, but my mind was an ever churning chute of molten rock endlessly folding in upon itself, refusing to surface. On Tuesday In biology we'd learned that when sweat evaporates, it cools the body, and I was drenched and half nude in the middle of a Nebraska autumn. Oh for it to be Tuesday again, so I could feel my dirty blonde hair be tussled by my father's hand as he moved toward the coffee pot and I stuffed my mouth with eggs and toast. The combination of mental images made my jaw ache even more than already did, though I didn't reach up and touch it.

“Maybe I deserve this”.

That thought dammed the flow, stopped the churning, settled the dispute, and, for a time, I stood there on the edge of a cliff, in the middle of the road. It had to be quite a bit of time because I didn't even see the head lights on the horizon that had turned me into a deer, but there I stood staring down the long red striped hood of a brand new Mustang GT.

“Daniel s'at chu?”

I peered back into the driver side window.

“Mr. Quaid?”

“Boy the hell you doin out here wit no shirt or shoes!?”

I felt my eyes get hot again, eruption was imminent, but I didn't want it to be now or here or in front of a damn pastor.

“Huh, get in the car,” he sighed and leaning over to pop the lock,

More a stream than a river, I made my way around the trunk to the passenger side door. I tugged at it hesitantly, weighing my factious options.

“Get in the car, or walk to uncle Jace's in Florida, get in the car or grow wings and fly to Liverpool”

“I ain't got all night boy!”

I swung open the door as wide as it could go and flopped down on the leather interior. Much to his dismay I hoped, his words were just convenient logs for the fire when it started, no it was more a tornado and his platitudes were simply more debris.

“So this some type of senior rite of passage thing?” Pastor Quaid said

I sat in silence my elbow pressing down on the door jam and my fist propping up my head.

“Grew up in Mullen myself, over there we would have to dine and dash at one of the local diners, pretty stupid thinkin bout it now”

I watched his hands go on and off the wheel, as he spun his tale, left than right, and sometimes both at the same time.

“yup...”

“So home?”

“No!” I hollered

My back straightened as quickly as my response leapt out, and I smacked my head on the cars roof.

”shit!”

“Language Daniel!”

“I’m sorry. Just please not home!”

“I can’t be ridein round wit a shirtless boy in ma car in the middle of the night, People’la start to talk, whatever ya going through wit chu folks I can help ya’ll sort it out”

“No if you take me back he’ll kill me. He already kissed my jaw wit da bat and tore the shirt off my back. All over da-dang ol note. I can’t go back, I won’t!”

I could feel his eyes bore into the side of my head as I slouched down in my seat rubbing the crown of my head.

“Fine, where to then?”

I felt the magma ever ready to become lava and there was only one place it made sense to happen.

“Can you take me to Devon’s?”

“I can get chu within a mile, but dat’s the best I can do, got a trunk full of pamphlets need foldin, and a sermon need startin”

“Okay...thank you”

ping *ting* *ping* *ping* I readied the fifth pebble, but by the time I had drawn back his upper body had filled the panes dimensions. His ebony skin glowing in the bright yellow back lighting. He disappeared and, in that moment, I felt empty, before the braided rope ladder unfurled down to my instinctively waiting fingertips. Of course, my body would know better.

I threw my left leg over the windowsill, then righted myself and stood straight up awkwardly swaying post exertion. Shedding my mirrored southern diction in the process, I didn’t need it anymore. With Dev I was safe.

“I wonder do all white boys climb through your windows half-naked and ready to go” he said eye’s stripping the small amount of clothes I had left.

For a fleeting second, I forgot why I came, his seductive tone plucked chords within me like a professional harpist. My brain raddled, and in half of a second, I remembered; how we had become friends after in the 7th grade when I knocked Nick Greebs two front teeth out his mouth for taking his glasses, and how I’d threatened to go on a hunger strike in the summer of 81’ if our parents didn’t put us in the same camp, and how last year the football team had won the championships, and he was so happy that as soon as we got alone, he told me he loved me. Then reality set in and then gravity, and as pretty as they were, sweet memories can’t stop explosions.

“They found the fucking note, Dev!”

“What note?”

“The one you slipped me in Ms. Lowes class”

“How!?”

“Laundry, it was in my pants”

He was up off the bed and pacing the area rag, in what seemed to me a single movement, as if analyzing the possibilities, it was clear he needed time to process, but lava can’t just go back to being magma.

“After my mom told my dad, he flipped his shit, and started in on the abomination before

the lord and, not my son crap.” I had moved around to the bottom of the bed, in front of his closest to have my own pacing/flailing room.

“The more I tried to talk. The more pissed off it seemed to make him, and...and then he gave me this look like I was a stranger in his home”

Dev had stopped his pacing to peer at me with concern, and for a second I stopped to share in it.

“he told me to get out, and I’m pissed so I go to my room to pack my stuff and he follows me and as I throw clothes into a suit case, he just keeps yelling and spitting and asking who wrote it and...”

“And what did you tell him!?”

“What?”

“Did you tell him I wrote it?”

“What, what’s it matter?”

“It matters! My dad talks to your dad and if my dad finds out I’m fucked too”

“...No I didn’t tell him”

He collapsed on the bed with relief. The dark blue spread, I knew all too well, deformed under his weight, as his hands masked his face briefly. He leaned up looking carefree.

“That’s good”, he said exhaled sharply, and tossed to baseball he’d been fiddling with sense I crawled in the window.

“Good? I’m homeless and that’s good? My father disowns me and that’s good? My little brother had to watch me be hit with a bat and that’s good!?”

“You know that’s not what mean I’m just saying what good would the both of us being ass out due”

“...well what do we do?”

“We?”

The room feel deafly silent as we both tried to compose our rebuttals, I could hear the prince record I had heard being turned down around the 3rd pebble again.

“If you hadn’t passed me the damned note in the first place, it wouldn’t have been found”

“Why did you keep it!?”

“Ms. Lowes was making her rounds. You know she would have made me read out loud”

He moved like a rip tide, an endlessly predictable movement that seemed to drag on for an eternity. He stopped just before I’d imagined the rug would have combusted, and deviated into a the top drawer of the nightstand we’d carried to his house together a half a mile from the Wilson’s moving sell, and came up with a roll of 10s.

“With this you should be able to get a room at Shirley’s for about a week until your parents cool down. I’ll take you in the market truck.”

“What? Where’d you get that money?”

“It’s from one of the scouts from FSU It’s an incentive for me to come play ball for them”

He shoved the money into my limp hands, as I felt my lava flow begin to harden.

“No”

He stopped half way into the closet and looked at me blankly, and it seemed his turn to erupt.

“What do you mean no? What the hell are you going to do then? You can’t stay here. Your dad’s gonna call mine any minute. Do you think I’m gonna get swept up in this? Think about me for a change. Dammit!”

He punctuated his rant with the stomp of his foot, and the mirror rattled so much I thought it'd shatter. He breathed in deep clutching the Adidas, I'd gotten him for his birthday. After a brief stare down, he tossed them in front of me, and went back to his search for something or another. I suddenly knew how all those ears of corn I'd stripped over the years must have felt.

Before I knew it, I was in the cab of the truck the oversized dark blue flannel he'd also given to me blowing in the wind. He was saying words all the while, but they lay dead on my shoulders. I was too busy fantasizing, I thought of picking up the hotel room phone and dialing up Mr. Andrews, and telling him how I'd snuck into his son's room at least three times a week in the dead of night for the past 11 months. Devon would probably drive back out to the hotel and finish my dad's attempt to beat my brains in. In rosier tangents, we'd embrace each other in our mutual exile, and move to New York City. I'd get certified as an electrician and he'd be a Gym teacher. We'd live in a decent sized house just north of a bad neighborhood. He'd cheat on me whenever he felt the itch, in our own bed, as he looks upon his football trophies. Taking out all his; anger, hate, disgust, and regret, on his pilfered lover. All so he could stomach to look at the man who'd destroyed his dreams every day of his life.

I blinked slowly staring out the window as crops passed us by, and then a long stretch of hills. The gas station, then the post office, what came next again? The bus station, and suddenly. My heart felt resolved.

"Take me to the bus depot instead"

"What? What for?"

"For myself, for dad, for mom, and for you, for once"

He looked into my eyes for longer than a person driving a truck probably should have, and flicked the turn signal without even looking.

I bought a ticket to Tennessee and took a seat smack dab in the middle of the rig. I sat there finally fully feeling the bat, and the door, and the aimlessly walked miles, and his scorn and my scorn in tandem, and my brain felt more of a cloud now and my movements and the buses synced. There I sat on a ride to a strange place I'd picked at random, with \$240 dollars in my pocket, a tattered heart, and an immortal spirit.

Judge's Comments

Through harsh but effective description, the writer painfully portrays a young man's experience with violence, rejection, and betrayal when he comes to terms with who he really is. Left with "\$240 dollars in [his] pocket, a tattered heart, and an immortal spirit," he assures the reader of his survival.

Third Place Fiction

2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Waiting
Rob Linsley

Ray walked onto the wooden porch and felt the sun blast onto his face. *Frustrating*, he thought. *It's October, and it should be as cold as my soul.* He enjoyed amusing himself with his own cleverness.

"Whatcha doing, Ben?" It was a bogus question—he saw exactly what Ben was doing: enjoying the warmth, pretending it was still summer, and pretending he had a beautiful city that wasn't made of chalk. Still, Ray drew comfort from Ben's descriptions of his faux-towns.

"I'm the Mayor of Benville. It was a small town before, but now it's a booming metropolis!"

"Ben, you're seven. The only kids your age who know words like *metropolis* grow up to be lonely nerds," Ray smirked, knowing that his brother would likely grow up to be lanky and awkward just like him. With the family's luck, Ben would grow up to be ugly like Ray, too—scraggly beard, hook nose, and all.

"It's okay. I love you even if you are a loser," Ray added while tussling Ben's curls.

"I love you even when you're mean," mused Ben.

Ray pretended it didn't warm his cold soul a little. After all, show weakness, and little brothers will never let it go.

"Thanks, kid," he replied with expert nonchalance. "Where's Mom?"

"She's getting groceries, I think. You should play with me!"

"All right," Ray conceded. "What's the next thing the construction workers need to build?"

Ben lit up. "A church! There aren't enough churches for these people. You'll need dump trucks and excavators and diggers!" He zoomed to the garage to find these vital plastic tools. Ray took a good, hard look at the sky and wondered why it needed to look so goddamn happy. The end was near. He could hear it in the increasingly incoherent babblings of his mother, and he could see it in the falling of leaves—and the falling of dead trees, the chopping away of beauty in order to further fuel our pathetic human existence. Ray whipped out a pack of cigarettes and hit them against his hand, but he could never seem to decently pack them. He lit one up, preparing to watch the world burn as well.

"I got them!" Ben squealed with a cardboard box of toys in his hand, attempting to run but soon learning it was a mistake to try when his hands were full.

"You've gotta be more careful, dipshit," Ray chuckled.

"Swearing is of the Devil," Ben admonished, sounding more like their mother now and less like a child.

"Sorry," Ray practically whimpered, suddenly taken down emotionally by a seven-year old.

But it wasn't Ben, of course. Ben was only a symptom of the problem. In the past few years, Mom had started to unravel. "It's coming," she would whisper while inching forward, then backward, then forward again in her chair. "I can feel it. That chill. Don't you

feel it, boys?" She was only forty-four, but her face had grown sunken, worn. And her voice—god! Her voice! It was now but a whimper, frail as a ninety-year-old's.

"Do you ever miss Dad?" Ray asked. His mouth felt so odd—so vile—saying, "*Dad*." It felt far too familial—fuck blood and fuck family ties. Some men grew beyond such titles and deserved to lie in the grave of namelessness they dug for themselves.

"No," Ben paused. "He was mean."

"Okay." Ray took another long puff and added, "That church still need building?"

By the time Mom returned from her trip, the boys had taken to the house and were on separate couches playing their own separate puzzles—simplified Sudoku for Ben, and the newspaper crossword for Ray.

Mom plopped onto the couch beside Ray, maybe an inch apart, and sniffed like a police dog.

"You smell like cigarettes. You know what they call th—"

"Cancer sticks," Ray grumbled.

"I don't appreciate that tone of voice, young man. You're taking on the behaviors of the World.

How do you think Yeshua would feel looking down on you now?"

That was another thing. In all Mom's reading, she had learned what Jesus' name really was, what he was really called when he walked this earth. But in Hebrew, from what Ray could understand, *Yeshua* was essentially the same name as what we now call *Joshua*. Naturally, Ray silently started calling Jesus "Josh."

"He wouldn't be happy, I know," Ray succumbed.

"I want to meet Him so badly, I long for it, I yearn," she babbled.

"I know, Mom."

"No, you don't.... I *long* to meet Him. It's all I've ever wanted."

And her eyes glazed over like a heroin addict.

It was pitiful, really, how they reached this moment. A few years ago, Ray's family still lived with his father in a suburb outside Milwaukee. Back home, Ray used to escape with a metal detector to Lake Michigan in search of coins and sea glass. The crisp chill of the water made him feel awake. But that was all gone now.

The family had left one night when Ray's father was asleep. He honked and oinked and snorted in his sleep. Ray occasionally wondered if that was what made Mom so restless later on—maybe her inability to sleep gave her sanity, and maybe she felt something was missing when her husband wasn't performing barnyard imitations next to her in the middle of the night. Ray awoke that night to his mother's frantic shaking.

"Grab only what you need," she whispered and gave him a garbage bag. And Ray didn't know what he needed. Maybe his baseball cards, or his favorite mustard yellow shirt, or his model train, or his favorite brain puzzles. Or the cards his grandmother sent, or the letters Randy sneaked to him in class last year ending in hearts and *xoxo*'s. Fifteen years old, and he had to figure out his identity in a moment.

He tried to sneak into his father's room, get one last peek at the brute. Through a crack in the door, he saw his restless father, saw his dark brown mustache whiskers quivering like wheat in a field, saw his ample belly undulate in and out, in and out. Mom snatched Ray when she saw him peer at her husband.

They crept out the door and into the car. The engine revved up, sounding like an angry horse; Ray wondered then if Dad would catch them. They drove and drove, as far as

it would take to get anywhere Dad couldn't find them. And they ended up in Montana on Grandpa's ranch. Far away from the punches thrown for anything that could be perceived as disobedience, far away from the turbulence of unending hollering and weeping. Far away from the hatred at his sons for a voice that was pitched a little too high or an arm that was a little too weak.

And now Grandpa was gone, and all that was left was poverty and the Bible. With religion in her eyes, Mom looked no different from Dad anymore.

"It's all I've ever wanted," Mom repeated, rocking back and forth, back and forth.

"Mom, are you sure you're okay?"

"We're leaving tonight," she whispered, bounced up from her chair, and scurried to the kitchen.

She came out with a tray upon which were three glass tumblers filled with what looked like sugar water. She set down the tray on the pine coffee table her father had made. Then, with great deliberation, she set down one tumbler in front of Ben, another in front of Ray, and one for herself.

"Drink these, it's good for you." Ray felt a brick trying to gnaw its way out of his stomach. Ben peered over his Sudoku puzzle at his glass.

"What is it?" Ben inquired.

"Water...with just a pinch of escape."

Ben started to reach for his cup. "Don't drink it!" Ray dashed toward his brother and grabbed him.

"I don't want you to know the suffering of this world." She rocked back and forth again, again, again. *"This is my body, this is my blood. This is my body, this is my blood."*

She noticed Ray ready to leave and grabbed her scrawny son from behind. She whipped a knife from her pocket and let it graze against Ray's neck. Ben started to wail. "I'm only doing this because I love you. Which way do you want to return to your Father?" Ray stood absolutely still but for the moving of his now-heavy chest and his soon-to-be-gone

breath bursting forth from it. By what must only have been the grace of God in his terror, he was able to wriggle his arm from outside her and steal the knife.

He stuck the knife between his belt and pants, snatched his brother, and sprinted away from the home that had somehow turned ghastly. He bolted across the fields, attempting to reach the speed of light; but no matter how rapid his movements, it felt like he was simply sauntering. He glanced back, and no mother was in sight. *Good, she gave up,* he hoped and soon found himself praying to a God he wasn't even sure existed. Still, Ray felt like the once-beautiful ranch had become God's curse upon the boys and they would spend forty years in this desolate wilderness.

But eventually they reached the promised land: the Wrights' house with ash-gray paint crusting along the war-torn wood panels. Ray knew—he just knew—no one would believe him, but he recounted his story anyway in dull hopes that he might be wrong.

"Oh dear," Mr. Wright whispered.

"Lord have mercy," murmured Mrs. Wright.

The couple paused for a long while. A few strands of Mrs. Wright's hair—the same ashy gray of their house's paint—fell over her cat-eye frames.

"Everyone knew your mother was—well—a little *unusual*," hesitated Mrs. Wright, a proper Presbyterian who must have been trying her best to be charitable. But beneath her

discomfort, Ray could see Mrs. Wright had a much stronger sadness, and once again, he was only an object of pity.

Mr. Wright skittered over to the kitchen to find the phone and call the police; Mrs. Wright made hot chocolate and turned on the TV. Ray simply sat in hopes that the television could drown out that overwhelming silence of waiting.

Judge's Comments

The author's gift is the ability to gradually build tension toward a frightening climax in this story of family dysfunction. Beginning with an innocent child's game, the narrative ends with a mother's horrific attempt to poison her sons, and one son's act of courage.

First Place Essay
2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Stains on the Surface
Brittney Arafat

Mexican, Puerto Rican, light-skinned, coal. Hawaiian, spic, nigger. Are you Arab? Are you sure? Mulatto, mixed breed, mutt. Beautiful curls, nappy head. Gorgeous brown eyes, full of shit. Go back to your own country, towel head. Abomination in God's eyes. Mud duck, high yellow. Exotic, captivating, ugly, disgusting. Porch monkey, Oreo. You don't belong here terrorist. Camel jockey. Burnt cracker, zebra, yellow nigger.
Slaughtered identity. Who am I really?

The one who said that people are not born evil, apparently never met Frank. One of my earliest memories was being pulled up the stairs, his white knuckles twisting around my curls, the red hot pain searing into my skull as he yanked me step by step up onto the landing before shoving me into my bedroom. His handprint was swollen across my cheek. But I should have known better, at the age of six, that reading out loud would cause him to rise to anger. I Can Read, that was the title of my crime. The little book that had caused me to swell with pride as the words formed and escaped my lips, turned to shame as Frank shredded the paper book, tossing the pieces on the floor around me. I had just wanted him to listen. I had just wanted him to be proud, yet my dreams of paternal recognition were torn apart, like the black and white pages of the story. They floated to the ground like snowflakes, before resting on the old brown carpet. When he slammed the door, I scooped up the scattered pieces, trying to force the sentences back together by sheer willpower. I cradled them in my hands crying.

When the door opened, I flinched, afraid that Frank had heard me and had returned for another round of reprimand. It's wasn't him though. My sister peeked her head in the crack of the door, before smiling and melting into the room. She shut the door gently and then knelt on the floor next to me, pulling me into her arms.

When my mother came home I ran to her, but she wouldn't listen. "Where are the marks?" She asked, "Why would you say such terrible things about your stepfather?"

She searched my body for a bruise or a welt, but there was nothing.

Frank frowned, looking hurt as he unbuckled his belt and hit me over and over again for lying. Feeling justice had been served my mother sent me off to my room.

Again, my sister was at my side, stroking my shoulders as my tears ran down my face. "We are not like them." She said, putting her caramel colored arm next to mine. "We'll always be different from them. Our skin doesn't bruise like theirs."

My grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, since my life began,
made me believe my skin tone was attributed to sin. I was never seen an equal, and
my best attempts still lost. I was seen as just a color.

As a burden.

As a cost.

How could a good bred daughter be born as dark as coal, if both parents were pious
people and if both contained a soul?

And to my peers a cracker,
an Oreo, a fraud.

So are we really equal then, weighed in the eyes of God? To categorize a skin tone
and conform to racial hate, doesn't make us individuals, it only serves to segregate.

So don't try to classify me when you pass me on the street. My ethnicity is nothing.
My race is obsolete.

"Your mother slept with the devil." My grandmother said, a limp cigarette balanced
between her pursed lips. "But if you marry a nice white man and have nice white children,
God will forgive you."

I stared, watching the tightly wrapped tobacco bounce as she spoke, ashes burning
longer than the cigarette itself but none falling onto the glass table top. She took another
deep puff followed by a choking cloud being blown from her nostrils. It resembled that of a
dragon's breath, like what's shown in cartoons and movies.

"It's too bad your skin isn't light like your mother's." She looked over at me, her
gaze scrutinizing as her eyes scanned over my brown skin and black hair.

My mother had pure, white skin and wavy red hair. That's what beauty was
supposed to look like. It was not brown. It was not me.

She had married and divorced an African American man, against her better
judgment. My sister and I were proof, products of her indiscretions.

She shook her head and clicked her tongue, as if regret would be enough to "white"
wash away the mistakes of my mother.

I had heard this speech often enough. As I grew older, I learned to ignore it. But at
the time I didn't know which I wanted more: for her to accept me as I was, or to have been
born white. She would never see me as anything but "colored".

At school and on applications we are asked to classify our race. There are options to
choose from like:

Latino

Non- Latino

African American

Caucasian

Pacific Islander

I asked once, "What should I mark if more than one applies, since we're supposed

to only check one."

"Just mark the one that resembles you most," The woman said, but none of them truly resembled me.

America is commonly referred to as a melting pot. But is this really true? And for those of us that have been "melted," we face a whole new crisis of self-identity. We aren't one, and we aren't the others. So what are we?

I learned in biology class that genetically all people are 99.9% the same. There are only .1% of genes that distinguish us from each other, so I pose the question, why do we allow this .1% to matter?

Classifying people into ethnic and racial groups does not empower us, not really. It's just another tool devised to divide and separate us. The Constitution says "We the People." Not we the black people or we the white people. Just people. I'm tired of labels and division. I'm ready to be an equal.

I still remember my niece, at the age of 6, crying. Her wild red curls framed her pale freckled face. Her blue eyes were stained pink as fat tears ran down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" I asked, searching for a cut or a wound, some indication of what was causing the pain that was clearly being reflected on her face.

But there were no physical marks. Her pain was internal and hurt her worse than any cut could.

"The kids on the bus said I was a liar," she wept, "that I'm not black. When will I turn black?"

Judge's Comments

This is a raw, honest portrayal of the emotional toll that social preoccupation with race can take on individuals. The author skillfully uses a blend of prose and poetry, as well as vivid imagery, to reflect on how the frustrations of race and identity are conducted through generations and thoughtfully paints a provocative picture of how racism brands us in ways which are not easily discarded.

Second Place Essay

2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

American Machines
Nicholas Folcik

Under a mid-afternoon sun, I sat in the cab of a dirt covered, olive drab payloader. The type of tractor you might see at a factory or power plant, endlessly scooping piles of various materials and ores. I was in no factory, or even the continent of North America, however. The African sun was unrelenting as I waited for the aircraft to appear.

I was a little more snug than comfortable in my seat. An extra thirtyish pounds of cumbersome body armor and equipment were to blame. To my right, a dirt stained Kevlar helmet leaned up against the frame of an open window. Behind my seat, miscellaneous tools and an M4 service rifle held firm, but remained easily accessible. On my left, a square cubby and cup holder held Meal Ready to Eat trash. In the same direction was the cab entrance, and its door hung open, allowing an unpleasantly warm breeze cross my face. The features to my front included the throttle and brake pedals, as well as the steering column. Windows gave me a clear 360-degree view of my surroundings. My eyes alternated between a small pack of donkeys, curiously approaching my tractor, and the horizon. Just watching and waiting.

We were Combat Logistics Battalion 22 (CLB 22), a United States Marine Corps unit, conducting training operations in April of 2014. I was Corporal Folcik, and my primary occupation in the Marines was operating construction and logistics equipment. I ran bulldozers, road-graders, backhoe loaders, pay-loaders, off-road forklifts, and just about anything else that moves large amounts of material or cargo. Being a “combat logistics” unit meant that our primary mission was to keep the infantry Marines supplied while they conducted their set of operations. My time was largely spent inside an eleven-foot tall, 186 horsepower, thirty-seven thousand-pound payloader. Its technical nomenclature is the, “John Deere 624KR-T.R.A.M.” Or more commonly known in the Marine Corps as simply, the Tram.

The Tram was *my machine*. It was my craft, my profession, and my passion. I lived and breathed this tractor out in the field. Countless nights and days were spent living out of the five-foot tall, four-foot wide, four-foot long glass box of a tractor cab. The serial number (640034) of one specific Tram is still etched in my mind. I developed a strong attachment with this machine over the course of my deployment. Akin to the bond between a man and his loyal canine.

I strongly believe, in the context of operating in the military, one must have a healthy blend of aggression and finesse. Missions need to be accomplished in an efficient and timely manner. In a warzone, you cannot hesitate; Marine lives may be depending on it. At the same time, an operator is often transporting millions of dollars’ worth of equipment, or explosives. Being too aggressive can have costly, and even deadly consequences, so a feathery touch is needed just as well.

I had this touch, and I could *feel* the machine as an extension of myself. From the cab chair, the pulsating hum of the hydraulic pump felt like a heartbeat, and the smooth-as-glass transmission was almost as reactive to my direction as my thoughts. When my

hand was on the control stick, I could sense where the forklift was as if it was my own arm. Similar perhaps, to the function a blind person's cane. Difficult to put in words, but surprisingly easy to learn firsthand.

"Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast," was part of a work ethic drilled into me during boot camp, and something I continue to recall and apply, to this day.

On an average day, I dealt with loading and unloading cargo from Oshkosh military vehicles. On this day however, I would be dealing with a vehicle unlike any other: The Marine Corps' "V-22 Osprey," aircraft.

It would supposedly arrive in less than five minutes, but I wasn't holding my breath. In the military, last second changes are passed out like candy on Halloween. But just to be prepared, I ignited my tractor's engine to warm it up.

The donkey's scattered.

As the Tram ran idle, I began to go through my pre-operation checks. *Fuel? Fuel's good*, I would say to myself while inspecting gauges. *What about hydraulics and oil? Normal pressure...cool, cool, cool*. After verifying everything was good to go, I took control of the machine, raised the boom, and slightly tilted back the forklift attachment. This signaled to everyone else I was ready.

The incoming *bird* slowly peeked over the mountainous horizon of Djibouti: A country on the African Continent, less than 200 miles wide, located where the Gulf of Aden meets the Red Sea. This terrain was mostly rock... with some dirt between more rock. The earth swooped up and down between jagged mountains and flash flood valleys. The flora mainly consisted of twisted, dry trees scattered here and there. Various types of cacti and twiggy bushes were just as scarce, and tumbleweed rolled about the surface. The sun baked everything in its persistent rays. These April days were consistently humid and above ninety degrees, while the nights were stagnant and warm, when a cool breeze was all you wanted. This land was a thirsty, starving thing.

Unfortunately, flash floods are the only source that seem to quench its appetite. We had set up camp right next to a valley carved out by millennia of this sudden and violent rainfall. Right in the middle was where the Osprey began to land.

From about a thousand yards away, I watched in admiration as the flying machine made its final approach for landing. In loose earth terrains, witnessing an Osprey land is like trying to see the inside of a tornado. An intense turbulence stirs up massive clouds of dirt and debris, enshrouding the action. It's a chaotic and wonderful scene to behold. I came into close contact with this aircraft five times in my military career, and each time was as awe-inspiring as the last. A true testament to human invention and engineering.

The hull of the aircraft is bulky, but the tail end angles upward, with a ramp that raises and lowers underneath from the rear. Midway through the hull, a set of wings reach out to the rotating engines on either side. These engines use both jet propulsion (like an airplane) and rotor-lift (like a helicopter) to create the aircraft's thrust. As I mentioned above, the engines *rotate*. They do so from vertical to horizontal positions, and vice versa. Thus, this hybrid machine can take off and land vertically like a helicopter, but also fly horizontally at faster speeds and higher altitudes like an airplane. This combination makes it the perfect candidate for rapidly transporting cargo and troops.

When the dust finally dissipated enough to see the Osprey, the ramp was lowering. Two Marines; wearing body armor, desert-tan jump suits, and white cranial helmets; stepped out into the chaos beneath their aircraft. With engines running at low power, the

turbulence was still throwing debris and bending nearby tree trunks. Again, with engines running at *low* power.

One of the marines made his way toward me, frantically waving his arms while trying to keep his footing. It was go time. I threw on my helmet, put my tractor in gear, and headed into the chaos... but not before closing my door and window.

One-hundred yards out, dirt began impacting my windshield. Excitement and stress shot through my body's system. This would be my first and only actual *interaction* with this aircraft. In all my other experiences, I had only been an observer. At fifty yards, the tractor began to shake from turbulence. The sound from the Osprey became deafening, and it was hard to hear my own thoughts. From ten yards now, I could feel the air outside my cab becoming almost... *thinner*. As if the aircraft was pushing air out of its vicinity faster than the air could fill back in. The cab was also shaking so bad that my body was impossible to keep from doing the same.

But I maintained a relaxed and steady grip on the controls, and a soft, unflinching touch on the brake pedal. I breathed deep, and remained calm.

Even as controlling my forklift became more complicated. The downdraft was forcing my forks to the ground, overpowering the 3600psi hydraulic system in the tractor's veins. I needed to keep a careful balance on the controls, pulling the stick just enough to keep the forks from dragging, at just the right position to stay level. In regards to operating, this was perhaps the most focused I'd ever been during my service.

Crewmen rolled a pallet of ammunition to the edge of the ramp, then signaled me to pick it off. *Okay Nick...don't damage the \$70-million-dollar aircraft*, I kept repeating to myself, *no room for error*. To make matters worse, my tractor was about two-thirds the size of the aircraft, but too tall to fit under the tail fin, which I needed to get underneath to reach the pallet. At the closest point I got, had it not been for my windshield, I could have reached out and grabbed the aircraft's tail.

Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast...you can do this.

My forklift just barely reached far enough into the pallet. I picked it up and backed away, air refilling my lungs as I took my first breath in what felt like an eternity. I took the cargo to its home inside our ammunition post. The Sergeant in charge of that area pointed out an elongated, rectangular container to take back and load into the Osprey.

Once I was close to the aircraft again, it became obvious to the crew and me that this container was too wide to fit through the aircraft's four by four-foot opening. After a moment of deliberation, the crew on the ground came up with *the dumbest* plan. Disregard the fact that it worked out in the end...

One of the crewmen approached and I opened my cab door, letting in the intense turbulence and dirt. At the top of his lungs, he tried to communicate over the noise and wind. "DO YOU THINK WE COULD TURN IT!?" With his hands, he made the gesture of turning a square ninety degrees, "SO THAT YOU'RE CARRYING IT THE HOT DOG WAYS!?" I could barely hear him, but that's a direct quote.

"WE CAN TRY!" Said the idiot who went along with this plan. The crewman likely understood only through my use of rigorous nodding and the thumbs up I was throwing him.

By turning the cargo ninety degrees, we could fit the container through the aircraft's opening. However, because of the shape, this meant I would only be able to pick it up on one fork, making it unsupported from underneath. Doing this would dramatically increase the

risk of dropping the container, which could lead to damaging my tractor, the aircraft, or even injuring one of the crewmen on the ground.

As I lifted the container back off the ground, one of the crewmen jumped up on the unoccupied fork, grasping the side of the thousand-pound container, in what I can only guess was an attempt to balance it amidst the turbulence and debris. I was breaking every safety rule ever invented. *Great, I'm going to kill this guy.*

With a little skill and lots of luck, we pulled off the risky maneuver. I backed away from the aircraft, relieved the job was over. From a comfortable distance, I watched the V-22 Osprey's incredible engines power back up, and the cloud of earth surrounded it once more. By the time the dust settled, the aircraft was nowhere to be seen...

This was just one of hundreds of experiences I had in the military with impressive and powerful vehicles and equipment. As my enlistment ended in 2016, I had to think about what was next for me. The impression these American machine's left on me eventually led to my decision to return to school and pursue a career in mechanical engineering. When people ask me about my time in the Marine Corps, these are some stories that come to mind, and the memories that inspire me still.

Judge's Comments

This piece was an unexpectedly intense recounting of what on the surface seems like an insignificant task, but, as the author explains, has big implications both for his Marine corps unit and his future. This compelling look at the incidental circumstances which led the writer to determine his path makes interesting use of metaphor, simile, and internal monologue to bring the reader into his story.

Third Place Essay

2016 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Tangent of Ninety
Altair Boonraksa

“If you give someone who is starving half a pie, but you want them to return a whole pie, what can you expect from them? Or would they be happy to return a half of a pie for a half that you gave? If, however, you give someone who is starving half a pie and expect nothing in return, how much happiness do you think they will have?” It was during a short break that my teacher asked this question in my math class. I did not have much expertise in math back then; I was only a 5th grade kid wearing a white school uniform and red trousers, sitting in a classroom full of prodigies. My friends started to chirp one answer after another while I sat in silence, quietly thinking about the solution. In the end, however, no one could answer the question correctly. Not even my genius curly-haired friend could give the right answer. Confusing and frustrating as this was, the teacher finally said, “The answer is infinity.” Infinity, I thought. What is that? I had never even heard of it before. The word resounded in my mind like a car alarm in the middle of the night. The word captivated me. Was it a number, a letter, or only a response that people gave when no one knew the answer? I kept trying to understand the notion. This word, once I heard, it became a part of me, haunting me and demanding to be explained. It is a concept I still wrestle with.

I went to the first floor of my new school to start one Monday as an 8th grader. The rain was falling lazily from the edge of the roof to the ground. The sky was filled with grey, slow-moving clouds that seemed reluctant to leave. It was on that day that I first met a girl. She was sitting patiently, waiting for the classroom door to open. She was holding a textbook on her lap with a sweet smile on her face as I greeted her. Her name was Tika. I sat beside her and chatted a bit about classes and about the life around us. We talked about this new school of ours, about the surrounding objects and people, and about her favorite subject, math. This revelation surprised me. How could someone have math as their favorite subject? To me, the subject was such a nuisance that I could not imagine it being anyone’s favorite. I wondered why she liked it so much. During the day, there was a math class in 3rd hour. I sat 3 desks behind Tika and slightly to the right. At first, I didn’t believe that she really liked math; I thought she had only said that because she wanted to sound different. I therefore observed her behavior from distance. I was stunned to see the truth. She really had a genuine enthusiasm and zeal for the subject. She seemed to understand everything the teacher said. Meanwhile, I was confused about how x and y could relate to each other in a paper of lines and squares. I tried to figure a way out of my predicament, so I came up with a plan.

After school ended, I decided to borrow Tika’s math textbook, using the sad excuse that I didn’t have a textbook of my own. It was this way that I brought Tika’s book home to examine. Sitting on a porch on a rainy afternoon, I flipped through page after page. The gentle breeze and the sound of drizzle soothed me as I kept on reading. There were many pencil strokes and doodles on the folios. I began to get bored trying to

decipher the numbers and letters that seemed to have been placed randomly in the book. As I kept paging on, however, something dazzled me. It was in the section on graphs and functions. One graph in particular caught my attention. It was the tangent graph. This graph looked so innocent, yet it was mischievous. It was a combination of a typical wave graph and another graph called sine and cosine. The resulting tangent graph, however, was something different. It started from zero, curving its way up to something so high, the book couldn't even record it. Then it went to the very bottom of the page without even touching the last point of the graph as the other graphs did. I didn't think that it was a legal graph to draw. After a few minutes of silent contemplation, I decided to ask Tika about it the next day.

The next day came swiftly. I was so curious that I itched to ask Tika about the tangent graph. As on the day before, I met her early in the morning to chat. The only difference was that, this time, the sky was bright and filled with small white clouds that loitered beneath the endless blue firmament. There was a bustle in the halls, but I wasn't interested in any of the people around us. Eager for answers, I shared with Tika my thoughts about that one graph. I wasted no time and went straight to the point. At first she frowned, but then her brow cleared. With her familiar smile, she explained to me, "It is the tangent of ninety, and the result is infinity." Infinity was a word that had haunted me for the past 3 years, and here it was again, unexpectedly from the lips of a girl. She was not a teacher; she was just an ordinary student attending the same math class as me. She was starting from the bottom, just as I was, wearing the same uniform as everyone else. How could she know something I didn't—something I had been seeking for years? I asked her how she could possibly know that. She told me that she had learned about it from the same book I had borrowed the night before. Seeing that I was troubled, she advised me to be patient and to learn more. She encouraged me to read the book once again, concentrate on what I was looking for, and try and work it out by myself. And so I did. That evening, I spent the whole night looking for the answer. I pored over the book and drew the tangent graph over and over. After ten pages and six hours of drawing, I still couldn't find the answer. The mystery continued to elude me.

Out of curiosity, I decided to ask my mom about it. It was when we were on our way to pick up my sister from her school. My mom drove our black family van, and I was sitting next to her on a fairly hot day. She chose the road with tree canopies up above to shield us from the sun's heat. "Mom, what is infinity?" I asked her innocently. She answered my question with a story about her past, and as she did so, I sat listening with patience. She told me about the first time she left her home village. She had had a dream to move to a big city to start a new life, but no one seemed to believe in her, not even her own family. They kept saying that she wouldn't be successful living in a harsh life in a big city as a woman. They discouraged her in every way imaginable. In spite of this, however, she decided to leave her village and move to the city of Jakarta. She struggled at first. She had to live by selling a stock of peanuts, and she slept next to them in order to protect her capital. After a couple of years, she had earned enough money for her family to live comfortably. She convinced all of her five sisters and her mother to come and live with her in this new life.

They all did well in the big city, and it became a new home for all of them. As my mother spoke, I kept on listening, waiting for the end of her story. Finally, she decided to answer my question. "Infinity is like a dream," she said. "It is a series of struggles that no

one can count. It looks like a letter that no one would ever believe. It is a term that looks so real, yet it describes something that is imaginary. It feels like a passion, but it tastes like a bitter gourd, and once you give up on reaching it, you will never find out what the real meaning of life is. Why? Because we live in uncertainty, in a world with billions of people and an infinite number of opportunities. Dreams and reality might look like opposite waves, but if you really strive for them, you'll find that they are one. The result is inconceivable."

"Opposite waves; find that they are one." I thought of the two phrases for quite a long time. It brought me back to my thoughts about the graphs. Sine and cosine really did look like waves, and tangent, that was the result of it. Curving up towards the infinity, it was like the uncertainty of life, but higher than anything else. It started from the bottom and made a solid state at one forty-five-degree angle. It kept going up until it got closer and closer to ninety, but it never touched it. Why? I've been thinking about this for a while. I feel that I have finally reached a conclusion. As long as we live, there will never be an end to our dreams, and our hopes and struggles to reach each and every one of them. One dream might be completed now, but to sustain it, there may be even more struggles ahead. To reach perfection as a human being is not possible. The closest we can get is toward the ninety-degree angle, the angle of perfection and the limit of human nature.

I learned all of this only because I was curious about a concept: infinity. One symbol in math taught me about life. A graph showed me the path I should take to make all my dreams come true. I developed my contemplation of math into a passion, a hobby, an escape from boredom. Like my friend Tika suggested, I approached each problem with passion and patience. I dug as deep as I could until I could see the tip of the root of a problem. It is so that I know how someone discovered the concept in the first place, just like my mom's story. The way to find the meaning of life and reach infinite happiness can be different for different people—not only in math, but in languages, in the arts, in farming, and in everything else. For me, I think I have found the way to reach them. It is the tangent of ninety.

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.