

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2017**

2017 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

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Bay de Noc Community College

First Place Poetry 2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

These are My Hands
Deborah C. Springstead

These are my hands.

They remind me of my youth. These protruding wrist bones remind me of the numerous front walkovers and back handsprings to which I've subjected my body. This ragged, faded scar on my wrist reminds me of summer camp, a time that was blissfully free from peer pressure, and divorcing parents. These callouses around my finger nails remain from a nervous habit that developed during the awkwardness of puberty. When I manicure my nails, I remember the summer that I turned 13, and my mother first let me wear iridescent pink nail polish.

These are my hands.

They're clever hands. From a cute math teacher, they learned how to count from 0 to 31 in binary. From the back cover of a Helen Keller biography, they learned the American Sign Language alphabet. From my father, they learned how to pick up a single grain of rice with chopsticks. From my baby sitter, my hands learned how to carefully craft origami. My index fingers know precisely how to hold my tongue in order to whistle, and silence an unruly crowd. My hands love to thread crochet snowflakes for friends.

These are my hands.

They remind me of my mother's hands, which are graceful and expressive when she speaks. Hands that used to glide effortlessly over the keyboard when typing term papers for classmates at college. Hands that used to knit sweaters, and play folk songs on guitar. Hands that love painting with watercolors. Hands that are failing her with age and Parkinson's, as they may one day fail me.

These are my hands.

They are also my mother's hands, and were her mother's hands before her. I wonder how many women before me have been blessed with these graceful, dexterous hands. How many women before me have used them to prepare meals, plant gardens, restore furniture, darn socks, and pen letters? When I look at these hands I think of all of the women who have had them before me, and am grateful.

These are my hands.

I love these hands.

Judge's Comments

Great use of poetic refrain. The writer is sentimental, almost romantic, in tone and nature. The use of memory and its impact on the narrator stands out. Good reflective qualities in the poem's narrative style.

Second Place Poetry
2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Promise Bridge
Leah J. Moore

A pensive walk, a lonely road.
Thoughts revealed,
stories untold.

Through the mist
as I ponder my journey, an
object appears stretching
out before me.

An unkempt bridge amidst
branches and vine,
weathered, beaten, ravaged from time.

Rotting board, fraying rope.
Dare I risk it? Or
give up hope?

I take the first step and in the silence I hear
my heart screaming out,
pounding with fear.

The bridge, so unsteady, creaks
loudly and groans.
Yet my eyes are averted to an illuminating glow.

I press onward, unknowing.
The challenge unnerving.
Is the goal worth the risk? Is my motive self-serving?

The glow in the distance, now brims with sunlight.
My steps become quicker.
My grip not-so-tight.

A soft wind whispers, "keep going, almost there".
It untangles my prejudices and
they vanish in air.

I step off the bridge, unto solid ground.
The darkness behind me, my
confidence, new-found.

The sun stretches endlessly like the horizon at sea.
A promise of a future
now waiting for me.

My spirit, like the bridge, once
broken and unsteady, now
steadfast and sure
for I know I am ready...

to let go of the past and the bridges I've burned
for a new bridge of promise, and a future
I've yearned.

This journey, my quest, wrought
with obstacles and tears,
was a soul-cleansing bath washing over my fears.

For that walk up the road, led me up to a ridge to
a bright, shining future
when I crossed the Promise Bridge.

Judge's Comments

Great use of descriptive language to show conflict, internal struggle(s). Tension builds as the narrator struggles to move on and beyond his/her current condition (situation) into a better place.

Third Place Poetry
2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Suburban Eden
Daniel Parker

Despite the two-story houses
Peeking over
I like to think
That the whole world
Is contained within this fence
A backyard
With its simple garden
And minimal consequence
Where barking dogs
Are the only eminent threat
Lying on my back
On a wooden deck
Feet just dipping into
The cool night grass
I need to believe
That the clouds pass
And the moon winks
Not to the general viewing audience
But just to this small square
Moreover
That it is not a reflective satellite
Gazing down at me
But the very eye of God
Affirming His creation

Judge's Comments

Simple, yet powerful. Good use of imagery and language to convey feeling and meaning. The narrator is in a solitary place and state of mind, but also aware of the world around.

First Place Fiction

2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Play the Game
Nora Duncan

7:42. The perpetual ticking of the clock dominates all other sounds. I stand in the front room allotted for incoming draftees. It's too early for the new dawn to find its way through the windows, and management must have decided it wasn't worth switching on every light. So, we are left standing in a groggy twilight. Though there's more than a hundred other young adults in the room, silence conquers over conversation. Most of us decide to lean against the hard walls, happy to stay near the room's edges.

8:00. Someone who looks as if they're in charge walks in and gives instructions. Everyone falls into line, and files down a hallway. Then we stop. I peer past the person in front of me as we hold our place. At the head of our row, a man at a desk, with checklist in hand, finds the name of the boy standing in front of him. He asks for his identification, his papers, and his calculator. After glancing over all three items, he directs the boy to join one of the lines down the hall. And so he sorts through each of the conscripts in front of him, until he comes to me. I fumble around in my bag and plop my belongings onto the desk.

"Duncan?" he asks not looking up.

"Nora Duncan," I say. He looks up at me for a second, then puts an "X" by my name on his sheet.

"Your line is down the hall and to the right: surnames A through J," he says. I wonder if there's any way of getting out of this now - any possible hope. But, there's nothing for it. It must be done.

"Well," I say to myself, "at least this war is one that will be over with by lunchtime."

8:11. We are numbered off and directed to individual desks. We arrange our calculators and pencils beside us - and wait. I glance around the room at the others. There's a smart-looking, senior in front of me, and a girl my age to the left. Across the room, I see a small, wide-eyed boy hardly old enough to be in high-school at all. He fiddles with his #2 pencil. I silently wish them well. We are all in the same struggle together. But in the back of my mind, I can't help but remember: *it's my score against theirs.*

8:19. "Alright," a woman interrupts the silence. "Fill out your information, and then we can start testing," she says as she passes out the standardized test worksheets. "We will begin with the reading test. You have sixty-five minutes." I sit tall in my chair, but I find my drumming foot against the floor mirrors the tempo of the beating in my ribcage. The reading test.

8:31. Complete silence. "You may break the seal of your booklet," we are told. I stare straight ahead like a recruit peering out from his trench. "You have until 9:36. You may begin." Covers are ripped off in unison, like the first wave of an attack. My eyes meet pages soaked in words. I stumble over them in a mad rush to get to the other side of the passage.

I fall. "Wait, what is it saying?" I find that though I have spent the last minute battling the words, I understand nothing. I get back up and start over, but the words pummel me like a

thousand bullets.

“What does it feel like?” someone sitting next to me asks. I jerk around. In that moment, I find that I am six years old sitting next to my Dad on our couch, wearing my pink nightgown, patterned with pineapples. The book *Charlotte's Web* rests on my lap. Water droplets reveal where tears had fallen on the pages. “What does it feel like when you read, Nora?” my Dad asks again. The pages ebb and flow as I turn them, a sea of words overwhelming me.

“It feels like,” I start, “like I’m drowning.”

Dad puts his arm around me, “Kiddo, why’s that?” “Every time I read, I go under water. I can’t breathe.”

My Dad sighs, “Well, let’s slow down, focus on only this paragraph, and breath at every comma, ok?”

I sniffle a little. “Ok.”

I turn back down to my page.

8:37. I tread over the words. I find they reveal a short biography and account of the musical career of Louis Armstrong. Over ridge and valley, the words go, but I keep running. Finally I reach the other side of the page and scamper to fill out the questions relating to the passage. Then I see the neat row of lead circles falling down my chart to my right.

8:46. I turn the page. This one’s about the ecology of Yellowstone National Park, with a focus on the linear relationship between wolf and bear populations. I run into it, ready to face off against both the wolves and bears alike. I get far. I’m more than halfway through.

8:52. I’m jogging, when my eyes fall out of focus. Then there’s a graph. It doesn’t seem to correlate with the passage at all. I try streaming it through my brain, but both the numbers and the words are now tangled in one big, barbed-wire mess. I look ahead to the questions, hoping to swipe up some easy points. But they only twist my brain more. I must reread everything to sort it out. But only one word surfaces in my mind, and it’s not one that’s seen in the text.

“Dyslexia,” I hear, “Do you know what dyslexia is?” I look up to meet the face of Mrs. Lopez. I am back in middle school, sitting in my reading tutor’s snug office. I have just arrived for my weekly session. I have a page of words and numbers in front of me, which she had just instructed me to read aloud. She readjusts her round-rimmed glasses that hug her circular face. Her long, jet-black hair is parted in a straight line before it cascades over her shoulders. She thinks for a minute, then in her thick Filipino accent reports, “I noticed a few things about your reading.” I watch a ladybug crawl up the wall behind her. “Do you see this number?” she points to a space with a 57, “You said this was 75.”

“Oh,” I state. The ladybug has reached the top of the wall now, and starts crawling on the ceiling.

“You did this with several other numbers on this list, as well as with a few words,” she evaluates, “this is called ‘dyslexia.’” Now the ladybug falls. It manages to catch itself back on the wall. “Do you know what that means?” Mrs. Lopez asks me. I finally force myself to look her in the face, and am met by her gentle, relaxed eyes. “It means that you are going to be a great reader,” she said, “You are just going to need to

really focus." Then to my complete horror, she pulls out two thick books and slaps them on the table. One's a chapter book, the others a dictionary. "Why don't we start reading a story," she slides the books forward, "and if ever you find a word you don't know, you can look it up in here." I try to smile, but search the room for a clock. How long until half an hour of this is over? "Just remember," Mrs. Lopez's voice pulls me back to the lesson, "I want you to focus. Read every word carefully. Even the small ones. Every word counts in a good story."

8:54. One question at a time, the passage unfolds. Some answers come from obscure paragraphs in the passage, the answer being only distinguishable from the other choices by a single word.

9:00. I read a narrative about a crab fisherman and his grandson. I actually enjoy the fourth passage, which tells about an early 20th century photographer who made it her goal to photograph the rough terrains of the Arctic.

I have one passage left. I turn the page and find that's it's on the history of radiation and the development of microwaves.

"You have ten minutes left," we are told. My head jerks up. Most of the others are done already, looking bored in their seats. The clock says 9:26. I start feeling my breath quicken. My eyes can't rest - they jump from one place on the page to another. I cannot hear anything. My ears are too shell-shocked from the blasts of defeat firing in my mind. I don't know where to start. I don't know what to do.

9:27. I throw down my dull #2 pencil. "That's it!" I yell. "I'm done! I hate this system."

I'm done fighting their fight. They file you into a line, march you down a hall, assign you a number, and punch you into their computers. They say you're worth your work, and then they spell out that worth in dollar signs!"

I stop for a second to breath. I look up, and find that I'm transported back four months before the draft. I'm at home with my previous ACT results in hand. They had just arrived in the mail, and are less than ideal. Mom is next to me in the kitchen, listening to me rattle off against the system. I stop and sign. "I'm sorry," I say, "I cannot do this. If only it wasn't for - time."

Mom looks at me, then pulls me close. Her hug transports me back to being a little girl, when the hardest thing to read was Doctor Suess. "Oh, Nora," she says, "You're worth is not in this test. No one's worth is. It's a broken system." She stops for a moment, "You are an excellent reader. You digest things. You have had to learn to focus when you read more than most, and because of that, you read differently. You remember words, and dwell on words, and find meaning in words that no one else sees."

I listen to what she says, and in an instant, am flooded with memories of all that I have read. Picture books, chapter books, essays, reports, poems, and tests - I can remember from years ago clearly. Individual lines in a story, single shots in a film, certain lyrics in a song - I hear and see it all. And I realize that indeed, the way I have learned to read has made me who I am.

"That," Mom continues, "they will never be able to put into dollar signs." I fall into a long-awaited sigh. Then, straightening up she says, "But, right now, we need what the system can give us. And what the system wants is this test. If they want you to play this game, you are going to play the game." I feel myself standing up straight, like a soldier when hearing the anthem. "And if after you've given it everything you've got, and you're

not at the end, I couldn't be prouder."

9:27. My thoughts place me back in my seat. The piece is composed of two passages, written by two different authors - one about the invention of microwaves, and the other on our use of radiation in everyday life. I chose the first one, and fly through it. 9:31. I answer as many questions as I can from the first passage, then move on to the second. It's harder to understand. 9:33. I jump to questions I can answer without much reading. 9:34. There's only two questions left. I read them over, and rush back to look for their answers. 9:35. I find them. I stare at my page with columns of lead circles randomly divided under either A, B, C, D, or E. They stand like bullet-shots fired at a range, and fall all the way down to the finish line. 9:36.

Judge's Comments

The narrator provides the reader a riveting narrative of what she faces in her struggle with dyslexia. The story is minute-by-minute account of her journey through a reading test, with flashbacks to her earlier challenges in reading. She learns that, for now, she must "play the game" the system requires in order to move forward.

Second Place Fiction

2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Cricket in a Jar
Joshua Hillary

The silhouette of trees swayed against the silver moon, the gentle breeze brushing down the hillside, along the cloudy river bed and through the pasture, blowing against the tall grass with crickets hopping—chirping—as Jim lounges on the porch—silent—bottle of moonshine in hand, painting the scene in his head before it’s all gone. The vast violet horizon sprawling across his hazel eyes. He’s wearing the same mangy overalls, overcoat, and Trilby that he had worn before his untimely departure some years prior. And together, we watch as an orchestra of crickets leap up between the blades of grass, reciting a prayer to the night-sky as they depart on their exodus into the hazy emerald beyond.

I tap Jim on the shoulder, pointing at them “You remember Pa’s story about crickets?” Jim blinks, shaking away the head-fog and rubbing his knuckles against his sand-paper cheek. “What’s that?” He says, taking a swig from his jar.

“The crickets... Pa’s story?”

“It’s been a long time...” He says, leaning further back into his chair, tipping his hat over his eyes.

“He used to tell us about the china-man he met, carried crickets around in a cage for good luck.”

“Pa never met no china-man...”

“Well, even so, you think it’s possible?”

He tilts his head up, the side of his eye peeking from under the hat’s brim “What’s possible?”

“That crickets are good fortune.”

He giggles to himself, quickly erupting into a gut laugh. “I don’t believe in too much these days, Liam. But, I ‘specially don’t believe something holed up in a cage has good fortune.”

“Do you think it could bring good fortune?”

“Course not... Look, a cricket does exactly what it looks like it does, and nothing more.

That goes for most things. Trying to see something that’s not right in front of you is a waste a time. It’ll get your brain all twisted up. You want a real fortune? I got some sitting right here in my grasp.” He lifts the glass to his eyes, rotating it with his fingers, watching the colors morph as the light passes through. “folks will pay a pretty penny for this... the nectar of truth—I call it.”

We sit for a moment in silence and I dangle my head between my knees. He takes his hat off, slicks back his hair and then returns it to his head, shifting his weight so that his chair angles towards mine “I know, it’s a sad fact—there’s not much mystery left in this world... but, that is why God has graced us with an over-abundance of grain alcohol—that of which we can drown our sorrows until kingdom come.” He gestures to me with the Mason jar. I grab the sweaty bottle from him, lifting it to my mouth. The fumes swirling out sending shivers up my nose. I take a drink and it burns my throat. I cough, sending the clear liquid misting into the air, stinging my lips and soaking my clothes. Jim roars with laughter.

“The truth’s difficult to swallow, isn’t it?” He grins, and for the first time I can see his jagged yellow teeth like a palisade protruding from his gums. It was rare to find Jim smiling these days, he kept his lips sealed tight like a bear trap—widening only when he meant to.

I screw the lid back onto the jar, grimacing as I hand it back. We laugh together—remembering better days—until our laughter dissolves “So, when are you taking off?”

“A few colleagues of mine coming to pick me up at dawn.”

I wilt my head again and he scrambles my hair around with his mitt “You’ll be alright.”

“Hey, Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“You think Pa’s still out there somewhere?”

Jim looks up past the river and trees, taking a moment before he answers “I’ll be honest with you since

you're getting older... I'm pretty sure he died out there... I know how much you miss him an' all, but that's the truth."

I rub the back of my hand across my wet eyes.

"They never found his body. But, if we're being honest with ourselves, he ain't alive.

He's been gone 6 years, he hasn't turned up by now, may as well be dead."

We both sit staring into the tree filled hills, listening to the song of crickets and the cries of the cicada, lain overtop the cacophony of noises rattling from the woods.

"I'm sorry." Jim whispers. "Here, I'll make you a bet. You finish the rest of this here 'shine and I'll let you keep the jar. You can catch your damn cricket too, so the least I can say is I left you with some good fortune."

A smile stretches across my face and I snatch the jar from his hand, taking a deep breath before guzzling what's left of the liquor. My body shivers from top to bottom, and back up again, the hair follicles standing on their hind legs. I close my eyes—twitching—until the tremors are gone. Shaking it off and holding my gut so that I don't expel it across the porch-floor-planks. Jim starts clapping wildly "Oh shit! I'll be damned." I laugh and choke at the same time. "You're a man now!" He exclaims. My eyes water, growing red with veins.

I recall having bloodshot eyes the day Jim returned at the train-station six years ago. He was waiting in a neatly ironed uniform—stiff. The train smoke pouring over him—enshrouding him in a billow of fog. His eyes peeking through, unmoved, as if he could see straight through.

Momma dropped my hand and ran ahead. His expression never faltered. Despite the pain behind his eyes, I envied what he had. 'You're a man.' Those immortal words. Pa had always said that war made men out of boys—and thus Jim became a man—even though Pa was dead long before he could tell him so.

Hugh's porch-chair creaks as he leans back into it "I'd wash that bottle out before you catch anything if I was you. Poke some holes in the lid." Jim says, as he pulls out a little blade, holding out his other hand. I hand him the lid and he begins twisting the blade tip over it. "Remember, don't tell Momma I let you drink."

"She won't find out anyways, she never leaves her room anymore since Pa—and since you took off... She goes to work, comes home and just locks herself in her room. It gets pretty quiet around here." I huff.

I could still recall the aroma. Momma used to cook the four of us breakfast: eggs, sausage, bacon, and beans. It used to wake me up, lulling me from my slumber. Pa would be holding a pipe in his mustachioed mouth, sitting at the table, stuffing crushed tobacco in the chamber with his index finger.

We didn't say much—heck, we didn't need to. Our silence was alive and thumping. Silence can sound so different at times. One moment it's the gap between the high notes, and other times it's the sound of nothing left worth singing.

"Are you going to talk to her before you take off?" I ask, Jim.

"Don't make no difference whether I want to or not." He says, leaning forward in his chair. He grabs a strand of hair with his two fingers and shoves it back beneath his hat.

"I wish you'd stay."

"If I sit still, I'll never start moving again..."

After pouring out the mason jar, I roll up my pant-legs and stumble barefoot into the weeds, dipping the jar into the dirt to catch crickets, but they've stopped singing. I sit completely still, attempting to lull them into a false sense of safety before I pounce.

I close my eyes while I wait and the world starts to spin like a carousel. I stifle my gag reflex and listen close—the grass rustles. I open my eyes and swing the jar wild, dirt kicking up into the air. I lose my balance and toss my jar, bashing my head against the sod. As I lay—back to the grass—I take a moment to wipe the sweat from my brow, watching the tattered midnight clouds pass overhead.

I can hear Jim, clapping as I lift myself up. I sit with my arms propped back like kickstands, and I eye my bottle—a nymph hops inside. I slam the lid down and lift the jar to have a gander, my mouth wide in shock. His antenna twitches like he's tuning into a fuzzy radio station, his five eyes staring back.

A loud—boom—echoes from across the hills, the sound ricocheting off the barn, the trees, and the

river, making it difficult to decipher its location. Jim stands up from his seat and a flock of birds flee from distant tree-tops, cooing as they sail out into the darkness.

I hobble inside and set my cricket down on the table.

I grab my rifle from the shed and sling it over my shoulder and when I return to the porch, Jim's still staring out into the woods.

"That was close. The heck was that?" I ask.

"Gunshot."

"I'm going to check it out. You coming?"

"I'll miss my ride... It's probably just some hunter got lost." I check the rifle chamber for ammunition "Shit, I need bullets."

"I don't think you should go by yourself, Liam." "I've done everything myself for the last six years."

Jim has a look of guilt in his eyes. He shakes his head "Try and get back before your Momma wakes up."

"She's your Momma too."

I run inside the house, rummaging through drawers, cabinets, shelves, closets and I can't find a damn thing. I storm the kitchen—and Momma is leaning against the door frame—dead silent with a cigarette between her lips. Her eyes are wrinkled and yellow, dried out from years of staring at the smolder. The smoke obscures them, twirling out of her mouth and into the cracked window above the sink. I can't see her eyes anymore, but I know she's staring at me, I can feel it, her infernal gaze setting fire to my eyes until I can do nothing but avert them. Jim walks in right behind me, "You find th—," stopping dead in his tracks at the sight of Momma. She doesn't say a word.

"Hi, Ma." Jim says, stepping one foot inside the door-way, the other on the crease.

Momma, looks at Jim, then looks back at me. "Come here, boy." I walk over to Momma, with my head hanging between my shoulders. "Give it here." I hand her the rifle. She takes it and leans it against the table beside her. She takes one final drag of her cigarette and drills it into the ashtray until it folds up like a snake, exhaling one last time before its heart goes black and gray.

She grabs the lower half of my jaw with her palm; she moves my head from side to side, peering over me. She shoves my head to let me go, and then smacks me across the cheek, turning me red and making my eye tear up. "Go to your room." She commands.

"He can take care himself." Jim whips back, inching his other foot in the door-way.

"And who are you?" She says, laughing in awe as she holds her forehead against her hand.

"You think you know something about this boy, here?" She says, leaning her head in towards Jim.

"He's my brother."

"Well, isn't that a lovely sentiment?"

Momma turns to Liam—frozen in place. "Where do you think you're running off to anyways with that cannon?"

"We heard a gunshot."

Momma breathes in deep, she widens her nostrils several times like a rodent and then looks over at my mason jar and then at Jim "You got the nerve to pop up—poof—like nothing after six god damn years and corrupt the only son I got left!"

"I gave him a sip, Momma."

"Don't call me that! Don't you dare. I never birthed no criminal—you got no right to call me that... I need you to get out... Now."

"I'm leaving at sun-up anyways."

"That sounds about right, stick ta what you know best." She makes a shooing motion with her hands and then points at me "I told you to be on your way!"

I readjust myself, pouting my chest "No."

"Look who wants to be a man."

"He's been the man since I left." Jim says, folding his arms across his chest. "Is that what he told you?"

"He didn't need to."

"Did he also tell you we're going to have to give up the house and move into the city?"

“What do you mean?” He asks.

“There aren’t too many jobs in the mountains for women or lame-boys.” Momma says, glaring at me.

Jim looks over at me, squinting his eyes.

“He can’t cook, he can’t hunt, he can’t farm, he can’t clean. Your father never taught him how to do nothing, he wasted it all on you. Now I’m left with a lame-boy. Can’t do shit besides ask questions and collect up trash like this.” She picks up my cricket jar from the table and eyes Jim.

She winds up and chucks the jar—it whizzes past Jim’s head—shattering the cabinet window and bursting into pieces against the kitchen floor.

Jim looks down at the damage and sighs. He opens the door and walks onto the porch, his boots crunching over the debris. The bottom of the jar creaks as it rocks upon the kitchen floor. The cricket hops out from underneath the lid, shifting his antenna around before bolting for the door. Momma tries to stomp it as it dashes away. Her foot becoming bloody as she steps on the glass and the shards slide into her flesh.

The cricket escapes through the swinging screen door and Momma shrinks to the ground, holding her head. She picks the pieces of glass from her heel, holding her breath before each.

“I’m leaving!” I scream, grabbing my rifle.

“Why do you want to go out there, what’s your fixation?” Momma asks.

“Because...”

“Because, why?” “Because, what if it’s Pa?”

Jim walks back in and passes me another Jar, its got a new cricket inside. The edge drains from Momma’s voice, her face turning dark and red, and her posture relaxing. “Is that what this is about?” Momma pauses “Harlan’s dead. Your Pa’s dead, sweetheart.” She leans in. “Going out there is useless. I’m sorry, I didn’t have the heart to tell either a you, but it seems I have to now. Search party found his body a few months after he disappeared. Dead as dixie. Gone.”

“You’re a liar.” Jim says, tightening his lips.

Their voices start to fade into a murmur and my head starts spinning, I quietly make my way to bed, meandering like a ghost with one hand against the wall, my stomach in the other. I crack the window, rest my cricket on the mantel, and collapse onto the mattress, pulling the sheets over my head.

The door creaks as Momma and Jim step outside, I can still hear the faint muffled sounds of them arguing from my bedroom. I can hear Mama start to cry, and as the grandfather clock’s pendulum swings—tick-tock—the voices start to blend together, along with the chirps of the crickets, like a bunch of ingredients mixing together to make a head-spinning gumbo, slowly becoming one singular sound as I descend into the dark fog of sleep.

The clock chimes ring and I rise to look out of my window, using my hand to shade my eyes. The sun is rising above the hills, spilling light through the cracks in the trees and turning the river pink, casting the harsh shadow of Jim’s hat against his eyes as he holds the rifle over his shoulder, marching into the woods. He looks at me out of the side of his eye, and proceeds, getting smaller and smaller as he descends into the tree filled hills, towards the sound of the mysterious gunshot. I wish I could follow him.

Judge's Comments

This story reveals the poignant reality for two brothers who find out their Pa is dead after years of waiting. The author employs gritty language to describe the boys’ separate pain and their mother’s desolation, while using the ironic metaphor of the cricket as good luck.

Third Place Fiction

2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

I Still Love You
Ann Hosler

I'm sitting at my desk when my daughter bursts into the house after school. Immediately I'm met with tears and a demand. "Mom, I want to go to Taylor's house!"

"You know that's not how you ask for things, Sara. We talked about it this morning, and her mother needs to call me first so I know there's a parent there."

Sara glares and continues to cry.

"Go calm down for a few minutes in your room, then we can discuss it," I sigh.

She charges across the den and into her room, which is right beside my desk, and slams the door shut. I hear her backpack flung into the wall, stomping feet, huffing tears, a tiny fist punching a pillow. A six-year-old is not the easiest of humans to reason with.

Several minutes pass by and she quiets down, the occasional shaky breath and sob escaping. I hear the tearing of paper and another minute of quiet. The sound of something getting shoved beneath her door grabs my attention, and I see her fingertips retreat from a folded piece of paper. Scooping it up, I read:

Too Mom Form Sara

If you don't let me go some war then I well cep on crying.

I'm grateful that she's practicing her writing, but this wasn't exactly how I anticipated discussing the matter. But if that's what she wants...

Sara, If you keep crying, then I will keep not letting you go anywhere!

Sliding it under her door, I realize this isn't my most mature moment, but maybe this will open an actual dialogue? Her reply scrapes across the worn blue carpet about a minute later. I sit down by the door, realizing this may take longer than anticipated.

So well I stopped crying.

I smile and pen my reply. She's not going to like it.

You're still not going today because her mother never called me.

Sniffing resumes on the other side of the door. A few minutes pass by without a response, so I sit back in front of my computer and continue my work. I'm startled a short while later when the door opens a crack and a new piece of paper is thrown out. Her arm snakes back inside as the door snicks shut.

Please call her back. I am sad

Well, that's a reasonable entreaty, isn't it? Now we're getting to manners, and that's what I was hoping for. I start jotting down an affirmative.

Fine, I will try.

But then my logical side gets the best of me, and I decide to throw in some friendly advice as well.

You shouldn't get a new piece of paper for every note, because you will run out of paper quickly.

Judge's Comments

A poignant account of a mother helping her six-year-old daughter learn self-control in the face of disappointment. This little story masterfully illustrates both a mother's love and patience and the impact of seeing her child learn a valuable life lesson, all in the name of love.

First Place Essay

2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Egypt
Bashair Pasha

In Egypt, there's a popular nationalistic song my mom used to play around the house when I was a kid called what translates to *Egypt is My Mother*. It's patriotic, sung in a serious, deep baritone, and uniformed kids in school listen to it sometimes after singing the national anthem. Whenever I heard it playing through the tinny speakers in our small Chicago apartment as a kid, there was a line in it that captured my imagination out of all the lyrics: *Even my skin is the hue of wheat*. I never considered this might mean to have tan, North African skin. My mind always conjured the image of wheat colored skin as something much more special. To me, it meant golden skin, it was skin that was kissed by the sun, even in darkness. I always imagined this as I lay my back on our cheap, scratchy carpet listening to old Arabic women crooning through the radio.

I leave my homeland at the tender age of three and come to America, and for so many years of my life I spend my time trying to truly leave my country behind me. I watch American movies, and dread talking to my relatives back home. Two times a year I get handed a phone, and try to have conversations in a language I rarely speak with a grandmother or an uncle, people who have fond memories of the day you were born, the way you took your first steps, and I try to connect to them. I don't know how. In school, I am one of the two colored girls, and I try to avoid the required questions someone like me gets asked in a predominantly white area. I am ten years old, and I don't want to answer. I always pretend I don't know.

When I turn seventeen, I go back to Egypt for the first time in fourteen years, and find it waiting for me in all its glory: a grand old lady, with a history so complex I cannot begin to understand it. As I step out of the airport and into Cairo, I am overcome with a desperation. I feel the earth beneath me warping itself to make space for me, like my footsteps are softer here. I wish, so unexpectedly, that I had never left. That I had never become a stranger to a place I pushed away, but had never left me.

I meet my family again, and hear the same stories I heard over the phone for so many years, only now I am not yelling over the phone trying to comprehend someone as their voice cuts out every two words. Instead, my grandmother is holding my hand, and telling me about the day of my birth. Instead, my uncle is taking me to the Nile, the river everyone in my village calls the ocean. We sit and watch the women washing their dishes on the shore, and the young kids skipping rocks. I meet a boy, and I learn more about what I have left behind, and try to forget that I'll be leaving soon.

He stands tall, looking like six feet of eternal sunshine and I am the ground beneath his feet. He gives so much, and I take and take. He takes my breath away. His fingertips leave fingerprints on the curves of my wrist, and I can think of nothing but tracing the small galaxy of scattered freckles across his cheeks. I can barely see them where we stand outside the Cairo airport, faces washed out in the warm glow of the old street lamps. We're lucky tonight, that the electricity is running. We lean against a railing outside, waiting for my flight to be called. It is humid, but the night is incredibly calm. I ignore a sadness I know is within me: I know this is the last time I will be in Egypt for a very long time, but he does not. I want to tell him. Instead, we play silly games to pass the time until I must go. We can't sit inside, the security guard standing outside the doors tells us, because there is no room in the airport. Through the glass doors we can see that all the seats are empty. I want to be angry. He

laughs, because being a second-class citizen in his own country is something he's grown used to, and I am still learning. He dares me, childishly, to ask the guard in English why we can't wait inside. I do, and the guard stumbles in his reply to me, surprised at my fluent English, another reminder I am not really from here. I don't notice in the moment. I am caught up instead in the awe with which he watches my lips form words that are foreign to him, and I try not to forget what I'm saying.

I tie knot after knot within myself every time I look at him, and I realize I am in the middle of this thing before I know it has begun. Even after this is over, after I have left and I assume he has forgotten, he is a poem I am constantly changing; he is the ghost heart of the empty space next to me, he is, time after time, the pen I put to paper and put back down without writing. He is.

In the small second, I hear my flight called on the loudspeaker, I panic. He turns to look at me and I pretend I don't see, looking straight forward. In that second, there is something small in me, something small and naïve and bare that stops me from saying anything. It climbs up my throat, crawling slowly until it reaches my tonsils. It has fish hooks for fingers, and they sink into the soft of my throat. I never say what I want to. I say goodbye, kiss him on his cheek, and the world reels. Maybe it is just me.

Years later, I begin to forget, slowly. I forget that the best times of my teenage years are in my memories of Egypt with him. I slowly lose pieces of the memories I have: Arabic poetry scribbled quickly on torn notebook paper, pressed into my palm quietly, shyly. Waking up at 5am to sit outside the bread bakery, watching the world wake up. Late night adventures on the Nile. It is all with him. There is something precocious about being a teenager. There is a knowledge in that age young children have yet to learn, and adults end up forgetting, that I realize I am beginning too, to forget. Today, I am reminded sometimes, so softly, in flashes and razor-sharp moments, of Egypt. A broken curbside will be overgrown

Judge's Comments

This compelling account of the speaker's connection to her family and her family's homeland contains vivid and intriguing portraits of very small things which dilate the ordinary (sand, freckles, memory) into the life-changing. Young love is skillfully treated with reverence instead of clichés, and the result is thought-provoking and aesthetically stimulating.

Second Place Essay

2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Excerpts of Things
Jacob Rechsteiner

I read once somewhere, or maybe I made it up and only thought I read it, that for a lot of jigsaw puzzle kits that you can buy at the store, once you finish ringing through the self checkout line avoiding the eyes of anyone else standing nearby who are also avoiding your eyes and make it home to your watermarked kitchen table underneath the one light in the house that really gives off that soft light that you can't describe to anyone else why it's your favorite type of soft light, and maybe you can't even describe it to yourself and chose this spot unconsciously for your kitchen table which incidentally then became the location of the next puzzle in your life, however this jigsaw is a lot more literal than the figurative ones that have led to you having this kitchen table in this home with this puzzle purchase in the city that you visited the supermarket in.

But I read once somewhere, or I think I did, that a lot of these jigsaw puzzle kits use the same pre-cut configurations to mold their pieces out of cardboard. That way, unintentionally or maybe in a grander scheme of things it was an unknown universal intention, the pieces from your 500 piece Ravensburger Riverside Cottages puzzle are interchangeable with the components of the slightly larger 1,000 pc. Monet imitation of different floral watercolors. You can spread all these bits of cardboard out in front of you, next to the dishes from dinner that you haven't had the energy to wash yet, and start fitting them together with puzzle pieces cast from the same paper cutting factory. And as you start lining up the different tabs and interlocking pieces together, you start to wonder about people and about yourself. As you place one of those fake Monet lilies right where the door of the oak cottage should go, you wonder how many pieces of people may be cast from the same mold and if they ever connect together to form a picture that fits, but isn't quite perfect. You feel bad thinking about people as interchangeable in each other's lives, because that's not the point you're trying to get across to yourself under the light of your favorite light at your kitchen table, but you're just curious why it seems that so many other people find it easy to figure out where in the picture they lay even if it may not be the happiest or most pleasing to look at. You wonder, then, if you've been shopping for jigsaw puzzle kits at the wrong supermarket, solving them at the wrong kitchen table, having these thoughts in the wrong town, but not under the wrong kitchen light because at least in all of the wonder and worry, you do know that you have comfort in having an indescribable love for something that doesn't even make sense to yourself. If there are so many beautiful pictures coming together from the same seeming place, why is it so hard for you to find one where it's easy for you to fit?

How long have you been thinking these things? Why is your mind fixated on that damned kitchen light? Why do you keep returning to the same places? Why can't you remember what any of the other people at the supermarket looked like? Do you always choose the self checkout lane and why can't you remember the answer to that? Why do you keep returning to the same places? Are you afraid of people? Are you going to remember these thoughts in the morning? I don't know. I read that somewhere, or at least I think I did.

Judge's Comments

This essay uses the image of a jigsaw puzzle on a weathered kitchen table and observations about its manufacturing process to explore the nature of belonging and personal connection. The questioning sequence at the end leads to a productive lack of resolution which allows the reader to simultaneously encounter the familiar while entering a space of inquiry and reflection.

Third Place Essay

2017 LAND Creative Writing Competition

La Granja
Laura Hallfrisch

To this day, I'm not sure what made me go back. Back to that place. Back to the poverty, back to the crime, to the razor wire, to the scorpions and cockroaches. Back to the cold showers at night, to the stifling heat by day. To the risk of mosquito-borne diseases. I'm not sure why, but I did go back. Back to that Honduran barrio. There, I fell once again into that gut-wrenching feeling which overtook me on my first trip: that *How could I ever leave this place?* feeling. I traveled to Honduras with a local mission group called *Sirvientes de Cristo* the past two summers. During those times, I came to realize how the barrio where we work is a living paradox. Yes, there is great suffering and great danger, but among the sleepy clay *casas* there is a peace so tangible it can almost be grasped and tasted, like the mangos which grow in the fenced-off gardens.

If you look at a map of Honduras, at its heart you are sure to see Comayagua. The city is relatively wealthy, clean, and known for its magnificent Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Comayagua's little sister, La Paz, lies not far to the south. Tucked under the wing of La Paz is a forgotten barrio. This barrio -- my barrio -- is known by the inhabitants as "La Granja," which means "the farm." It is in that barrio where I worked during my mission trips. It is with that barrio that I fell in love. Thinking about La Granja, my heart flies back to that place, to that paradox. It is as if I am there again, living in the daily rhythm of that community.

There, the sun rises at 5:00 a.m., but morning starts much earlier. "La Granja" is a terribly accurate name for that place at 2:00 a.m. when a single rooster decides that the world has slept long enough. He crows for several minutes until another rooster answers him in the darkness. Soon, a chorus of roosters joins in, and why should the dogs be left out? Their yips and howls echo to one another through the sleeping streets. Then, the large, grey cattle bellow out baritone. Occasionally, a nearby gecko gives a rattling chirp.

By 4:30 a.m., an alarm clock blares from within a home in the east half of the barrio. (The west half does not have electricity.) Any sunrise is obscured by the mountains, but light ever so faintly breaks over La Granja, breathing life into the clay homes. The air is heavy with dew which settles into bedsheets. In the barrio, these morning hours are precious. The sweltering, overpowering heat has not yet choked out night's coolness, and work can be done in comfort. The early-morning animal chorus fades away as its members begin the day's activities. The chickens scratch at the dust, eyeing any human activity warily. The bony dogs trot purposefully between the houses. The cattle set to picking through any foliage as they wander the streets. When there is enough daylight to walk, mothers send their children to the mill. A small bowl of corn must make enough flour to feed the family.

As day spills over the mountains, it paints La Granja once more. Unlike in La Paz, the roads are not paved. They consist of large rocks, mud puddles, and plastic waste. "Main street" refers to whichever road is most able to be driven down at a particular time. Small houses are arranged haphazardly along these roads. Some are painted with lively pinks, yellows, or lime greens and adorned with artistic iron grating on

the windows. Others are white and grey. Instead of grating, they use razor wire and shards of broken Coca-Cola bottles to keep robbers out.

In the midst of such squalid conditions, there is breathtaking beauty. Palm fronds drape the distant, jagged mountains. Blooming trees rain down their fluttering, scarlet petals. Striped cliff faces lie to the south, and violet wildflowers are scattered in the grass. And the aroma is indescribable! On the mornings of very hot days, the tree which grows outside my window produces a perfume so completely satisfying that it makes the heat worthwhile. This blends deliciously with the smell of fresh fruit, of warm rain, of hot meals after a long morning.

By noon, the sun beats down mercilessly. The schoolchildren make their way home for a much-needed siesta. Activity in the barrio comes to a halt. The only noise is that of tropical insects hissing and crickets singing. Geckos dart into the shade. Under the dry heat, the day slowly creeps by. At 1:00 p.m., it feels no cooler, but work must continue. And continue it does.

When evening finally comes, the kids meet at the field. They chase away any cattle and chatter in Spanish. Even though the ground is covered in thorny *dormilona* plants, some run barefoot as a soccer game ensues. They laugh and yell, bright-eyed. Some of the quieter ones sit beside me at the edge of the field. Between their broken English and my broken Spanish, we manage to communicate with one another. They tell me about their families and friends. I know that behind these stories hide the ones they don't dare tell: stories of abandonment, of loss, of desperation. With incredible courage, these children are not afraid to hope. They share with me the laughter which dances in their beautiful, dark eyes. As a missionary, I came to La Granja to give, but in moments like this, I receive far more than I could ever hope to give in return.

The children of La Granja have big dreams, dreams of leaving the barrio. Some tell me they want to be biologists; some, lawyers. Others dream of being dental surgeons or website designers. Regardless, behind every dream lies that one goal: to give their future children a better life. To move from the rocky streets of La Granja to the gardened, paved roads of La Paz. To not have to live among razor wire and trash heaps. I wish I could make this dream come true for them. I hope it does. Still, if it were up to me, I would stay in La Granja forever.

Judge's Comments

This piece reflects on the idea that beauty and dignity are found in what is commonly considered marginal, unimportant, and even ugly. The author renders simple but profound moments with expertise and both evokes and celebrates the deep, natural bonds that humans can share despite a range of differences.