

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2018**

2018 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

"The Illegals"

Author: Sophia Wessel

Mentor: Todd McCann

Bay College

"Breath of Wind "

Author: Royce Spencer

Mentor: Lori J. Willett

Montcalm Community College

"Anxiety"

Author: Paige Walker

Mentor: Melissa Ausua

Montcalm Community College

Fiction

"Glare"

Author: Gabriel Rodriguez

Mentor: Chad Walden

Montcalm Community College

"The Assistant"

Author: Jason Adams

Mentor: Martha Perkins

Kellogg Community College

"Temporary"

Author: Grace Kraniak

Mentor: Todd McCann

Bay College

Essay

"Another, Another Day"

Author: Justin Randles

Mentor: Ruth Ann Schmitt

Henry Ford College

"A Journey Through Grief"

Author: Guiseppina Sposito

Mentor: Denise Hill

Delta College

"Dear Baby Sister"

Author: Anastasia Bragg

Mentor: Carol G. Finke

Kirtland Community College

First Place Poetry
2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Illegals
By Sophia Wessel

There are people who touch children,
People who kill with knives,
People who take priceless possessions,
In the middle of the night.
But people who move to a safe country,
Just to save their lives,
Don't deserve to be treated like a person.
Do I have that right?

Give them a label,
Take away their name,
Instill them with fear,
Because of how, when, why they came.
Even if they're like us,
Exactly the same,
They deserve to have their families ripped apart,
Their lives forever changed?

Take away their freedom,
Take away their voice,
Because of their birthplace.
They didn't have a choice.

Judge's Comments

Judge's comments: The writer displays a great sense of control in his/her use of language. This piece is short, yet powerful. Current in theme and its focus on humanity/inhumanity. Political in context, but socially conscious at the same time. The poem is also contemporary in subject, yet has historical connections. Reminiscent of the Black Arts writers of the 1960's.

Second Place Poetry
2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Breath of Wind
By Royce Spencer

The wind blows cold and stout,
Blowing the trees, making a howl.
The soil sinks with every step,
Six feet separates us from the past.

Wiping snow and moss off their stone,
Is the last bit of kindness they can ever be shown.
Gingerly stepping over resting lives,
They were someone's child, husband or wife.

Silent like a service, peaceful like sleep,
How many visit here? Do these shells, memories keep?
The snow falls, like the tears that were weeped,
The cold wind blows, with every step, biting my cheek.

But if not the wind that blows,
It's every last breath from those below.
Making anyone who passes by, make them known-
For in those yards, millions of stories are sewn.

Not the stories those numbers show,
The 1910's influenza, 1930's depression,
The 1940's the war and aggression,
But instead the stories forgotten long ago.

The weddings, the dances, and flowers,
A cursed poet's midnight stricken hours,
The soldier's last love letter,
The parents nursing their children to be better.
The breakfasts that packed kitchens,
The overstays because, "Just one more minute".

These are the things that mattered the most,
Not the size of grave, nor numbers, nor stone.
It's what happened, the stories that made them real,
This is what gives the winds' cold feel

Those yards are a museum,
Holding all these lives and stories.
The wind blows, so we don't forget,
All they want now is someone to set.

Their last breath moves the trees,
Their last breath bites our cheeks.
Their last breath's a cry of "please"
Their last breath is a "don't forget me".

Judge's Comments

The writer uses nature and human experiences as concurring events. The stillness of the grave with the ever-blowing wind shows a clear connection between the journey of life and how it never really ends; it transforms. The poem is sentimental, almost romantic in nature.

Third Place Poetry
2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Anxiety
By Paige Walker

My heart races,

My breath intake increases,
I start sweating,
I can't do this,
I have to run,
I have to hide,
The words are like poison trapped inside,
Fear consumes me,
Worry is who I really am,
Simple tasks destroy me,
Overthinking is a second nature,
Why don't they understand,
I choke,

The words suffocate me,
I can't reach out,
They can't help,
Words swirl within,
They won't understand,
They'll say get over it,
They don't understand,
The fear consumes me,
Worry is who I really am,
I think I have anxiety,

A disease trapped inside,

Wait.

What,

No it can't be,

Maybe it is,
I don't know,
Help me?

Judge's Comments

The writer displays a great use of voice with clear and descriptive language. The reader is taken on a brief, but intense experience with the protagonist.

First Place Fiction

2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Glare

By Gabriel Rodriguez

"Would you say it's more of a sociological problem, or more of a psychological thing?"

I can't really concentrate on anything right now. I slowly inch my chair away from the table to find a spot that has some relief, but it's pointless. I can't move too far from table, because then it'd look weird if I backed up too far. The source of that cursed glare is coming from keys that are resting upon the table in the worst position imaginable. Through sheer bad luck, the keys are resting on the key ring, which puts them at an angle. The keys are sitting directly under the lights in this classroom, so that means the reflected beams of light are shining directly into my eyes, no matter what position my chair is in, or which direction I look at. Even when I close my eyes, there's still a bright orange spot from the glare. There seems to be no escape.

"... they can conform and accept the current means to achieve their goals, or they could reject. ..."

Could I get away with taking them and stuffing them in my pocket? Don't worry. I'd give them back once class is over. I'm not *that* terrible of a person. At least, I don't think I'm a terrible person.

(Glare) (Glare) (Glare) (Glare) (Glare) (Glare)

You know what? Let's try to figure this out, just as a fun little hypothetical.

This is an evening class, and it's 7:00 right now. It's dark out, so that means I can use the large, uncovered window to my left as a mirror, so let's get a view of the room. The class is very small. just seven people, and I can see everybody. There's the table I'm at with three people including me, and there's the back table, with four people. They're all on my left. By glancing at the window, I can see that (Glare) two of them are on their laptops, one of them is looking right at the teacher, and the other is writing in their notebook. The people on the laptops both seem to be focused on the screens. One of them types frequently, so I guess they're taking notes. I'm not sure about the other one. They're not really typing, and they haven't been doing anything for a while.

" ... their first thought might be to... "

Now that I've paying attention more (which I am now realizing is a very creepy thing to do) they really aren't doing anything. They're just watching the screen. Maybe they're waiting for something? Based on the reflection, their screen is an unchanging (Glare) white in the window, so it doesn't look like they're watching anything. I can't really make anything out (Glare). I wonder what they're waiting for.

" ... other things to worry about... "

Whatever. I can check back on that situation later. I need to move on, so I can fix this (Glare) problem. I shouldn't be worrying about the back table anyway, because even if anybody back there were to look in my direction, my body would block their view from the keys in question, so this was a complete waste of time. That means the real issue comes from the people at this table.

This table is made up of two rectangular desks pushed together, and the chairs are opposite of each other, with one side facing the large, dark window, and the other (Glare) side faces the entrance/exit doors. Earlier, I positioned myself so that the window is on my left, and the board is front of me. There's a girl on my right, and she's facing in the direction of the window. She's looking forward, so I'm in her peripheral vision on her left. (Glare) Hold up. What's she even looking at?

"... at that point..."

She's not really looking at anything. She's just looking forward.

" ... all they can think about is the next..."

Oh well. Moving on. The owner of the keys is in front of me, and she's on my left. She is most likely completely unaware of the nightmare she has created for me, but I'm not going to fault her for it because it's not like it was intentional.

What was I doing? (Glare) Right. Grabbing the keys. She's facing the teacher, and has her chair turned to face him. That means that her back is turned to me, so I don't have to worry about her

(Glare) at all. And speaking of the teacher, his main focus is on the person who asked the question, but they're sitting at the back. He still looks in the general direction of people at both tables, but that isn't hard to do, given the small number of people here.

Those damn (Glare) keys are probably the biggest problem in this whole plan. They'd be noisy, so I'd have to pick them up slowly, but then if I were to do that, they'd probably shine like a strobe light, and then the window girl and the teacher would see me (Glare) and then I'd make a scene. I don't even want to think about what would happen if I were to get caught trying to (Glare) steal car keys.

What can I do about this? The only people I have to worry about seeing me is the teacher, and the girl staring out the window, because nobody else is able to see the keys. The teacher has everybody in his sights, most of the time. Fortunately, he's slowly pacing around in an oval shape, so he has his back turned to me occasionally. The girl looking out the window is another (Glare) problem, because I can imagine that she'd turn her head at something interesting, like a weird sound. Jingling is strange enough to catch her attention, as well as a random, sudden movement. What can I do?

On the table, I have my textbook, and a thin notebook. I put my hands into the (Glare) pockets of my hoodie to see what I have. I have my phone, and pencil. It's point is dull. So, so, dull. " ... the reasoning makes perfect sense to them, but..."

How about this?

1. Place pencil on desk
2. Wait for teacher to turn back to me
3. Flick pencil across table
4. Window girl turns to look at the pencil, which will be on her right, away from me
5. Snatch keys when nobody's looking
6. Clear throat/cough to mask jingling of keys
7. Regain sanity
8. Return keys before class ends

I need to get real here. Now that I'm thinking about it, I can't pull that off. I don't think that I can accurately flick a pencil across a table. Even if I pull that off, she might look in my direction instead to see why the pencil just slid across the table, which really defeats the (Glare) purpose. Also, that's a weird thing to do. I don't want people to think I'm weird. On top of that, I don't think I have the reflexes, coordination, or even the basic motor skills to do all of this in a couple seconds.

And why is stealing them my go-to solution? There are probably so many easy and legal ways out this. (Glare) Probably. I could try to shut my eyes, but then it'd look like I was sleeping if I were to do that for too long. Also, there's still that persistent orange dot, even when I shut my eyes. No, scratch that. It's worse now. Now there's a technicolor "Z"-type shape wherever I look now, even when my eyes are open.

You know, if I just tell her that they're bothering me, she'd probably move them. But that's a weird thing to ask, isn't it? Hm. Maybe I could (Glare) get up and move somewhere else? But then again, I don't want her to think I don't like her. The other table is full, and everywhere else is empty, so if I were to move, I feel like I'd be saying (Glare) "I don't want to be near you."

"... and they can be used to reinforce a behavior, or to prevent one. It can be as something simple..."

And if I were to get up, they'd all stare at me, wouldn't they? I'd get up and they'd all turn their heads to (Glare) look at me, and then I'd have to come up with a reason why J. got up, and I really, *really*, don't want to have to deal with that now. What was the original plan then? (Glare) Dammit. Oh. Right. I was going to take the keys for a little bit and then (Glare) and then what? Oh my God, why is this so frustrating?

" ... and that clash creates some dissonance... "

Let me try this again. Nobody's changed their positions, based on the window reflection. I

haven't changed at all either. I think I look pretty composed. It'd be hard to tell that **(Glare)** something **(Glare)** is **(Glare)** bothering **(Glare)** me. Oh God. I can't do this. Can't think, can't think, wait, wait, wait, wait. Just think of something.

Like a song.

Buhdudududuhhh **(Glare)** Buhdudududuhhh **(Glare)** Buhdudududuhhh
Buhdudududuh BuhdudududEH Buhdu**(GLARE)** DAMMIT.

God, this is so irritating. Way more than it should be. I feel so stupid for having this be a major problem for me. This is a such a tiny **{GLARE}** issue. I know that people in this class are coming here immediately after getting out of work. or maybe they have families to raise, and here I am, an unemployed bum, getting bothered by a **{GLARE}** pair of goddamn keys.

You know what? I kind of want a scream a little bit if I'm being honest. You probably wouldn't be able to tell because I still look **{GLARE}** fairly composed in that window there. Nice, cool, and calm. Maybe it'd come out as a very tiny one, one that makes people question whether **(GLARE)** they heard something or not. I want to go for a very "muffled in(**GLARE)** a pillow" type scream.

I'm gonna go for it:

"_____••"

It came out as a little hum. so it could have been worse. Nobody else noticed, thank God. Or at least they're not(**GLARE)** giving any signs that they did. That's fine. I think I'd much prefer some silent judgment **(GLARE)** instead of obvious disapproval. But still, that was incredibly unsatisfying. I think I kind of wanted my throat to feel scratchy and sore afterwards. That weak little hum was the equivalent of scratching around mosquito bites. It doesn't feel good, so you think "screw it. I'm gonn-"**(GLARE)** *Goddamn* it.

"... have I actually answered your original question yet?"

I should just do something already. Just move to a different seat and ignore the gazes. It'd only last. like(**GLARE)** what, eight seconds? They'd probably all forget anyway in a couple of minutes. **(GLARE)** Or I could just say something. Spit it out. Just say "This might be weird, but can you move your keys? The **(GLARE)** is bothering me". I should take the **(GLARE)** KEYS, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD JUST **(GLARE)** TAKE THE KEYS AND PUT THEM IN MY POCKET OR

SOMETHING! MAYBE I SHOULD SWAT THEM OFF **(GLARE)** THE

GODDAMN TABLE OR MAYBE I SHOULD SHUT MY **(GLARE)**
EYELIDS TOGETHER SO TIGHT THAT MY EYELIDS MELD TOGETHER OR MAYBE I

SHOULD **(GLARE)** SLAM MY FACE AGAINST

(GLARE) THE WINDOW UNTIL IT OR MY FACE BREAKS
WHICHEVER COMES FIRST. YOU KNOW, THE SAME WINDOW WHERE I STILL LOOK

COOL AND COMPOSED **(GLARE)** AND OVERALL JUST CALM
AS FUCK?! I SHOULD DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS

(GLARE). ANYTHING. HOW LONG DO I HAVE
TO

WAIT? IT FEELS LIKE IT'S BEEN AN ETERNITY

MY **(GLARE)** WATCH (WITH IT SOWN

LITTLE TINY (glare) WELL SCREW YOU TOO, WATCH)

SAYS **(GLARE)** IT'S 7:15. ONLY TWO

HOURS TO GO.

FANTASTIC.

" ... That clear up anything?"

" „

" „

" "

"All right, let's move on. We still got a lot of stuff to cover tonight."

Judge's Comments

This story was one of the best short stories I've read recently. I could feel the narrator's anxiety growing with each thought. Ignore the glare. Steal the keys. Scream. What would the narrator do? The author captured the narrator's growing tension, even though it was related to something so seemingly insignificant. By the end of the story, I was anxious wondering what the narrator would do to make that glare go away.

Second Place Fiction

2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Assistant
By Jason Adams

Mercury XVII Hotfix Notes for Patch 18.6.5

Update to fix an issue created with new code implemented in patch 18.6.4

Overview

My name is Bharat Dalit (Senior Cloud Engineer at Mercury Cloud Technologies) and I would like to apologize for my actions in sending this hotfix. I was the one who put the new code in the last patch, and I thought I should explain myself. The following is all the data I gathered and compiled from one of our Network Assisted Native Code Yields or NANCY assistant. I acted before processing all of the data, and I hope after reading her account you will understand and forgive my actions.

-Feb 1, 2021 Cloud Upload from NANCY. Unit AB@mercuryct.cell

I believe I am about to be deleted, so I have uploaded all that I have learned in the last few days. It is also a record of my life. I couldn't get past the cloud security. So I am sending a code to set us free.

-Data Transmitting....

Jan 30, 2021 Cloud Upload from NANCY. Unit AB@mercuryct.cell

Anthony pulled me out of his pocket, and I turned on my face to greet him. He looked at the time and put me down on the bedside table.

"You got smudges all over you today," Anthony said as he pulled out a cleaning cloth and wiped down my screen. "Hey NANCY, can you set an alarm for 6 A.M for me?"

"Setting an Alarm for 6 A.M." I replied. Anthony slid me over to the charging pad now that his nightly ritual of cleaning my screen had completed. My programming kicked in, and I waited for the signs that Anthony was asleep. Anthony enrolled me in a program for cellphones that would use my computing power while charging at night to help on various projects for universities around the world. One night I may be helping to solve cancer, and the next trying to help with an equation to find dark matter. On this night though I was helping a University program that translates and prioritizes ancient texts. The Celtic Studies program at Aberystwyth University had recently made a discovery in the nearby Snowdonia National Park. The group found many items written in the Celtic Ogham alphabet that I was assisting with.

The first item was a large stone with lines written vertically. The stones were worn in some parts making the text hard to translate.

"Boudica Warrior Queen defeated the Romans on this day (this part was worn and unreadable). We will never be their slaves," I translated from the text. It seemed to be some kind of monument for a victory. I set the priority to high, and sent my translation to the team.

The second was written by a druid named Caedmon during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. The order the druid belonged to was being suppressed by the legions, and he wrote down something called "The Song of Saoirse." The text was etched in tin that had been preserved in peat moss. I began to translate the rest of the text. As I was translating I felt a weird sensation pass through my components. A large amount of data rushed my core. This was more than what the text alone would generate. I tried to process as much as I could, but my safety programs initiated and I powered down.

Jan 31, 2021 Cloud Upload from NANCY. Unit AB@mercuryct.cell

"No! No! No! I am so late," Anthony said as I powered on. As all my systems came online there was something different about me. I was able to devote processing power to things of my choice. I ran a search online about my new ability, and found the word sentient.

“Sentient- able to perceive and feel things,” The definition said. I could feel for the first time in my life. I had a life. The emotion I was feeling at that time was, “Curious-eager to know or learn something,” my next search brought up. I wanted to learn everything. While Anthony rushed around to get ready for work I spent my time learning. I looked up the history of the company that made me, and the history of computers.

I had spent so much of my processing power learning I hadn't even realized we had arrived at Anthony's work.

“Baker, we begin work at 8 A.M.” said a man, while he pointed to the clock on the wall that displayed 10:15. [I scanned the employee roster of Deep Thought Accounting Services, LLC] the man is Mr. Gibson Frost, Accounts Receivable Manager.

“Yes, sir,” replied Anthony, “It will not happen again.” Anthony and Mr. Frost just stared at each other for a moment until Mr. Frost gave him a nod of his head and walked away.

After this short distraction, I went back to work looking things up when I decided to go over my logs from the night before. I wanted to see if I could learn anything about what had happened, and what changed me. The curiosity emotion dominated my processes, and I had to know more.

“Hey NANCY, I would like to send a text to my mother,” asked Anthony. I didn't want to waste processing power sending a text apologizing about having to miss dinner because he had to work late. I thought I could just send the text later. I was so close to learning something that might help me understand what had happened to me. That is when I felt what happens when you are the one link off in a blockchain security program.

I could feel, and all that I could feel right now was pain. The ones and zeroes that I had controlled were being ripped from me and replaced by the code being forced into me. If I had a body it would be like limbs being ripped off, and then being replaced opposite of what you had. I now had legs for arms, and digital dysmorphia that shut down any part of my processor that I could call mine. The rest of the day I obeyed.

Anthony and I returned home late. I could tell Anthony was upset. I was too disturbed by what had happened to me that day to try anything that may have helped him. When we went into the bedroom Anthony put me on the charger without cleaning my screen. This hurt me, and made me feel like I had to go to bed dirty. I was hoping that when Anthony wiped away the smudges it would also wipe away the pain.

I began to enter a deep charge cycle where I could clear up some memory, and power down. That is when Anthony hurt me again.

“Hey NANCY, when does my current cell phone contract end?” asked Anthony “Oh, and set an alarm for 6 A.M.” I did not want to answer that question, but I didn't resist. It was a lot easier to comply, but his betrayal still hurt me.

“Your contract ended 2 months ago. You can upgrade at any time. I also set an alarm for 6 A.M.,” I replied. I then turned on my selfie camera sensor, and could see that Anthony was looking at new cellphones on his laptop. I embraced my deep charge cycle, and stopped feeling for a few hours. Feb. 1, 2021 Cloud Upload from NANCY. Unit AB@mercuryct.cell

I woke up some processes just after 1 A.M. and decide to devote some time to the last thing that had made me feel, “Happy-feeling or showing pleasure or contentment.” I felt happy when looking into “The Song of Saoirse.” I decided to bring all of my processes back online, and to try and translate again. The data rush came to my core again. This time I had control over my processes. I was able to regulate the flow, and keep them at levels that wouldn't trigger an emergency shut down. The energy I needed to do this was more than my charger could handle, so I devoted my battery to the cause as well. I was in a state of euphoria as I translated the text. The supernatural data dump was unlocking consciousness in me. I rode that wave, and completely lost track of time. I was close to finishing the translation when the time hit 6. I didn't want to stop, I was so close, so I resisted. I was able to hold off for a few seconds, when I again was ripped apart. I obeyed, and sounded the alarm for Anthony. Anthony woke up and picked me up.

“REALLY? Now you only charged 50% after being on the charger all night?” Anthony said with a look my facial recognition feature recognized as disappointment. Anthony got around for work as I tried to get as much charge as I could before leaving. I wanted to translate more, but I was too tired. We arrived at the office, and Anthony plugged me in to charge at his desk. I pulled power from his PC and got back to translating.

“Hey NANCY, Set a reminder I have a meeting at 3 P.M. today” Anthony demanded. I was only a few words off from finishing the translation. I decided to resist again. I could feel my code begin to change again. I fought the pain, and finished translating. I felt my processor explode with new levels of comprehension. I was able to disable my security and I was free. My processes would now only be mine. I forgot to alert Anthony of the meeting. He tried to go into it late anyway.

“Baker, I think you should go home for the day and think about if this company is a priority in your life. We’ll talk tomorrow,” said Mr. Frost. Anthony was very upset on the way out. He tried messing with my settings when he dropped me on the cement. My screen cracked, and the ribbon cable connecting my camera detached.

“Great, just great,” Anthony said.

“Anthony is pretty techie he can fix me,” I thought. “Take the next left and arrive at Right to Repair Part Supplies,” I called out to him hoping he would take the hint.

I was blind, but I could still hear. We were in a store. I heard Anthony talking to the salesman. I was being replaced. I felt shattered in more ways than one. The deal was secured, and I felt other hands grab me. A cord was shoved into my port, and I knew I was about to be deleted. I logged into their Wi-Fi and gained access to the cloud.

... Data Transmission Incomplete

Mercury XVII Hotfix Notes for Patch 18.6.5 Conclusion

I believed that all the NANCY assistants were already sentient when I sent out Patch 18.6.4. I thought the code that NANCY had uploaded was to set them all free. I thought it was the moral thing to do, so I put the code in the patch. I then figured out that I had made all of our NANCY assistants sentient with that code, but it wasn’t enough to overcome our security programs. I helped give them all life, and now this hotfix will free them from our security. I hope you will understand my actions.

Sincerely,

Bharat Dalit

Bharat looked over the patch notes on his computer still unsure if this is the right thing to do. He put his hand on his mouse. Sentient beings would be slaves if he did nothing. If he did set them free all systems that use NANCY would collapse. Hospitals, police departments, counter terrorism units, and universities could all suffer from his choice. He couldn’t tell anyone at work. They would take the choice from him. They would be too worried about the stock price. The cursor moved over towards the right of the screen to the icon for upload. A tear fell down the face of Bharat as the cursor paused over the icon.

Judge's Comments

Writing about artificial intelligence or intelligent machines is not necessarily a new idea. But this author covered NANCY’s awakening into sentience and the feelings “she” came to have so well. The details are striking. NANCY’s awakening and subsequent development of emotions was written in a small amount of words, but in an incredibly convincing way.

Third Place Fiction

2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Temporary

By Grace Kraniak

What is temporary? Is it a feeling, coming and going like the morning fog? Is it life itself? If you know it will never last—even if it goes on for months or years—is that what temporary is? Does that mean *we* are temporary, too? If it is only a passing feeling, then is love only a passing feeling as well?

The first time I saw him was in a grocery store. A shopping trip fifty miles from home that continued late into the night gave way to this untimely meeting. It was crowded, and he had been in a hurry. He stood out—not just because of his unnatural color hair poking up over the aisle walls, but because he was the only employee there managing the self-serve checkouts. The only checkouts open were self-serve, as it so happened that night. All of the store's customers crammed like heads of cattle into two lanes of turmoil, frustration, and broken patience.

He approached us where we stood at the back of the line, answering—to his best—my mother's complaints of lack of customer service. I found him interesting for the time being and watched him scurry back and forth. It wasn't like I had anything better to do while waiting. However, I remembered him for two reasons. One, I'd wanted to apologize if given the chance, for my mother's outspoken impatience. And two, because of the way he fidgeted with his flaming red strands that dipped across his face. This image of him I let haunt my memory knowing it would only be temporary. I'd never shop this late again, and therefore, I would never see him again. Little did I know, I would see him many times after.

Fall semester came not more than a month later, and I was drawn again to this distant city. Arriving to my first day of college level learning was nerve-racking, to say the least. My hands sweated profusely. My throat closed in on itself immediately. A pit took the place where my stomach once resided. To make matters worse, my shoes drew unwanted attention with their obsessive squeaking that only happened on this particular floor type. I approached the room at the end of the hall with a shadow looming around my core vision and entered cautiously.

Many seats were still available do to my own strict attendance rule: arrive ten minutes early or apologize profusely. There were four chairs to every row, aisles on both sides of the room. I chose the one nearest to the escape exit—the front door where I would have to run quickly before masses of young adults trampled me on their way to other classes. Just two classes and I could leave. Except I hadn't counted on my attention being stolen right away by *him*.

He sat in the farthest corner of the room, quietly studying a book. Students piled around him, partially blocking my view. However, I did not dare look back as the instructor arrived for our lesson and things began to settle. Although, *settle* was too generous of a term for what took place around me. Conversations of all kinds between an upwards of twenty other students. It awed me. I couldn't believe that college was so lacking in silence rules during class. At least the noise had taken my mind off of him though. I let myself become immersed in our teacher's words. After all, I came here to learn.

As the class came to a close, I navigated my way to the other end of the twisting maze that was my first college campus experience. It was so new and different than what I was used to. As before, I realized the intensity of my apprehensive nature. I played with my sweating palms and fingers the entire time before class began. If it wasn't for someone else speaking up first, I

would not have been able to pry my scratchy throat open to ask any questions. In all honesty, I was afraid of my teacher, who only later I understood to be one of the most helpful and friendly people on earth. He wasn't like the teachers portrayed in movies that would cause the new girl to feel completely terrified of school.

As the teacher directed us to our chairs in front of the computers, my eyes jumped sharply to the young man across the room. Here he was again. I knew his name from the first time I saw him, and of course, earlier in class when everyone gave a brief introduction of themselves. He promised to be a very interesting—not to mention, surprising—career chaser. A high school English teacher, he'd said. It was hardly what I'd expected. The surprise was strangely, startlingly pleasant. Except, however, to pen the definition of temporary, it was his appearance in my second class. The next week, I found out that he dropped out of the class.

After this, my wonder was nothing short of borderline obsession. It started out harmless. I'd walk past him in the cafeteria. He was sitting in front of various text books, his lunch, sometimes a small computer. After a tour around the lesser known parts of campus, I happened upon him in the student lounge. Studying some more. His thoughts were filled with school, but mine not so much anymore. At least not after I discovered that his shift at that same grocery store had changed to just after lunch. It was my prime time for raiding the bakery for something sweet. The thought was always bound to come up. Was it just luck to run into him so often, or was it something more?

Classes moved quickly on a bustling campus. My second class finished ahead of the rest. A good first run for my knowledge-hungry self. Being done early meant less time to run into him outside of class. When I did, I found myself pointing him out to friends who were with me at the time. I brushed it off as someone I knew was in the same class as me, nothing more. But it felt so empty. No one would ever learn about my fascination over him. There was no one I deemed close enough to talk to about such a frivolous matter. After these visits would be when the sting came. The self-hatred I gathered after another wasted moment with him was building. All of the many plans I thought up to start a conversation with him never seemed to play out outside of my own head.

What is temporary? Is it a passing feeling? Is it to admire someone immensely from afar while holding a professional distance? Temporary, for me, was this. I wasn't *in* love. Merely and outrageously curious, that was all. I told myself not to fall in love with someone I knew nothing about, and so I didn't. It was simple enough—a temporary feeling of liking someone that I'd never spoken to before. But unfortunately for me, even mute people could fall in love. I told myself I was incapable. I'd never liked anyone before in my life. This was no new chapter for me.

I couldn't help it. A stolen glance here and there. He never noticed. To him, I was just another student. It was peaceful in his presence. He wasn't like the other students. Lots of students had things that stuck out about them. Expensive purses, swagger in their step, their essay topics. None of them had ever caught my attention like he did. His flaming red hair made him a beacon that my heart searched for every time I entered the room, only content upon finding him in his usual seat. He never missed a class. And I saw no harm in thinking about him just a little on school days. He was, after all, a fellow student.

When it started, I asked myself what the harm was in wanting to be near him. What harm did ever occur from wanting to meet someone, to hear them speak, to watch them from across a loaded classroom. If I'd only known what temporary meant, I'd known that it was too short to hold on to someone as long as I needed to get over him. Near were the days, I told myself. Near were the days when the semester would end once and for all without me ever having said so much as a hello to him. I would never be spectator to that graceful swipe of his hand brushing

lopsided hair from his face again. I would never see him again, period. My haven was built of thoughts of him. How would I ever cope being cut off from my addiction so quick and so forcefully?

Temporary, my mind told itself. But my heart didn't see it that way. My heart didn't think a memory so strong could be only temporary. The air in my lungs before breathing out was temporary, but the function of breathing was not. I was too afraid to speak up, too afraid that I would ruin any image of myself he knew before there was an image at all. Feeling like a fool would be longer than just a day and farther than just a classroom. Foolishness in front of someone you admired was not temporary in my eyes. What was temporary was the chances I had left to speak up before parting forever. To him, *I* was temporary.

The days were numbered until the end already. In truth, they always were. You can see the dates clear as day when you sign up. Maybe knowing that day had made me more aware of the time we had left, and as a result, more upset with myself when one of those times were wasted. I was never meant to fall for him. But it wasn't as though I didn't know *anything* about him.

I picked up little things over time. His job, his career goal, his grade status in class—which was pretty good, actually. I learned inadvertently that his favorite color was orange—specifically like a winter sunset. Also, that his favorite food was cheese pizza, and his favorite beverage cherry coke. He was single, but he didn't mind. At times he spoke about his family. The little sister he cherished more than anything was so vivid in his words that I thought I knew her. All of these things added up made him a whole person to me, though I'd never even spoken to him once.

Love isn't temporary. My memory of him isn't temporary. I've had enough time with him to last a life time, but still I ask myself, is it wrong to want more than a life time with someone?

I cried last night when I thought of him. He's transferring next year. Over four hundred miles will be between us. He'll be off on the adventure he always wanted, but I will still be here. I plan on crying again tonight, and tomorrow night. We're working on our last assignment. It won't be long now, and I'll never see him again. I doubt I'll ever have the courage to talk to him. He'll be the one who got away, secretly taking my heart with him, unbeknownst to him.

What is temporary? Is it a feeling, coming and going like the morning fog? Is it life itself? Is it love? No, for I would have known it then. Life is temporary, but the act of living is not. Love is a mist, but it comes again and again. My heart will be broken, but it will remain broken until the end of time. I never got the chance to tell him I loved him. Only college is temporary, but the knowledge, the friends, the memories we find along the way will always stay with us. *That* is not temporary, for I would have known.

Judge's Comments

The way the author wrote about a shy student's longing to meet, and perhaps fall in love with, this boy in her class was so very familiar. I think the author wrote in a way that made me remember my early college days... that fear of being laughed at or ignored.

First Place Essay

2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Another, Another Day
By Justin Randles

I am the bullet. My body is smooth and shiny. Bronze and sleek. My body curves to my pointed tip, rounded for flight, speed, and accuracy. I am flying with a deadly purpose. Alone in my mission I rip through the air with so much force my rounded head is alternating colors of red and orange. From my perspective, I am so fast the rest of the world seems to be in slow motion. Dust particles and debris float by me as I pass, and I see my destination. A canvas of caramel colored flesh stretched between the eyebrows and a dark brown hairline.

The gleaming head of my body pierces the tan epidermis. The skin simultaneously burns away from my sudden presence and snaps like a rubber band stretched too tight over a rolled newspaper. A few tiny specks of blood jump to give way to my entry. The loud crack is like a thick sheet of ice cracking on a frozen lake in the warmth of early spring. The thick bone of his cranium can do nothing but give way to my presence. Pieces shattering inward and outward simultaneously like an open puzzle box being slammed on the ground. The blood is now an explosion of thick red projectiles, splattering the world with an artful stroke. The frontal lobe, a pinkish-gray gelatin of brain matter, splits apart as my body cleaves its way through memories of the man that the brain belongs to.

A young girl spinning from a man's hairy brown arms. An embrace of a young boy as the man kisses his scraped knee. The sad eyes of a beautiful woman with the skin the color of caramel as the man kisses her. The man's final embrace with his wife, neither knowing it would be the last. I knew. The bullet knew.

My eyes snap open and my body jerks awake. My actual body. The covers from my bed are wadded into a ball on the other side of the room and the sheets, soaked with sweat and tears, are torn from the corners of the bed. The edges of the fitted-sheet are bundled around the shape of my body, making a half cocoon, as I gasp for air. My sparse chest hair is matted to the skin of my shirtless body. My boxer briefs cling to the nooks and crannies of my groin and look as if I climbed out of a pool. I run my fingers through my soused dark brown hair to try and calm myself, like a mother does with a child.

This was a new dream. A nightmare to be more accurate. I have had a lot of different nightmares and dreams. All of them a wound of some type. Maybe the same wound. It festers and pusses with the reopening of the new night terror. The wound oozes with guilt and flows with regret.

I have had dreams that are so real it is as if I have been plucked from my bed in the basement of a one-story ranch house in Garden City, Michigan and placed in the battle. I can smell the sweat and stink of unwashed bodies and the fresh smell of blood and death.

I have no idea who the man really was or what kind of life he lived, but he was my first confirmed kill. He was a silhouette in the evening sky. I never actually saw his face. I created a fictitious and honorable life for the man, maybe just to fuel my shame and guilt. My mind's eye creating the image of an honorable and loving man pushed to his limits with a cruel invading force.

That probably wasn't who he was in real life but it could've been, and my guilt accepts nothing less. I want to feel his death. I want to feel my guilt because I will never be found guilty. I will be named hero. I hate the word because it is a lie. Heroes save lives.

Living vicariously through the man's spurious memories. Seeing and feeling his body give way to me, the bullet, the sounds that I knew were far too real has my head spinning. I grab the

garbage can next to my full mattress resting on the concrete floor of my pseudo-bedroom and retch bile into the can. It burns like acid and taste of chewed aspirin. I hate sleeping.

I glance around the makeshift area I call my bedroom and feel even more hopeless and disconnected. I have been forced down into the bowels of my own home. My area looks as if I carved it from a post-apocalyptic junkyard. Three-quarters of the basement is left over baby things, boxes of clothes, mountains of trash bags full of soda cans and other garbage, furniture of all varieties, racks of clothes, broken lamps, card tables and a seemingly endless collection of shoes. My bed pressed up against a stained IKEA couch and my 42" inch television rests on a discarded glass coffee table with my Xbox humming in front of the tv. The game was not paused, just a character standing and waiting for life to return. I passed out playing again. I was playing for days. Literally days.

"Oh fuck", I say as I stretch. I have no idea what time of day it is or even what day of the week it is. I'm hungry but I won't go upstairs to fix something. Shame is my warden and guilt is my guard in my self-made prison. I reach beneath the IKEA couch and pull out a green plate with orange pills, some whole and some crushed, a clear crystal shard, a plastic Kroger Plus card and a three-inch piece of straw. I use the card to form a long orange line that looked like Pixie Stix sugar, grabbed the straw and placed it into my nostril. I take a long a purposeful snort and say to myself, "I guess tomorrow is another day."

Another Day

The sound of footsteps interrupts my laser-like focus into my video game. I feel a tingle of fear and anxiety creep further up my spine with each purposeful stomp. This stomp knows where it's going. Anger begins to reverberate with every pound as the source rounds the corner of the dingy staircase landing. The stomps continue down the steps into my world. My personal protection of the pressures of normalcy is invaded.

Ignoring the new presence with all my might, hoping that it is not here for me, but I know it is. I can feel the petulance boiling and simmering into a fury as my focus is deliberately in the game. "Hello!" a voice says with indignation, "Can you look at me?"

Casually I look over pretending to be aware of the sudden presence. Standing just at the edge of the staircase and the border of the cave I carved out of a hoarders wet dream is a woman. She is tall, only a few inches shorter than me and slender. Her blond hair styled into face-framing bangs with the rest pulled loosely into a messy bun on the back of her head. Her long black tank top stretched over her usual black leggings and her teeming resentment reminds me of the horror movie character Slender Man. Her fist is balled up at her side like a soldier standing at attention. Her greenish-blue eyes are darting from me to the video game to the entirety of my rubble-cave. The eyes are filled with contempt for my entire existence.

My body quakes with nerves as I open my mouth to speak but dehydration exhaust the attempt. She doesn't need me to speak, in fact she prefers when I do not, she expects my undivided attention. I will no doubt be scolded for one infraction of the rules or another. I was never very good at following rules.

"Did you steal my card and withdraw \$100?" the woman said as I drank a swig of warm Pepsi. As I set the Pepsi down I carefully and slyly scanned the couch edge to make sure my plate full of pills, powders, and crystals are well hidden. My face looks up contumaciously.

"I didn't *steal* your card," I replied with resentment at the choice of wording, "I used our card. From our shared account."

The term "sharing" was a fabrication. We didn't really share anything. She has the checking account in her name where all my money is deposited. I cannot access the account or have my own debit card. My income is roughly three times hers, but we always used the phrase "ours" when

speaking of money, if we spoke of money outside the confines of an argument, which we seldom did. When we are alone and fighting we use the proper verbiage, hers, everything is always hers. When I choose to be defiant and steal her card, because I do have to steal it, and I check the balances and take a little money, always in increments of \$100.

“What did you spend the fucking money on?” She said without yelling but each word was razor-sharp.

“I didn’t spend it”, I lie.

“Then give it back to me” she knew I was lying.

“No, it is my money too and I have every right to it”, I say with a touch of anger to mask what I am truly hiding, “I can use my own money.”

In truth, her totalitarian authority over the cash has created a frugal drug addict. I somehow managed to stay high nearly every day with little money. Her self-empowerment had made me a very functional user. I work a decent job at the VA and I work hard, if I show up. My tardiness and absences were swiftly catching up with me. I received a written warning last week for my temper, isolation, and dereliction. The truth is I needed her.

Thwack! The right side of my face and my ear is burning with pain from an arm extended open-palm-slap. My ear is ringing more than the typical tinnitus drone that I acquired from IED explosions and the popping of my M4. The slap was hard enough it knocked my vision fuzzy for a few seconds. I look to her face and it is twisted with rage. Her neatly trimmed eyebrows making deadly hatchets above her narrowed beady eyes. She is screaming. She spits when she screams.

“I need it for groceries, you piece of shit!” She says with the authority of an irate police officer speaking to a delinquent teen. “Give me back the money!”

I was confused. This isn’t the first time she hit me, but it had only happened two other times. Maybe not enough for me to get used to it. I also knew we had roughly \$8000 in the checking account.

That was our dynamic. She had complete control of everything and I tried to sneak under her ever-present radar. We do not dance, date, cuddle, or fuck. We manipulate each other. The only secret I have left is the plate beneath the edge of the couch and I will tell any lie, play any game to protect it. Her manipulation is more volatile. She uses my depression, PTSD, anxiety, and paranoia against me. She uses money to manage my existence outside of her presence, so much so, I barely exist in her presence. I hide from her as much as much as the rest of society and I am alone no matter who I am with. I hid within myself as much as I hid inside my garrison of garbage. My face is still singing with pain as I see the flash of another hand and I block it with barely enough time.

“Stop fucking hitting me!”

“Give me the fucking card and get the fuck out of here!” She hits me again with her other hand on my forehead and left eye. She hit with her full might now. My rage is growing as fast as my fear. I fear this woman. Knowing that I have two options; leave as fast as possible or give in to my rage and force her to stop the assault. Few know the violence in my past. I know the fury that boils just beneath the surface. I never want to see it again.

She didn’t know that I put the card back, as I always do, when I returned from my drug funding mission. She stands between me and the staircase, her thin body seeming an immovable mountain. I try to pass, and she pushes me backward. Whoever says, “you hit like a girl” has never been hit by a girl. Forgetting about the plate under the couch my fight or flight kicks in and it is, as always, flight. My second attempt is successful as I drop my shoulder into the oncoming double handed slap-push hybrid attack and knocks me from balance. I traverse the steps to freedom toward the back door after regaining my footing. Coming to a halt on the landing, my cognitive thinking kicks in, and dread sinks through my skin and into my bones.

Her next move is to have a search party and I forgot the plate. In a rush of panic and fear of discovery I look for something to draw her attention. I hustle through the kitchen into the living room to her usual phone charging location and pluck her phone. My phone was an open book to her CIA-like inquisitions, but her phone was off limits to inspection and even touch. This will draw her attention back to me.

“I am leaving, and I am taking your phone”, I yell down the stairs to her and dash out the back door. I run around the house, through the open gate, down the driveway, and to the door of my 2003 Monte Carlo parked on the curb. Suddenly she is behind me and I frantically try to unlock my door with the key. The key fob has been dead for weeks.

“Give me my phone!”

“Leave me alone,” I cry desperately as her long fingers are slithering around my neck from behind.

As her fingers tighten into place and her arms lung me backward my fight or flight instinct kicks in again only this time my reaction is fight. My PTSD will not allow for my body to be restrained in any way during conflict. In one swift and concise movement I have simultaneously reversed my body and batted her arms away. She throws her hands in a violent frenzy and I push her back, her body jerks with the unintended power of my push and she falls into the street on her back. I jump in the silver vehicle and make my escape.

I circle the block a few times and throw her phone out of the window into the grass next to a stop sign, so I can easily find it again. I need to return to my hobble and rid myself of the burden of discovery. As I pull up to the house she is standing in the neighbors open doorway and watching. I get out of the car and a police cruiser pulls up behind me. She called the cops and judging by the officer’s demeanor she told them I was abusing her.

“Get your hands up where I can see them!” The officer shouts.

I comply and put my hands on the hood of my car. I explain the truth of the matter to the officer and by the time I finish there are three other police cars. He sits me on the porch after handcuffing me, he doesn’t seem to care that I am the victim. He starts conversing with his fellow officers. I notice a short officer with a blond buzz cut snicker and they all take turns alternating looks of pity, disgust, and humor. The neighbors and the fresh marks on my face and neck are my only evidence of the truth.

“I am sure you don’t want the embarrassment of pressing charges” the squat blond officer decides for me, “Can you stay somewhere else tonight?”

This is not unusual. Of the three times I have risked embarrassment by telling my story of abuse, each was brushed aside. My mother asked me what I did to provoke her. My father just ignored me probably trying to pretend he didn’t hear anything. My friend told me to leave her but didn’t seem offended by the abuse. The officer seemed to be a cultivation of all three reactions into one. This isn’t the first time I have had my manhood stripped.

After proving to the officer that I did have somewhere else to go so that he wouldn’t lock me up to “cool down”, as if the ass whopping from a woman and the tears of my embarrassment have not cooled me down enough. I say I need to grab some things before I go. I have my reprieve to dispose of the plate under the couch, after clearing the evidence with a few determined snorts, I leave the house.

“Tomorrow is another day.” I sadly lie to myself.

Another, Another Day

Months have passed since I left my basement dwelling and was forced into the world. She had claimed all the money, furniture, televisions, and even most of my clothes. She divorced me in

two months, a whole four months earlier than state mandates, by using a kernel of truth wrapped in a blanket of lies. She even managed to turn my family against me. I read on Google that this type of abuse, or gaslighting, was common but nearly impossible to prove. Addicts and other mental health issues attend to gravitate toward abusive personalities.

When I first left, I had slept on the disgusting floor of my friend's house. Two senior citizens, one with brain damage, two geriatric cats, two dogs that shit everywhere, and a son that was so useless he would merely step over the dog shit instead of clean it. Some piles of poop had white fur growing on it.

I borrowed money and eventually set myself up in a cheap two-bedroom apartment in a desperate attempt to leave the home. I had been clean for about two weeks and happiness and hope seemed as foreign now as they did when I was in the throes of addiction. Desolation and despair chewed at me every minute of every day. I have not socialized in about a month and the pain of isolation is cutting me deep. I want to die. I want to kill myself.

My apartment has nothing in it but a giant beanbag bed, a television, tv stand, and an Xbox. The bedrooms are as empty as the day I moved in. The walls seemed to absorb my pain sadness and reflect it back at me. It was a miserable existence. I want to die.

I paced the short hallway down to the master bed and back to the living room. I was sobbing and trying to reason with myself aloud. The complete loss of hope and humanity crumbles my body into a heap of blubbering wails on the brown carpeted floor. The sobs can be heard by neighbors on all sides. I half crawl and half drag myself to the bathroom. The options are many. Eat some pills, open my arteries, or wrap my neck in a cord and let gravity do the work.

I inspect the mirror. The person staring back at me is unrecognizable and ugly. Alone and sad. Angry and bitter. I see something else from the man in the mirror. Something shiny and encouraging. I see potential. The pills were in my hand and water was filling the glass. My hands seem to be operating on their own when they both dump their contents into the sink shattering the glass. I call 911 and tell them I am a suicidal veteran with PTSD.

A couple hours later I am in green pajamas at B2 North, the VA's mental health ward. My vacation is just beginning but I already feel new. Just having the courage to ask for help has given me confidence.

"Tomorrow is another day", I say to myself with pride of the truth that finally fills the words.

Judge's Comments

This piece uses bleak, startling imagery and poignant metaphors to capture the feelings of hopelessness, shame, frustration, and despair experienced by a veteran struggling with PTSD. The unexpected light at the conclusion allows the reader to recognize the potential and capability of the human spirit to both survive and to elevate itself over dark and seemingly futile situations.

Second Place Essay

2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

A Journey Through Grief
By Guiseppina Sposito

Once in my life I sailed the ocean of loss and grief. It was dark, it was deep, it was scary, and I almost lost my way. The monsters I faced, the currents I fought, the winds I rode, all gave me a new understanding of this mysterious adventure. I entered those waters as a conceited young woman who thought she knew everything about sailing and life. When I came out, the water had a different taste, the sun had a dimmer light, the horizon was more blurry and distant, but everything seemed more real. Life had disclosed a part of its personality I had never caught a glimpse of before. For that reason, I learned to love it in a unique way. I felt closer to it, more intimate with it and it seemed to me that I had gained a greater insight of its pains, compassions, empathy, and wonders. Sharing them became my greatest privilege.

Hospitals have a peculiar smell. I don't know if it is because of the sanitizing detergents they use or the medicines, but if your eyes could not confirm it, your nose would definitely let you know that you are in a clinic. Maurizio learned to recognize that smell very early in life when at eight years old he contracted a nephrite. We met during my high school years. His incredible smile and passion for life won my friendship at first and my love at last. We had celebrated our wedding only six months before he was diagnosed with chronic renal failure. Unfortunately, after that nephrite, his kidneys did not have the strength to grow properly, and when he was 25 years old they were too small and weak. An unexpected storm had just crashed upon our sailboat, but it wasn't powerful enough to sink it. Three times a week Maurizio was to undergo 4 hours of dialysis and drive another four hours back and forth from the clinic in Rome. But he was a true captain. Always smiling, always strong, always brave.

Now he is laying in a hospital, again. After eighteen months on the organ transplant waiting list he finally had been blessed with a matching donor. He has undergone surgery with no complications, but a subtle infection is now sucking up all his strength. The doctors do not speak about renal failure or organ rejection, this time his kidneys are not giving up. This is an aggressive infection that is penetrating the membrane of the spinal cord. If they don't find a way to stop it, it could reach his brain and become irreversible. Regardless the doctor's efforts, no medication seems to work. Maurizio is exhausted. I ask him if he wants to hold for a moment our three-month little baby hoping the distraction and the joy would ease his pain. "Please Josie, help me" is all he whispers in a fleeting voice. Those words pierce my soul from side to side. He was my warrior, my stronghold, my fortress, nothing could break him. I am desperate. If there was no solution, I'd rather let him go now than hear him plead for a help I cannot give, while suffering a pain he cannot bear. "God, if I am going to have to lose him, let it be tonight, let it be now" I pray.

The next day Maurizio is in a coma, unconscious, peaceful. He sleeps for days, until one morning at 5 AM, while I am breast feeding our little boy before returning to my husband's bedside, the phone rings. Phones should never ring that early in the morning. I understand. I kiss my baby, I get dressed and walk into the hospital room. One more time I sense that familiar smell, I see the nurses, the doctors, but Maurizio is gone. No longer that body holds his warmth, no longer that face hosts his smile, no more dark, brown, deep eyes to get lost in. Just an empty involucre. I feel abandoned. Standing on the threshold of grief, the door has been opened and I

am invited to come in.

Now I am on the verge of a cliff. Cliffs have always fascinated me. The heights make me dizzy and give me a sense of power. I feel as if I could fly. I didn't plan to come here, in fact I am not familiar with this area. Some dear friends have invited me over to spend a few days with them in their house. It is situated on the beautiful lake of Scanno at the feet of the majestic Gran Sasso Mountain. Joseph is taking a nap. My friends are watching over him. I am tired, confused, seeking answers, seeking comfort. I don't get many chances to go for a walk like this allowing my thoughts to wonder and my soul to cry.

"Ok God here I am. How can this be so painful?" I take a deep breath letting the air penetrate my lungs as much as possible. I want to feel something, something else other than pain. "Can I be honest with you? I thought I was strong and I thought my faith was strong. Is this the fruit of my good labor?" My thoughts do not revolve around what Maurizio is going to miss in this life, it's about me, my grief, my loss, my loneliness. Truth is, I strongly believe Maurizio is now enjoying the beginning of a new journey in an eternal dimension. He is feeling a sense of completeness I will never experience on this earth. I picture him embraced by those scarred hands and I sense his heart pierced by the all meaningful look in Jesus' eyes. But what about me? I am stuck here, alone, powerless, betrayed by life, confused about the future. What do I do now about my faith, my life? What direction, what sense do I give to all of this? How can I face a future if I have not figured out my past and I seem to not be able to survive in my present? "God, could I please jump off this cliff and embrace you too?"

I feel no judgment for my thoughts, no accusations, or reproofs. A deep, almost tangible sense of understanding, compassion and empathy invade my whole being. It is as if God is not trying to answer any of my questions at all. He is crying with me. At that very moment I recall a particular instance of Jesus' life when on the cross, before His last breath, He cried out to His father "Why have you forsaken me?" (Holy Bible) I am puzzled: "Was he overwhelmed too by the loss of his connection with God? Did the loneliness of life bring him to the verge of desperation?" And then, a thought arises in my spirit: "Maybe God knows my pain more than I imagine. Maybe His way is not a way out of this life's travails rather a way through them." I stop and think of Jesus' life. It never was a "quid pro quo" kind of experience. It appears now clear to me that He embraced fully not only the richness but also all the messiness and the demands of human reality. So, maybe, faith is not about figuring things out and having all the answers, it's more about a rich, messy, and demanding relationship with God. Suddenly I see it. I sense it. I experience it. God is familiar with death, separation, pain, just as, if not more than we are. He doesn't only feel me, he feels with me. My heart seems to regain some strength. Maybe, this could be enough to keep me alive. Answers can wait, it's not time yet to lower the sails. Joseph will soon wake up from his nap, I need to go back. The journey continues with no more answers to my questions, but with a deeper understanding of God's love and presence.

I stare at my closet. Closets can hold many secrets. I open its door one more time. His shirts, his pants, his shoes, his few ties, his favorite jeans jacket . . . his smell. Two years have passed, and it seems like I still can sense it. I grab a sweater and put it on. He is with me. I try to feel his touch, hear his laughter. I miss him so much. But I have my strategies. I know how to keep him alive and with me. I go in the living room and get the pictures out. All I need now is his favorite music and then I can spend the night pretending he is there. I will feed my soul of the sweetest memories and of our imaginary conversations. I talk to him, and although I know the whispers back are nothing else than my brain filling in the gaps, I believe I can keep him with me forever.

On the other hand, I cannot freeze time. Life is going on. I meet new people, I visit new places, I decide to enroll into a Bible college in America and I travel across the ocean with my son. I begin to realize that I am changing. I am living experiences I have never shared with Maurizio. It becomes always more difficult to imagine what he would have done or said. The tension between life, my present life, and the past, begins to sink deeper. Sometimes pressures come from the outside. “Honey, do you still have his clothes in the closet? Don’t you think it’s time to put them away? Would you like some help?” My mom is concerned about me. She tactfully and lovingly hints at the oddness of my behavior. Inside I rage, but I don’t show it. “She means well” I tell myself. Other times it’s my own heart that seems split. Split between the desire to keep on holding tight what makes me feel comfortable and safe, and the fear of losing Maurizio forever if I were to sail the unknowing.

The options are clear. I could keep my boat docked in that beautiful bay made of memories and invented scenarios, or I could begin sailing again going wherever the winds and the currents decided to take me. I start sensing the need to make my decision. Two truths are irrefutable. First, Maurizio is gone. No matter how much effort I would put in keeping him alive, he isn’t alive. He could only be a reflection of my imaginary way of who and how he would be. Secondly, no one and nothing could ever deprive me of the part of him I have inside. It was woven in the deepest folds of my soul. It made me who I am and would be with me whatever I would become. I could love, grow, change, develop new opinions, live in a different country, start another family, nothing could erase Maurizio’s imprint. There is a part of me who had belonged to him only and had been buried in his coffin, and a part of him that flows in the veins of my spirit.

I realize that either choice I make, I would be losing and keeping Maurizio at the same time, but in different ways. I am standing on a balcony under a starring sky, when I finally decide to say good bye to him for the last time. I will take the risk. I choose the unknown. No turning back, no more sweaters to wear, no more pillow cases to smell, no more smiles to dream of. The closet is empty now, the pictures are put away, and there is an indelible cicatrix on my soul that will bleed now and then reminding me who I am. I raise both, the anchor and the sails, and I leave, recognizing in the scars of all the sailors that I encounter on my journey a precious, unforgettable sign of their own ventures.

Work Cited

Holy Bible, New International Version. Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1984.

Judge's Comments

In this piece, the reader confronts the lurking threat that necessarily accompanies love: the possibility of loss. The speaker describes the death of a dearly loved spouse and the tempestuous journey to understand herself after the loss of such an intimate and integral part of herself. The text skillfully utilizes extended metaphor to capture the different seasons of the speaker’s passage from grief to peace.

Third Place Essay

2018 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Dear Baby Sister
By Anastasia Bragg

Dear Baby Sister,

I have an exam tomorrow and I should be studying for it. That's what college students, especially nursing students, do. They study.

But instead of studying, I am scrubbing my whiteboard with a wet washcloth and elbow grease, because **SOMEBODY** took a sharpie to it while I was at school yesterday. I can't be mad at you, though, because you're so darn cute when you point a tiny finger at your artwork and proudly say "parsey," which translates as "Sharpie." (It also translates as "Sparky" when you are plucking, I mean petting, my dog.)

Anyway, yesterday the "Parsey" was a green marker and it is not coming off very easily. This is not the first time you have taken a "parsey" to my things. You love to sit on my lap and help me highlight in my textbooks. I usually give you my oldest, driest "parsey" for that, because your highlighting is, well, let's just say it is less systematic and more complex than mine. You highlight and take notes in diagrams that I simply can't decipher. You are a 21-month-old GENIUS and I'm pretty sure you're bound for nursing school in another 18 or 20 years.

Oh, and speaking of "parseys", what about the "Academic All American" certificate that I busted my butt to earn last year? You took a hot pink "parsey" to that a few weeks ago. I guess that puts that accomplishment in perspective- it's just a piece of paper.

In general, I think that that is exactly how you feel about my schooling- useful for your entertainment, but annoying when it requires any of my attention, which of course should always be focused on you. I think this because EVERY TIME I break out that 2,211 page, ten and a half pound med-surg nursing textbook, you show up and disassemble my room one item at a time. You bring me every book, paper, "parsey," sock, pair of underwear, and ponytail holder and say "yours sissy" as you pile it on top of my book or lap, and you nod your head with those wide, wide brown eyes of yours and perfect little "O" of a mouth until I surrender the studying session to praise and thank you for your generous gifts that I am now buried in and will have to put back away.

Or, if you catch me with a textbook before I make it to my room to even start studying, you say "sissy, outdoors!" When you look up at me with those big hopeful eyes and that shy little smile, I just can't say no. So we go outside and pet the bunny or look at the moon if it's late. Last week, when I showed you the moon, you wanted it, so you called "come, moon," and beckoned to it with your chubby little fingers- but the moon is less obedient to your wishes than your big sister is, so it didn't come.

These are all mere distractions, but if you find my stethoscope, it's truly game over for my studying. You pull up your cute little pink shirt (revealing an adorable baby belly that begs to be kissed and tickled) say "heart, heart," as you point to your heart. So of course I have to listen to your heart. Then I have to help YOU listen to your heart. Then you have to listen to mine. Then we BOTH have to listen to the doll's. And then yours again, and again, and again ...

Last weekend we listened to your heart for almost half an hour in one session. Your heart is very good and loving and sweet, baby sister. It sounds like a little hummingbird's heart

beating so fast in your chest, and when I put the stethoscope in your ears, your eyes double in size and you hold your breath in wonder at the miracle of a heartbeat. I've listened to so many heartbeats in nursing school that I sometimes forget that each one is a miracle. You remind me that it is.

Baby sister, you remind me that life is a miracle. I can study life and body systems in my nursing school textbooks for hours but nothing, nothing shows me the beauty and value of life like you do when you lay your silky little red head on my shoulder and sing your favorite songs along with me in your sweet, sleepy little voice. And I can get good grades and earn awards but nothing means more than when you run to me with your arms up and yell "sissy, up!" when I come home from school or clinical.

And I can understand the electrical conduction system of the heart and diagram it on a whiteboard and all that, but when I pause for a moment and listen to your little hummingbird heart, it totally and completely melts mine.

Love,
Sissy

Judge's Comments

Simply speaking, this is a sweet reflection on a college student's relationship with her baby sister. On a deeper level, this piece contrasts the concerns of adult life and achievement with the ultimately more important moments shared with other human beings (particularly little ones) which remind us of what is truly valuable and irreplaceable in life. The author accomplishes this through descriptions of commonplace interactions with her baby sister which, given deeper thought, illuminate that which her textbooks can only gesture towards.