

**Liberal Arts Network for Development  
Creative Writing Journal  
2019**

## 2019 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

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### Poetry

"By the Threshold"  
Author: James O'Banion  
Mentor: Shauna Hayes and Sean Colcleasure  
Muskegon Community College

"I want to write a poem"  
Author: Jennifer Stelter  
Mentor: Janice Zerfas  
Lake Michigan College

"Judy"  
Author: Audrey Levanen  
Mentor: Cynthia Brandon-Slocum  
Gogebic Community College

### Fiction

"The Morning Doesn't Reveal All"  
Author: Emma Tebo  
Mentor: Nanci Love  
Bay de Noc Community College

"Her"  
Author: Taylor Strand  
Mentor: Shauna Hayes and Sean Colcleasure  
Muskegon Community College

"Temporary"  
Author: Kaden Kumpelis  
Mentor: Amy Higgins  
Bay College

### Essay

"The Universal Literacy of Hardship"  
Author: Lija Wendt  
Mentor: Suzanne Brown  
Delta College

"My Landlord Bill"  
Author: Samantha Gaudino  
Mentor: Jennifer McCann  
Bay de Noc Community College

"Dear Pauline"  
Author: Renee Sutter  
Mentor: Sanara Petrouske  
Lansing Community College



When this ends, will we know where  
to turn our cheeks and rest our heads?  
For now, we dream of better days to come  
and stay...

I feel safe to be inside with you  
Tonight, I'm convinced  
that all I ever longed for...

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**Judge's Comments**

Great use of language and metaphor. Optimistic in tone with a strong yearning for oneness/togetherness.

**Second Place Poetry**  
**2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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I want to write a poem  
By Jennifer Stelter

I want to write a poem:

like the first snow  
fall of winter;

chilling and beautiful.

I want it to feel like the brisk cold air that clears your mind and  
leaves you numb.

I want it to look like Christmas lights that  
twinkle and taste like

hot chocolate on a snow day.

I want to create

an ice-cold river of stories and

words passionately threaded with commas

yet boldly,

softly,

until every reader

hears my

Feels my

Sees my

laugh piercing their lobes with jewels of\_

pain from past wounds

watching as\_\_\_\_\_.

fear in not choosing the correct word to\_\_\_\_\_.

I want it to be fearless.

I want it to scream at the top of its lungs what it wants to

say. I want to be able to say what I want to

say.

I don't want to

be afraid to write a

poem.

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**Judge's Comments**

Good use of voice and imagery. The protagonist's voice is strong, yet scared with elements of fear and freedom.

**Third Place Poetry**  
**2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Judy  
By Audrey Levanen

The bluebirds gaze at me from their place on the keychain's beads  
as I pull on my hoodie.  
It isn't just a beautiful trinket, but the last piece of you  
that I own.  
My eyes sting as I sink back into the pillows on my bed,  
clutching the memory.  
I try to imagine joining you under the green earth.  
I won't care anymore,  
but my sisters will cry and remember the times we drove through town,  
whistling at the guys.  
They will laugh about the days when we'd wander the men's section,  
trying on the tackiest suitcoats,  
teal with pink flamingos and orange with palm trees.  
They will smile  
over the memories of chasing the neighbors' alpacas down the road.  
My friends will finally laugh  
at all the terrible jokes I made, as I become a void placed under the brown earth.  
I'm not sure when,  
maybe next Wednesday, sixteen weeks from tomorrow or thirteen years from yesterday,  
I'll join you under the white earth.  
Then the beads will be a piece of me left behind for someone else to cherish.  
But now I have to get to class,  
so I return the chain to its spot on my dresser and tie my shoes.

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**Judge's Comments**

Reflective and sentimental in tone. Great sense of memory in the present. Great use of time and space in "the moment."

**First Place Fiction**  
**2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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The Morning Doesn't Reveal All  
By Emma Tebo

It was winter, but the waves still beat at the old lighthouse's walls. It was snowing, but that light still burned in the high tower. Every lighthouse needs a keeper. And as everyone knows, being a lighthouse keeper can be a dangerous job. For that very reason, every lighthouse keeper needs a dog. Hugo was that dog.

A pale sun rose over the dark sea. Waves crashed against the cliff, the rocks were slick with the salty surf, and fog swathed everything, giving the lighthouse an eerie feel. Seabirds wheeled above the cliff, squalling a good morning to the world.

It was a normal day. Hugo started his day as normal. He woke up with the sun, and stretched, opening his huge jaws with a yawn. He blinked a few times and hopped up. He trotted out into the yard, leaving paw prints in the speckles of snow.

Hugo's house was made out of an upturned boat, half-buried in the ground. It left plenty of room for the chubby wolfhound to come and go as he pleased. Hugo was sleeping much more as he got older, his old bones drained of energy much faster than in his younger years.

Hugo rambled around the yard, sniffing here and there. Sometimes stopping to bark at the gulls where they sleepily perched.

The big gray dog returned to his house, and put his mouth around a thick rope, and pulled, once, twice, three times. A large bell mounted to the old boat rang each time Hugo pulled it; it was the start of the day in the lighthouse.

Trotting across the lawn again, Hugo entered the looming lighthouse. He meandered through the house at the bottom of the hulking structure, making his way to the small kitchen. In the kitchen, there was an oven and a set of cabinets and drawers. He maneuvered the bottom one open. Inside of it was a large bowl of dog food, put there the night before by the lighthouse keeper. Hugo quickly ate his breakfast. He wagged his tail back and forth and wandered around the house again.

Usually, the keeper was awake by this point, but Hugo couldn't hear his footsteps on the metal stairs. He couldn't smell the pungent oil that the lighthouse keeper would refill the huge torch with.

Hugo padded around the house. On his way he stopped at each doorway, his ears perked and nose quivering. At each doorway, no keeper met him, but he continued on his way.

When Hugo had made his way around the entire house, he was quite sad that he couldn't find his

lighthouse keeper. He whimpered softly and put his nose to the ground. Maybe he could sniff out his keeper.

He could smell his keeper, his smell was old like it was from that night. It had the smell of salt, tobacco, and damp wool. Hugo could smell the keeper's night meal of smoked fish, faint now. There was no trace of the keeper's normal breakfast, seabird eggs, black coffee, and pickled pork.

Hugo looked up the daunting stairs, and heaving a sigh he started up the rickety iron wrought stairs.

The dampness from the fog hadn't reached the inside of the lighthouse yet. The wood fire in the basement of the lighthouse had warmed the iron of the stairs under Hugo's paws. The salty ocean smell got stronger as Hugo made his way up the stairs, spiraling up, up, up.

He was panting by the time he got to the second level of the lighthouse, his joints clicking and creaking. The small room was about half way between the floor level, and the sky high torch. This was the keeper's bedroom. His smell permeated the air all around Hugo. The big dog quietly stepped around his keeper's room. A small white bed pressed against one wall. A desk against another.

The desk was dark wood, and messy. It was an organized mess, covered in stacks of beautiful, neat, books, and maps rolled and clasped. A row of candles stood away from the papers, a puddle of wax around the one that burned the night before.

Behind the candles on the desk, lovingly cared for, was a set of picture frames. The lighthouse keeper had bought them together on one of his few trips to the small fishing village across the water. The frames themselves were tarnished silver, and the pictures inside were old and fading.

One was a picture of the keeper and his family. He was younger then, and had his arms around a beautiful woman, and their young daughter.

The second picture was of Hugo as a puppy. Hugo was on the keeper's lap, licking at his face. The keeper's wife had taken this picture, and Hugo remembered their laughter.

The lighthouse keeper's family was gone. They hadn't come around in a very long time.

The room was very still. So still that Hugo could hear the birds caterwauling through the stone walls. He could smell the lighthouse cats above them. The cats never ventured down the stairs, and Hugo couldn't go and greet them now that he had found the keeper.

With soft steps, he approached the small bed. His keeper's smell was strongest there, but he couldn't hear him.

Hugo huffed happily and sat quietly next to his master's bed. His scraggly tail thumped against the floor.

The lighthouse keeper didn't rollover. He didn't chuckle and pat Hugo's heavy head. He didn't show his face for Hugo to kiss.

Hugo whined, his tail ceasing its happy rhythm. The room was silent.

Hugo sat there, waiting for the keeper to wake, to move, to start about his daily routine.

But the keeper didn't move. He lay on his stomach, the blanket pulled up to his ears, and his battered flat cap pulled down over his nose.

This would've been a very normal day.

But Hugo's keeper didn't wake up.

But Hugo would wait.

...

Hugo always waited.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This was a simple story, an account of everyday life. What made it beautiful was the fact that it was told from a dog's point of view. Hugo the "chubby wolfhound" is an endearing character. From the beginning of the story, I wanted to know what went on in his day and how he felt about it. We don't often get a glimpse into the emotions, experiences, and thoughts of dogs. The author wrote about Hugo's experiences with seriousness and compassion. By the end of the story, I felt for Hugo. And I cried for him.

**Second Place Fiction**  
**2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Her

By Taylor Strand

I shouldn't have worn this dress. I mean, it's a great dress, and God knows it wasn't cheap, but *I* specifically shouldn't have chosen it for tonight. Or ever, really.

It's sequined. And pink. *And* short. *AND* tight. All of the things that never flatter me. Some people can pull off sequins, but I am definitely not one of those people. Honestly, I don't know anyone personally who can pull them off; they're such a specific fashion statement.

The bathroom door rasps as someone pushes it open. I reach down to act as if I'm washing my hands and not staring at myself amongst the ambiance of flickering, harsh yellow lights, and the creaking of rusty plumbing overhead. I do have *some* dignity left, at least. I expect the typical parade of drunk girls to waltz in, linked arm-in-arm, and theatrically wheezing about something probably as funny as a knock-knock joke. When only one girl finds herself rounding the corner, however, I let my eyes slowly drift to catch her reflection in the mirror. She seems bored and doesn't say a word as she makes her way into the first stall amongst the completely empty bathroom. When her door is securely locked, I raise my eyes back up to the dress, leaving the water running in the sink before me.

*It really isn't a bad dress*, I think, letting one of my damp hands run down the front. The texture is rough, and I internally cringe as my fingers follow the curvature of my stomach. Too tight; this dress is too tight. At least, too tight for me. I never wear things of this cut: short enough to show a substantial amount of thigh, constricting enough to make it look like I have *some* essence of a figure. My eyes fall to my hand, the dress backdropping my skin. Normally this rosy shade flattered my milky dark complexion, but something is just not working with this ensemble tonight. Maybe it has something to do with the girl standing across the bar which I can't seem to get off my mind, but I want to pretend I'm not that person-- the person who hides out in the bathroom, staring at herself because her game is terrible and her self-esteem is as wishy-washy as a trophy wife who knows her husband is having an affair.

But I am that girl. I have *always* been that girl. I've also always been the girl who does nothing more than swoon. Who does nothing more than watch from across the bar and swoon; hopelessly. I wanted tonight to be different, but as I stare back at my reflection, I'm unsure. Unsure of myself.

When the woman in the stall emerges, I move my hands back to the water, pretending to vigorously scrub them as if something has stained me. Quietly, she walks over and washes her own hands, and as she pulls out a few rolls of paper towel, she turns to me, stating, "Nice dress," before exiting. The words bounce back and forth, echoing in my brain. It *is* a nice dress. And I don't want to swoon anymore.

With one deep inhale, I turn off the faucet and look at myself one more time, nodding.

*No more hiding.*

It's so much louder on the bar floor than it is in the bathroom. I mean, it makes sense, but I've been stowed away in there for so long I became accustomed to the altered sound, it seems. Some weird, up-and-coming techno music with barely any lyrics or vocals of any kind. Though I don't think many of us come to gay bars for the music. At least, I know I don't.

In this area, it's pretty tricky to find someone who you can relate to. Someone in the community. And it's risky; you get the wrong idea, start barking up the wrong tree, and things could go south fast. I always find a sense of community when I'm here. It's one of the only places I can openly talk without fear of people being judgmental. So, I'll deal with the obscure techno if it means I can keep this sense of community.

I glance across the floor of sweaty bodies and glittery feather boas, and for a moment, I'm worried she's left. She's not in the spot that she was the last time I saw her, right before I retreated to the bathroom. Then, however, I briefly spot her silvery-white hair disappear behind a group of guys dancing. That was the first thing I noticed when I saw her. Her hair was unlike anyone else's here. Short, very short, ending only one or two inches, maybe, from below her ears. It looked beautiful with her dress.

I continuously mutter "sorry" and "excuse me," as I make my way through the crowd. It's packed in here, everyone jumping in time to the music and taking shots left and right. Aside from a few elbows to the chest and a couple stray hands grazing specific parts of my body I make it through relatively unscathed. The crowd is significantly thinner around the edges, and when I surface, I feel momentarily accomplished before stopping dead in my tracks when I realize that I'm now standing directly behind her.

Her dress is open back, something I didn't notice before but am surely not complaining about now. She has pale skin, paler than the average person, and it contrasts nicely with the dark navy blue of the lace that crosses just over her shoulder blades. With the high collar to make her look that much taller and the belted waist to make her look that much more statuesque, it's evident that, unlike me, she knows how to pick a dress.

*Now what?*

She turns.

"Oh, hi."

*I guess that.*

"Hey," I reply, dragging out the word as I scavenge through my mind for something, *anything*, to say. Not like I have even the slightest chance of formulating a sentence now that I'm close enough to see the intricate details of her face. "I, um—"

"Nori, right?" she asks, and my stomach drops. Multiple ways as to how she could possibly know me come to mind, none of them particularly admirable with my history of being a complete embarrassment.

"Yeah, how...?"

She chuckles, flashing a stunning smile, "I was here a couple of weeks ago when you did that trivia night. Your team won."

Relief cascades through me. "Oh, yeah, that." She seems a bit puzzled as to why that was such a relief, so quickly, I inquire, "and you are?"

"Theo."

*So far, so good.*

I had seen her with a couple of others earlier, but now it seems as if she's alone. "Here with anyone?"

"I was. A couple of friends forced me to come out," she begins, then gestures out to the crowded floor, "now I think they're lost in there somewhere."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"Well, I'm not normally into this kind of scene. I only ever really come to clubs when they drag me along. Plus," Theo throws a thumb over her shoulder, and I realize now that we're

standing right before the bar, “I have a drink waiting to be nursed. I’d rather do that than dance, I think.” She has a small grin on her face. I’m trying not to stare, but she has these dimples. These little but distinct dimples that could quite possibly be the thing that’s making me light-headed.

*What am I thinking?*

I open my mouth to reply, but Theo turns when the bartender taps her shoulder, and she takes the glass into hand, giving a single nod of thanks before turning back to me. Her smile hasn’t wavered. “So what about you, you here with anyone?”

“I, uh... no,” I shake my head, “I’m not.”

“That’s a shame. You seem fun.”

I nearly choke on my own tongue. “What makes you say that?” Cue nervous laughter.

“I don’t know,” she cocks her head slightly to the side, and her hair dangles just above her shoulder. It leads my eyes to the floral tattoo I can’t fully make out in the dim, pink and purple lighting, “but I’d like to find out. Wanna sit? My friends will be out there for a while, and I’d much rather nurse my drink with company.”

I’m in the deep end now. I’m thrashing around in the deep end with no knowledge of how to swim and nothing to help me keep my head above water. Stupidly, I say, “sure,” because isn’t this what I wanted? That’s what I came over here for, to talk to her. And when she asks if she can buy me a drink, I say “sure” again, because this... gorgeous girl is talking to me. Talking to *me*, and who wouldn’t accept a drink from her?

For a second... no, more than a second... I fight off the urge to sprint back into that bathroom with the harsh yellow lights and the creaky plumbing. I’m used to the hiding spots. I’ve grown accustomed to the hiding spots. I grew up and found comfort in the hiding spots. And I can’t hide here, standing face to face with someone like her. I can’t hide in this dress, in all it’s pink, sequined, tight glory. I’m exposed. But for *once*, I’d like to be the person who met someone in a bar and flirted. Talked for hours. Stared at them from across the room and felt something.

So, I *will* be that person. If only for tonight, I’m going to make myself that person.

Theo’s fingers graze mine as she hands me my glass (her hands are soft), then leads us through the energized crowd to a corner of the bar where there are mostly unoccupied tables. I watch as she sits down across from me, then swiftly tosses her hair back. My breath catches slightly. She’s so beautiful, and I want to tell her. I’m going to tell her. I open my mouth, though pause with the words at my lips.

“Yeah?”

I let out a slight laugh, “I just, I wanted to say that um, you’re... very pretty. You’re stunning. I-I’m sorry if that’s too forward, I just—”

“No, no, not at all. Thank you. I would say the same about you.” There’s that smile again. The smile that makes my chest hurt. “And you look spectacular in that dress, by the way.” Theo locks eyes with me as she says this, and at that moment, I’m enchanted. The music’s loud and the crowd’s alive, and everything is just as you’d see it in a movie.

They’re brown, her eyes. A dark, glossy brown. Glossy. Her eyes are glossy. They pull around the edges. They look startled. Why is she startled? Is she... crying?

She takes in a shuddering breath, and I realize she’s no longer looking at me. She’s looking *past* me. “Oh my God,” she whimpers.

I don’t even have the chance to turn before the shots ring out over my head. There’s screaming, there’s shouting, there’s more gunshots.

Time stops for me at that point. I’m paralyzed in my chair. *Shooting. This is a shooting, I*

repeat over and over in my head. *This is a shooting. You're unsafe. Hide. Now. Hide under the table. Move!* I'm screaming in my head, but I can't feel anything.

*Move. Move. Move now! Mo-*

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### **Judge's Comments**

The story was really well told. I wasn't expecting the ending. I was wrapped up in the story of Nori, her feelings of introversion and inadequacy, and then her elation when she gets to talk to Theo, the girl she'd been admiring from across the bar. The author's repeated use of "hiding" and "hiding spots" foreshadowed the ending of the story. But I didn't realize it until the horror of that ending started happening.

**Third Place Fiction**  
**2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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A Walk Home  
By Kaden Kumpelis

Cynthia was working late, again. This was the third time this week alone. She had just finished work at the town pharmacy and health clinic. She smiled as she got into her “piece-of-shit car” and she prayed that this wouldn’t be the night that it just wouldn’t start. Unfortunately for her, it was. She gave the car door a nice hard slam as she decided to walk home and deal with the car in the morning. Luckily enough, her house wasn’t too far of a walk. Cynthia turned and began walking down the sidewalk in the direction of her house.

A cool fall breeze blew by as she tightened her jacket. She stopped to look at the trees being whipped by the wind and noticed a light through the branches. She continued walking following the light with her eyes. As she walked, the trees started to thin out and the light became clearer to her as to what it could be. “A fire?” Cynthia thought. She started to become concerned, but this concern was soon consoled as she began to hear music. She thought that maybe this was just a house party, but then she realized where she was. She was in front of the town’s cemetery.

Confused, she walked into the cemetery to have a closer look. She walked over a small hill to see a massive group of people sitting in chairs and standing around a large bonfire. The music was just loud enough to be heard from the sidewalk, but now it was quite loud. She went a little closer to the party and saw a man wave to her to come and join the party. Cynthia didn’t recognize him but felt inclined to come closer to the party anyway. She was right in the thick of it now. People were laughing and having fun around her. She wondered why they would have a party in a cemetery, but then remembered that she should be walking home. As she began to leave, the man who waved to her approached her. He looked as if he was trying to say something, but was drowned out by the cacophony of sound. Cynthia said, “The music is too loud I can’t hear you.” and that she was just about to leave. The man gestured to a tree near the entrance of the cemetery. Cynthia gathered that he wanted to talk over there so that they could hear each other. The man led and Cynthia reluctantly followed.

As they neared the tree Cynthia realized that he was going to walk into a tombstone. It was too late to warn him. He fell forward over a tombstone and onto a muddy grave. Cynthia thought that the way he fell and how he didn’t see the tombstone was odd, but dismissed the thought, figuring it was because it was quite dark. The man laid there and didn’t move or acknowledge what had happened. Cynthia asked if he was all right, but he did not reply. Cynthia worried about his physical condition and offered to help get him to the sidewalk to see the extent of the damage. The man nodded and Cynthia struggled to lift him up off the ground. Both of her hands now completely covered in mud, she was finally able to lift him up from the ground. She then put his arm around her to help him along. They start walking down the hill.

They finally made it to the sidewalk. Cynthia noticed that everything had gone dead

quiet. The music had stopped playing and the wind had stopped blowing the trees. She started to realize how cold the man's arm felt. She turned to look at him but found only a cold decaying skeleton. Cynthia screamed and let go of the body. It fell to the ground facing the cemetery.

Turning around, she saw no fire, no people at all, only a tombstone next to a tree with upturned earth.

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### **Judge's Comments**

I really enjoyed the suspense in this story. The end, in particular, was really well done. I think the end welcomes the reader to wonder just what Cynthia would be thinking after the events that just occurred.

**First Place Essay**  
**2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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The Universal Literacy of Hardship  
By Lija Wendt

I have spent a good majority of my life avoiding children. It isn't that I disliked them, but more so that they pointed out the things in my life that I so desired to live in ignorance to. I had a stroke as a baby that left me with left-side weakness, unable to use my left arm or walk without an apparent limp. Regardless of my physical hardship, I never let anyone put limitations on my life; therefore, I tried to live in complete denial that I had a disability. After graduating high school, I moved to Atlanta, Georgia to spend the next three years working with a non-profit outreach center. Ironically, one of the main focuses was a children's outreach called Metro Kidz. Despite my reservations towards children, I felt called to help abused and neglected kids, and this was my chance. Being a white female who grew up in suburban Michigan, it was obvious that I was completely illiterate on what it was like growing up in inner city Atlanta. I soon discovered that hardship is the literacy that connects people regardless of their backgrounds. I found that my connection with the children in Atlanta had nothing to do with similarities of our past, but our ability to accept one another because of our mutual understanding of hardship.

It was instantly clear that I could not even begin to relate to growing up in the "slums" of Atlanta. The neighborhoods that we worked in were unnerving in their sights, smells, and sounds. By outward appearance, the homes looked to be abandoned, except that people flooded the streets. Children as young as two ran free with no parents in sight, and men with guns strapped into their boxers gathered on various corners. Front doors were often wide open, revealing living rooms with nothing but mattresses on the unkept floor. The grounds were littered with trash and drug paraphernalia, and the air was always thick with the smell of marijuana. At all times you could hear nearby yelling and distant sirens. In this world drugs, gangs, and prostitution were the everyday reality. I had never been faced with as extreme of hardships, but to my surprise the children seemed to accept me anyways.

The first thing that struck me about the kids were that they responded to my disability differently than I had ever experienced. In Michigan, children would stare at me as if I was the first disabled individual to ever walk the earth, but kids in Atlanta would either appear unfazed by my disability, or they would boldly ask questions seconds after processing that my skin color wasn't the only thing that set me apart. I became good at answering their questions. At least once a day a child would run up to me, cock their head, and bluntly ask, "What's wrong wichu?" My answers always varied depending on if the question was sincere, or just a means to state the obvious: there was something wrong with me. As a stroke is a complicated answer for children, I usually stated that I got sick as a baby and now, I couldn't fully use the left side of my body. They would look at me, head still cocked for a couple more seconds, and then proclaim, "Okay," before running off to play. The children easily accepted my disability, and in turn they seemed to accept me.

I soon realized that the acceptance that I received from the children was because we had the common grounds of being literate in hardship even though our life experiences were vastly different. One summer day we hosted a dance party for all the kids to attend, where I met a nine-year-old girl named Chanice. I could see that she was drawn to me as she carefully examined my

arm and gait. As she stood in front of me, I prepared for the normal question and answer exchange to which I had become accustomed. To my surprise, she reached out to touch my hand and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I offered, glancing down at the concern and sincerity on her face.

“What happened?” she asked softly.

We sat down and, by her prompting, I told her the detailed story of my disability. When I finished her eyes began to well up and big tears fell down her cheeks, staining her face. This was not the response I had anticipated, and I tried to convince her that it was okay.

“It is so sad,” she kept saying, “that’s just not fair.”

At this point I stopped trying to justify the situation. She was right, it was not fair. My constant struggle to keep up with those around me was sad. I understood at this point that she was not just talking about me. I knew that her tears were for every individual in her life that had obstacles in front of them that were the size of mountains, and many weren’t making it to the other side. I held her as she sat and cried into my neck. As I did my best to comfort her, I shed a few tears of my own. It was one of those rare moments in life where two people just sit in their hurt together, not seeking to solve it or pretend that the hurt doesn’t exist, but simply acknowledge that they are not alone. Our differences were irrelevant. We were brought together through our shared literacy of hardship, not even because of anything I told her, but because of the hardship that I wear every day for all to see-- my disability. The thing that I had been hiding from my whole life, was the exact thing that allows me to connect with those around me.

The next time that I saw Chanice was the hottest day of the summer, the kind of Atlanta day when the air is so hot and humid that everything you touch is sticky. We went to the neighborhood where Chanice lived, an apartment complex, a quarter mile from Fulton Industrial, the hot spot for sex trafficking in Atlanta. Most mothers of the children who lived there were prostitutes, and most of the little girls would follow in their mother’s footsteps. We gathered in the center of the complex where there was a field full of dead grass and litter. Chanice ran to me instantly and we sat in the field a little way from the group and just talked. The heat didn’t seem to bother her as she was sitting against me the entire time.

Chanice stretched out her hands and grabbed both of mine. She held my left hand, a gesture that I had never let anyone do. I felt so incredibly exposed in this moment, sitting in our sweat, having a young girl embrace and accept the part of me that I had spent my whole life running from. She looked at my hand with such care, tracing the imperfections as if within it she would find clarity of the world around her. She then looked up at me with a soft smile.

“Can I braid your hair?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, smiling back at her, “I would love that.”

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### **Judge's Comments**

Through narrative, the writer provides sensitive description of the "literacy of hardship" that accompanies disability, poverty, and loss.

## Second Place Essay

### 2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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My Landlord Bill  
By Samantha Gaudino

There are some people who appear in your life by happenstance. Some may call it fate or destiny, while others may call it pure luck. These people are often just blips in our lifetime, going unnoticed. Other times, they impact us in ways that shape who we've been, who we are, and who we will someday become. For me, Bill is one of those people in my life. Bill is my landlord. He rents me a beautiful home for my husband, baby boy, and I that sits on top of a hill overlooking the water. There's a large fenced in backyard for our dog Daisy to explore and a patio for family cookouts in the summer. The backyard is filled with a variety of plants that Bill has grown. Upon moving in, this is something I learned about Bill. His love for plants. Throughout the first summer that we spent living here, he would occasionally come spend time with his plants, pulling weeds and watering them. The green shrubbery, unique trees, and rose bushes make the yard inviting and warm. They are the home to bees and butterflies in the summertime. There's a bonsai tree at the gate's entrance. He would spend time trimming the bonsai tree to create perfect little branches and then use one of the many hoses tucked in the basement to wash away the trimmings from the patio. Last summer, however, he began trusting us to care for his plants, a task we willingly took upon ourselves.

In the basement, aside from the hoses and sprinkler systems, the basement is filled with his other possessions. A vintage dog sled stands up high in the corner, seemingly untouched in years, but well worn. It is made of lightly colored wood and is formed with planks. A torn rope is attached to the front. Next to the sled, a beautiful white hammock, perfect for relaxing in the sun, lays folded on the floor collecting dust. We were told we could use it if we'd like but never have. In the center of the room, there's a children's cotton candy machine. It is painted with beautiful rich colors of purple, blue, green, and yellow. It doesn't work, he told us, yet he still holds onto it for reasons unknown to me.

In a separate room of the basement, dozens of names, dates, drawings, and quotes are written in colorful marker on a white concrete wall. Young handwriting, I assume from parties and childhood friends of his. There are inside jokes, funny drawings, and hearts filled with unknown initials. Against the wall, there is a weight bench, perhaps used very long ago. There's a stray baseball in the center of the room, a dusty glove sitting next to it. It is hard to imagine them being used once, likely to play catch or practice pitching. Bill has not been very forthcoming with these types of stories, yet you can see in his eyes the memories this home brings him.

My first interaction with Bill was not as his tenant. I met him when I was just ten years old. Our encounter was brief, and I never imagined that we would ever bump into one another ever again. It was the morning June of 2006. I was living at home in Gladstone with my mother. I woke up on the couch, where I had fallen asleep the night before. I could feel the AC blowing out cold wet air and could hear the hum from the fan. The sun was beating in through the window. It was probably around 10 a.m. I looked over to see my mother laying on the floor. She appeared to be passed out but was babbling gibberish words. I tried to wake her up, but as her eyes opened, she was still unable to form words. I was scared, my little heart pounding out of my chest, unsure of what was wrong or what to do about it. I ran outside to my neighbors' door, knocking and sobbing, calling out their names. Nobody answered. I stepped off of their porch, frantically running back to mine. A kind mailman, likely in his forties, stopped me to ask if everything was okay. I shook my head, unsure of if everything was okay. He seemed friendly to me in that moment, a short old man with curly hair

and permanent wind burned cheeks.

I told him my mother was on the floor and wouldn't wake up. I invited him inside, still sobbing. He dropped his bag and ran over to my mother. He gathered himself calmly and asked if I had a phone to call 9-1-1. My mother took away the cell phone she occasionally let me play with, but I knew she had hid it on the top of the entertainment center. I grabbed a chair and reached up to get it, handing it to the mailman and listening to the call. My young ears heard him explain to the dispatcher on the other line what was happening, using words like unconscious and unresponsive. He waited with me until police arrived and then went about his workday as usual. His name was Bill. It turns out, my mother had suffered from a stroke that morning, making it to the hospital just in time to survive and then eventually recover. I had never gotten to thank that mailman.

In March of 2017, more than ten years after my mother's stroke, my husband and I responded to an ad for a house to rent. We toured the home with a lovely couple, decided we wanted it, and sat down with them to fill out the paperwork. While filling it out, we made small talk about the winter and how we all couldn't wait until Spring. The man chuckled and told us how he was used to it because he's been a mailman for 20+ years. The entire tone of the conversation changed, as I began sharing about my mother's story and how appreciative I am of all mail carriers now because of it. The man's face went blank. He walked out of the room, not saying a word, and returned a few minutes later crying. We all sat around him, confused, until he spoke up and told us that it was him. He was the one who had helped me, who had saved my mother's life. He remembered me as a child, barefoot and sobbing in my neighborhood. I embraced him with a hug tearfully. My husband stood in shock, as he knew the story and knew how much it had affected my life. Bill's wife Amy stood there, still confused. It turns out that Bill never told anyone about that day. He humbly thought he didn't do much at all, just dialed a phone. This speaks volumes of his character.

Now, I rarely see Bill. Sometimes, I will pass him on the road as he's out delivering mail, a job that still to this day fills his heart. Sometimes, he will come to fix a leak or a broken toilet for us. When he does come, he brings a pocket of treats for our dog Daisy, his face lighting up when he sees her excited and waiting. We have never talked about our past since the day we signed the lease. We have an unspoken connection with each other because of that day so many summers ago. Although we've hardly spoken, he has been in my life through every big defining moment. From when I got married, gave birth to my son, and celebrated another one of my mom's birthdays, he has been a person on the sidelines going unnoticed.

I don't know much about Bill, but from the few encounters I have had, I know this much. He is a man full of stories that sit too close to his heart to tell. He is a lifesaver and a lover of nature. He is a dedicated man who is humble and adores dogs, brought into my life not just through happenstance, but by fate. I believe that we are meant to be a part of each other's lives, even if only in seemingly small ways. He is a symbol of hope for me, exuding a light in my life that I am unaware of most days. So if by chance, long after I'm moved out of his home, fate brings us together again, I will smile.

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### **Judge's Comments**

A compelling character sketch which begins with a rather ordinary description of a landlord, and then takes us to the past, where we see the full impact of his character.

**Third Place Essay**  
**2019 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Dear Pauline  
By Renee Sutter

The only Great Grandmother I knew was named Anna. I was seven when she passed away and I can still remember her smile, her frail arms outstretched to embrace me, her bony arthritic hands sharply contrasted against the smooth youthfulness of my skin. She lived to be 90 years old. In the years after her passing, my mom would often remark how I had Anna's ingenuity and ability to make something out of nothing. I cherished these moments because it bonded me to this strong woman that came before me and whose branch, I found comfort beneath on my family tree.

And then I learned of you.

My Grandpa was only five years old when you died. He was just a small, baby-faced boy who still lived in an imaginative play world and desperately needed the tenderness of his momma. He and his three siblings were all under the age seven when you vanished from their world. He never spoke of you. I often wondered if the few years of memories he had of you became faded and lost their sharpness over the years, or if he was silent because you lived so vividly in his every waking thought and he was burdened with a grief too powerful for words. No, sadly he never spoke of you. Actually, no one in the family spoke of you until I was old enough to learn the truth.

You were 24 years, six months and eight days old when you died. A young, reliant woman married at 16 and mother to four children ranging from seven to two years old at the time you passed. The baby inside of you was at least four weeks old. I think about how you must have felt. Overburdened with expectations and responsibilities, stretched beyond means to care for the little ones, and likely anemic from years of continual breastfeeding and pregnancy. As a child you were not sent to school, which meant you had very little possibility for a life that was not completely reliant on your husband. So, you did what you felt was needed to preserve the delicate balance of survival for your family. Even though it was illegal and life threatening, you decided to use the means available to a desperate woman in your condition.

Pauline, this was the last decision you ever made.

Sometimes I wonder what you looked like and if I inherited your jaw line, your nose, or your smile. I've never seen a single photograph of you. When I sing to my children at night, I wonder if you did the same until their heavy eyelids closed and they sank into a peaceful deep sleep. When you brushed the hair from their eyes, did you become overcome with love and pride at who your children were becoming? Did you ever dare to think you would never be there to see them grow and create families of their own?

The death certificate lists your cause of death as influenza, miscarriage, and an abscess fallopian tube. It doesn't list that you suffered septic shock following a botched abortion. It doesn't share how your seven-year-old daughter, six-year-old son, five-year-old son, and two-year-old daughter were thrust into a world where their beloved momma no longer existed. It doesn't describe how your children's meals were never prepared the same, their clothes never again smelled of your perfume, and how they no longer fell asleep comforted by their mamma's voice. The piece of paper merely stamps the time you came to me and the time you were gone, not the precious moments in between.

Our two lives have been separated by SO years, two months, and 29 days. Yet as I look in the mirror, for a fleeting moment I see you. I see a woman faced with daily challenges and struggles to do the best she can by her family. A wife wanting to create a loving and safe place for her husband and children. A mother who fiercely loves her children and would risk it all to care for them.

Dear Pauline, your family tree has continued to grow. Your children grew up and created families of their own that have now created families of their own. It is an honor to meet you and take refuge beneath your branch on our family tree. All my love, your Great Granddaughter.

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### **Judge's Comments**

Through the epistolary method, the writer creates a picture of a woman she never met but who directed her path through DNA. This piece grapples with a controversial issue of our time, with compassion and understanding.