

**Liberal Arts Network for Development  
Creative Writing Journal  
2014**

## 2014 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

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### Poetry

"The Cage Fighter"

Author: Kayla Grose

Mentor: Denise Hill

Delta College

"Come In Or Go Out But Don't Stand There

With The Door Open"

Author: Michael Wilson

Mentor: Brian Ivory

Mott Community College

"Loving My Body"

Author: Lisa Wright

Mentor: Bill Milligan

Bay College

### Essay

"Boots on the Ground"

Author: Wesley M. Schmitz

Mentor: Bill Milligan

Bay College

"A Room for Daughters to Grow"

Author: Madison Lowery

Mentor: Barbara Clauer

Lansing Community College

"The Spangled Pearl White Shoes"

Author: Meiling I

Mentor: Denise Hill

Delta College

### Fiction

"Vintage"

Author: Benjamin Champagne

Mentor: Denise Hill

Delta College

"Bank Shot"

Author: Kristine Groth

Mentor: Teresa Scollon

Northwestern Michigan College

"The Vampire Diaries"

Author: Michael Wilson

Mentor: Jackie Knoll

Mott Community College

**First Place Poetry  
2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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The Cage Fighter

Kayla Grose

You sat, hands clasped,  
elbows on your knees,  
and head bent forward.  
Blonde hair caught in  
false florescent lighting  
at the same time  
I caught the air  
rushing through my lungs.  
You didn't look the same,  
but, of course,  
tattoos never change,  
and the one wrapped  
around your arm  
was the only thing  
that seemed familiar-  
besides the way your  
hair reflects harsh light,  
almost like sunlight  
caught within a dusty bottle.  
You pretended not to  
see me for a few moments,  
eyes tracing patterns  
on your boots, but  
of course, I'm not unaware.  
I pretended my heart wasn't  
pounding like a cage fighter  
in my chest, a cage fighter  
with everything to lose, but then I let  
the charades fall to you.  
Because here we are-  
two strangers yet again.  
And I'm only now realizing,  
as I watch the way you  
hold yourself when you  
so clearly know I'm watching,  
that we were always  
just two strangers.  
And though before  
I could trace the contours of your face

and recall the way you enunciate your "f's  
with perfect clarity,  
I knew nothing  
about what sort of cage fighter  
you held within your chest.

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### **Judge's Comments**

"The Cage Fighter," begins in deft observation and ends with emotional insight. In between, Kayla Grose captures two people in the moment they meet after a considerable time apart. With carefully rendered description that captures what it feels like to be both familiar, and a stranger to someone you thought you knew, her sensitive eye to the nuances of human behavior, she transports the reader from the page to the scene itself. I especially admire her description of hair "like sunlight / caught in a dusty bottle," precise details such as "the way you enunciate your "f's" / with perfect clarity," and natural storytelling voice.

**Second Place Poetry  
2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Come In Or Go Out But Don't Stand There With The Door Open

Michael Wilson

I am from a black and white television  
set, from a day-old loaf of Taystee bread  
and a glass bottle of McDonald's Dairy skim milk left at the back door.

I am from a restless repeatedly remodeled house  
with the stale lemon scent of Murphy's Oil Soap used on the stairway  
walls to scrub away my dirty hand prints,  
and a secret spot on the varnished paneling  
that opened a hidden door under the stairs when pressed just right.

I am from the sour green apples  
that hung over the fence in the backyard at the red house next door  
and the sweet cherry tree on the other side of the driveway  
whose fruit was pitted with mom's hair pins to make delicious pies.

I am from Clement Street,  
the street with three families who shared the same last name but were not related.  
I am from Grandma's Christmas parties in Kawkawlin,  
and the annual family reunions at the Crump Fox Club,  
from Aunt Amy and Uncle Jack on Brownell Boulevard  
to Aunt Blanche and Uncle Jerry and all the cousins in Pinconning.

I am from "sit still, make your bed, as well as stop talking"  
and "Get back in the bathtub; you still have the same dirt on your face."  
I am from the Farmers Market on Tuesday, cleaning the house on Thursday,  
countless penny ante poker games Saturday night, going to church every Sunday morning,  
and taking First Communion with a hole torn in the knee of my trousers  
because I tripped on the concrete curb running in from the parking lot.

I am from McLaren Hospital on Ballenger Highway in  
Flint and related to the French Canadians near Montreal,  
and we dined on a dozen day old donuts from Buttercup Bakery  
sliced in half after breakfast on special occasions,  
and devoured pickled ground bologna sandwiches on white bread  
wrapped in wrinkled brown bags for our school lunches,  
from the time Mom and Dad left their six kids with a babysitter  
for five weeks while they went to Europe,  
to the time my sister Julie ran out the front door  
as my brother Kevin ran through the same door,

taking most of the glass with him back to the emergency room  
at McLaren Hospital on Ballenger Highway in Flint.

I am from Grandpa's Polar Bear helmet and hand grenade relics of World War I,  
framed but too heavy to hang on the wall  
so instead they stand at attention in the corner of my office,  
and his favorite pipe rests at ease inside a shadow box in my dining room.

I am from the old yellow high chair that served as a stool  
for military style haircuts and holding the meat grinder for mixing bologna and pickles,  
and the stool is now a plant stand in my living room,  
and floating weightless upstairs is my pre-kindergarten space rock drawing  
autographed by John Glenn.

I am from Central United Methodist Church,  
Longfellow Community School,  
Northern High School,  
and Buick City,  
All of these places are now closed.  
I am from the places that are closed.  
But,  
I am still open.

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### **Judge's Comments**

Michael Wilson's "Come In Or Go Out But Don't Stand There With The Door Open" is a time capsule depicting a world of black and white televisions, WWI relics, sweet cherries and penny ante poker games, and in this sense. Longer poems must be particularly successful at maintaining the reader's attention, so it's a special achievement to write one that sprawls and wends over three pages without losing force. Also notable is the way Wilson employs elements of nostalgia without turning saccharine or pat. His details conjure a time and a place, now gone, which provide the setting for realizations about where the he's from, who he is, what he cares about. Like the "secret spot on the varnished paneling / that opened a hidden door under the stairs when pressed just right" this poem opens, and the poet himself is open, although at the end he realizes that he hails from "places that are [now] closed," like Buick City. In that sense, he's written an homage, and a kind of elegy, for southeast Michigan.

**Third Place Poetry**  
**2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Loving My Body  
Lisa Wright

My body is not modeled after the women in magazines;  
But like the Renaissance women  
Dancing around the trees,  
They love themselves phenomenally.

My thighs don't gap,  
My tummy is round,  
Breasts fit to feed a child,  
Feet hold me firmly on the ground.

My body is not slender  
Although it used to be.  
What happened to me?  
I became a woman.

My body is loved  
And built thick like a tree.  
My body is phenomenal—  
Hanging in museums for all to see.

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**Judge's Comments**

If more young women and girls read—or better yet, wrote—a poem like “Loving My Body,” ours would be a happier, healthier society. Lisa Wright’s ode to her body “thick like a tree,” with feet that “hold me firmly on the ground” is also a manifesto in which she invokes the idea of loving one’s self “phenomenally”. In terms of theme and tone, she’s writing in the tradition of the likes of Lucille Clifton and Maya Angelou, and her unabashed attitude about her female body carries a resonance that’s immediately inspiring, and sadly, rare in its vitality.

**First Place Fiction**  
**2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Vintage  
Benjamin Champagne

Whitney liked to arrive early. Sit in the parking lot and get herself together. She had an unusually large vanity mirror, with lights on her visor. A major selling point. Applying eyeliner, she could ponder the contradictions of her girlfriends.

She could think of things even she didn't agree with. And this is a hard thing to do. She poked her lips out, considering balm. She thought past that, then stopped at a name. Whitney could not always divide herself. Her girlfriends would approve, but her mother wouldn't. Or vice versa. Or nobody would approve and certainly never her father. And getting herself to approve on top of it would prove harder still. So she didn't tell anyone she was meeting Kelly to go thrifting.

She continued fussing with her hair, alternating between innocent eyes and vixen, devouring smiles, as she does in parking lots. Brief practice for the conversation ahead. A bearded man knocked on her passenger window mid careless-sex-pose. She collapsed the visor elegantly and gathered her things into her purse. Never looking up, never feeling startled. High on herself. She opened the door, took one step and spread her arms out. Kelly swept around the car and hugged her.

"I cannot believe you're wearing that nasty beard."

He rubbed it into her neck and she fell out of his arms like liquid.

"Straight granola these days," Kelly said. He stepped back and put his hands in his pockets. He looked her up and down, asked her if she was getting better looking.

She dug through her purse and found her cell phone, put it on silent in a covert act. She wasn't trying to blow anyone off specifically. She just thought it better not to be distracted. Kelly hadn't seen her in a while. She hadn't thought of him in a while. They broke up over a year ago. She knew the break-up was coming and so her life didn't halt one bit. It may have sped up.

"So what do you want to show me?" Whitney perked up as the sun sank in her skin.

He told her she would find out once inside. They walked in and neither had to fight any nostalgic urges. Kelly was too rambunctious to hold hands while shopping. Everything stimulated him. This is what attracted Whitney to him. Though in practice she found it was too much. She had to scold him. She had to be a bitch. And worse yet, she liked doing it. She found her own angry face to be sexy and thought he must as well. Still, she felt guilty

deriving pleasure in such incidents. This sort of conundrum would invoke itself on the two in everything they did.

The old ladies working the register were talking intensely about recipes or grandsons or blacks or discounts or medicine or Republicans or vacations or Christmas or crocheting or work or church. They were not talking about true love. Whitney and Kelly slipped in unnoticed. Kelly went into the corner and pulled a fedora from a rack. There were feather boas and winter hats, a Playskool telephone was wedged onto the end. Kelly handed it to Whitney, "It's for you."

He told her that was it. The reason he had her come out.

"Really, come on. You know I'm bad at waiting," and she rocked her shoulders a little. Mostly she could wait. She liked to make sure that Kelly still wanted to satisfy her. Whitney was a smart girl. She could rely on herself for trivial demands. She finished school.

Kelly laughed at her. She realized she over-did it with the Monroe-esque line. She laughed at herself and threw a feather boa around her neck. He peeled the fedora off and put a plaid cabbie hat on. They walked down the aisle with all the busted electronics. Kelly liked to scour for obscure VHS tapes. He collected a few. Whitney always thought they were junk, but she stole one from him. A copy *This Old House*. Bob Vila inside Frida Kahlo's. After her divorce. It was strange, but Kelly never asked for it back.

"Doesn't Saul wear these hats?" Kelly asked. She knew it would come up sometime. Kelly didn't bother with tact.

"Sure. He wears whatever he wants. I don't keep track," she said. But she did. She kept track. And she liked the hat with a particular set of dark glasses. And she didn't mind it on Kelly either.

"Is that really what's going on? I mean, I know it is. It's our little quarterly check-up. I tell you about me and the artist. You tell me about some drunken hook-ups." There, she thought, this is what we both wanted. His lack of articulating what they were both thinking is why she left him.

Kelly lifted his hands in arrest position. "Okay," he said. "I don't have any drinking stories. I've mostly been by myself. All my drinking is E. A. Poe style." He thought this would intrigue her. She always said he was a weepy-philosophical drunk. It was one of those attract-repel things. Not now. Whitney saw in hindsight pure repellent raven.

"Oh my god. Are you still doing that shit? There, Saul would never do that. You think you're classic, but you're just corny. 'Corny Kelly is crying because T.V. is ruining the world'," she mocked. "Yeah, we get it. Jersey Shore is what's wrong with America. But I got shit to do."

Kelly smiled inside. It pierced Whitney, just a little, to pretend those things were so frivolous. But really, who had the time? She started thumbing through men's shirts. Kelly

knew she was looking for specific paisley patterns. They could've written dictionaries to each other's daydreams.

"Are you still making scarves?" Kelly asked. They used to take weekly trips to thrift stores together. They would usually stop for the 'bag for a buck' deals. Whitney made scarves. The frayed old-western types that musicians wear. Along with vintage dresses and boots she would sell online. You get a variety of patterns cheaply at the thrift store, Whitney would say. It was an excuse. She always loved revitalization. Finding the brilliant flairs amid all the worn out. Sewing memories together for 'hand-me-down happiness.' The smell. Garage and attic. Hiding. Sharing that smell.

"Yeah, but ever since I started at the co-op I don't have time. I mostly just make them as gifts now." Co-op made Kelly's stomach turn a little. Picturing all these artists rubbing elbows with each other. Pretending they have their lives together. For the instant they are together, knowing that they do have their lives together. Kelly was looking for t-shirts with wolves on them. Preferably in Tie-Die. Whitney held up a shirt with gold piping and white and red paisley on brown. "Perfect," he said.

"All right, I'm going to walk behind you and cover your eyes. I don't want you to peek. You are really going to like this," Kelly said. He got behind her and resisted the urge to nuzzle his big beard into her back, grab her by the waist and hump her. He was unsure if it was typical male or a fog from the oxytocin released in his brain upon sight of her. He walked her down the aisle without any sexual advances.

"Now keep your eyes closed until I say." He leapt in front and said Ta-Da.

He leaned back, reclining on an orange corduroy sectional couch, circa 1970 whatever. She smiled brightly and it faded into a giggle. Whitney walked over and sat next to Kelly. Only three parts were in an orderly fashion.

"What do you think?"

She really didn't know what to say. She had always wanted a vintage couch. None she had ever seen to that point fit her exact description of 'vintage-couch' like this one. Kelly was beaming. Proud of his discovery. She thought it was cute, but she knew the mess 'cute' could make. She thought about asking the price, but that implied wanting it.

"Oh my god, Kelly, too much. How did you find this? I suppose you expect me to fuck you now?" she laughed and laid back.

"You always said, vintage couches and shag carpet made you horny," Kelly didn't really honor that statement. He straightened up and told her upon finding the couch he thought of her. He sighed.

"It's too late. I think I'm moving in with Saul. I don't have room for it anyway," Whitney sat back up.

"You've always wanted one. Suddenly you don't?" He threw his leg over a fray in the upholstery.

"I don't know. I don't have the room. I can't just rebuild all my décor around one piece of furniture. I don't think Saul will even like it. He'll think it's tacky or ugly. He thinks the retro is there to serve the new. Not to be applauded," and she cast her gaze at her feet. "Are you ever going to grow out of that stuff, evolve?" She looked at him.

"Whoa, whoa. Don't think the couch thing is some metaphor. I mean, yeah, I can't turn down public sex on a corduroy couch, but... This isn't some effort to win you back. I just thought you wanted to see a great couch. I thought you would appreciate it," Kelly demonstrated sincerity. She could tell he meant what he said. She always had a problem with his lack of concealing. She could see right into him. He was transparent except for a little core, like the seed of an apple that reflected Whitney right back. "Besides, I might consider not fucking you in this thrift store. Old Jenny would get pissed," Kelly said and fingered a macramé hemp bracelet.

Whitney reeled a little. She had never suspected that the little core was capable of reflecting back whatever gazed upon it. Whoever. That his core could reflect back another. She stiffened up and gathered all the sex from the vanity mirror of her car. Composed she said, "Oh yeah? I bet I could seduce you." And he didn't respond. They were both rubbing their hands over the fabric of the couch until Whitney noticed. She reached into her purse absent minded. Her hand touched her cell phone. She pulled it out. One missed call. Two missed texts. Saul had texted that he saw her car at the thrift store but couldn't stop. The second noted that she hadn't told him she was going out that day.

"Excuse me," she said and texted back to Saul. She said she was with Taylor grabbing shirts to make scarves. Then she texted Taylor to cement her story. She turned a little from Kelly so he couldn't see her typing. "I'm going to grab a few more shirts," she said.

The two walked out together into the purifying sun. It made them realize how truly dark it had been. The fresh air turned their bloodstream into southern California. Traffic and people and birds and garbage and carbon monoxide and vibrant colors and advertisements and train whistles and puddles and chocolate and that fucking-not-attic-air reminded them that it's good to go to the thrift store, if only to leave.

They hugged near Kelly's beat up car. He stole a kiss at her cheek. She spotted a big tangle of hemp looking stuff in the back seat. "What's that?"

"Jenny made it," Kelly said. "It's a hammock."

"Hmmm..." she wrinkled her nose. She thought Kelly's car was a mess and all that rope wasn't helping. She walked back to her car and closed the door. The solitude and the pent-up heat overcame her. She pulled the visor down and mussed her hair. Pursed her lips. When she started her car, she realized she never even asked the price of the couch. She wanted to know the cost.

### **Judge's Comments**

Benjamin Champagne packs a lot into his tight, impressive short story, "Vintage." Using a complex point of view that moves between two characters, Champagne takes his reader into a thrift store—"The smell. Garage and attic"—and then into the complicated, not-quite-over relationship of an ex-boyfriend and ex-girlfriend—"Sharing that smell." Champagne has a facility for engaging the senses, and a keen eye for the telling details: "She had an unusually large vanity mirror..."; "Kelly was looking for t-shirts with wolves on them." The voice of "Vintage" is authentic and easy-going, the language precise and inviting. And the story is like the thrift store itself, filled with things left behind and discarded, pawed over and searched through; filled with what was and what almost was. I have no doubt that we will be reading more from Benjamin Champagne in the future.

**Second Place Fiction**  
**2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Bank Shot  
Kristine Groth

A lot of memorable moments in my life start with "that one time at the bar."

At thirteen, that doesn't sound so good, but Margaret had never worried about winning any Mother of the Year awards. After many nights sleeping in the staff room, playing pool and pinball, and becoming master of the video poker machines while Margaret worked late, bars were practically home for me.

Besides, bars had air conditioning. The blacktop sizzled through the window and I knew the truck was going to be an oven when we left. Everything was coated in a yellow-orange haze—sweat trickled down my forehead just looking outside. I hated heat.

"Do you want another one?" A voice drew me back into the air conditioning.

Clyde, my stepdad, waited at the edge of the polished square table, shifting uncomfortably due to a past leg injury. He jerked his stubbled chin toward the plastic cup half-filled with Coke and ice. I shook my head and reflexively took a sip. Too much pop led to too many trips to the bathroom.

Clyde smoothed back his messy dark hair before replacing his baseball cap, and the metal legs of the chair scraped the thinly-carpeted floor as he sat down. He tried to smile, but I saw the tick in his jaw and the way he rolled the white toothpick in his mouth jerkily. Trouble was coming.

She came out of the bathroom on the other side of the bar, bumping into the jukebox as she tried to thread through the tables. She wasn't graceful by nature, since she often ran into walls at home, but we'd only been here twenty minutes. Beer had been downed before we left.

Margaret was a short, thin lady who rarely stood down to anyone, even when she was wrong. She did clean up well, with tight jeans, low-cut shirts, and curly blonde hair that she spent hours fixing. But wrinkles were starting to blossom on her face, and her skin was starting to mimic the leather on her saddles. She was only twenty-two in her mind.

"Were you listening?" she slurred. Her scrunched face and poofy hair were like a cat bristling in the glass.

I kept my face neutral and nodded. I hadn't been, but drunk babbling was difficult to understand anyway.

She plopped down next to me ungracefully, splashing some of her beer. Last time she spilled the whole thing. I coughed a little as her orchid-scented clothes infected the air. She had put on too much, but she didn't seem to notice.

Margaret reached over to touch my face despite numerous protests from me. I leaned away automatically—I had enough problems with blemishes without adding oily fingers.

She was trying to imitate the ideal mother-child relationship she imagined, but she was doing it wrong. And usually in public. I used to think she was trying to make up for lost time after the divorce, but the problem was that real life wasn't like a movie or the books she read on occasion. It didn't matter if the stories she told were false. She was only worried about making herself look good.

Of course, that meant she got offended when I brushed her hands away. I would probably pay for that later. With a huff she straightened up, although she leaned slightly to the right.

A nasty scowl sat on her puffed up mouth. Like a rattler, she was coiled and ready to strike. If I had been a little younger, she probably would've dragged me off to the bathrooms by the hair like she used to—a "potty call" is what she named it.

Clyde was trying to give her a look, but it was like she had blinders on. I stayed silent and stared at the posters with beer advertisements behind my stepdad. In the mirror gleamed the green-matted pool table with spotlights and shiny orbs.

Clyde had been teaching me how to sink cut shots and put spin on the ball after years of rolling cues around like Skee-ball. Some days I thought I was pretty good—when we got to play. But hope was kept under the table and out of sight.

Margaret made a less-than-pleased noise and dropped her arm so hard that her wedding ring clacked sharply on the polished surface. It hadn't taken long to realize that she wasn't a fan of pool—or cards, the movies...anything else that wasn't drinking. Even her horses took a back seat.

Before the fight could start—because that was inevitable—heavy, creaking steps on the ramp outside preceded the jingling of the bell above the door. One of Clyde's longtime friends rolled in like the cool rains we badly needed.

Jack was similar to Clyde in that they were both dark-haired and tanned. They even wore the same blue construction-logoed cap. But Jack loomed over my stepdad by a good foot, and he had a grin that hinted at a mischief in his eyes that Clyde lacked. Jack could talk without needing to breathe, which was what I was counting on to prolong the train wreck that was on the way.

Jack made a beeline for our table as he called out for a drink and immediately launched into a story. This time he told us he had raised his longest-lasting girlfriend's kids, even though he was just the boyfriend.

"And you know what? It didn't matter. I raised them kids and I was glad to do it," he said.

I did an arm pump in victory when he finished.

He and his handlebar moustache grinned. "Yeah, right on! Thanks for that."

"They were probably good kids. Not like mine!"

That had never happened in public before.

The table went silent as she sloppily took a drink. I was shocked into silence at first. Then my fists clenched.

She had crossed a line I didn't even know was there.

The cars sped by on the road as my cheeks burned, boiling underneath the skin. It was one thing to say something like that at home, but it was another to do it in front of other people. Margaret pushed back from the table to stumble to the bathroom and I wondered how much of that she had even taken in.

More people came into the bar to distract us after that. I didn't know most of them. Some waved at Clyde or Jack before crowding around the counter or the jukebox. Eventually, two more friends joined us. With Cathy and Joe, our table was a little cramped. Luckily, Clyde had a solution for that.

"Okay, brat, why don't you go set up," he told me as he held out a fist. It rattled when he shook it.

Quarters rained into my palm, and I rushed off to rack the balls on the pool table. Margaret was momentarily forgotten as the game absorbed me. The coin slot made a gear-grinding wrench as I punched it in, and then there was a staccato of thunks as all the balls fell off the shelf and tumbled into the pit. I made the pyramid on one end with a practiced ease as my shoulders uncoiled. The challenge curve of the game was fulfilling in a way my family wasn't.

We broke up into teams of two. Margaret used it as an excuse to hang on my shoulder and her beer-stained breath fanned my face. Like in cards, I silently begged Clyde for help with wide eyes. She always reneged when we played Euchre, and even though she shined at pool after one or two beers, she was wasted now.

She pouted, but Clyde volunteered for my team so he could teach. Margaret's idea of helping me consisted of shouting. She immediately got over it by ordering another beer.

As afternoon burned into dusk, more and more people added their bodies to the mob until there was a pleasant buzz of conversation merging with the jukebox. A good indicator of time was how wild Margaret became. I think she was trying to dance, but her drunken

flailing translated into loud stomps. For being so small, she sure wasn't quiet. My shoulders tightened with every outburst. I expected the bartender to kick us out.

Clyde thought so, too. When she bobbed and weaved her way to the bathroom, I watered down her beer and he didn't say a word.

Eventually, a couple people at the bar were starting to shout almost as much as Margaret and the jukebox had been turned up to an almost-painful level. The walls shook when the bass of a rock song started up.

The noisy backdrop needled my spine as I gnawed my bottom lip and breathed. The pool stick was cool between my fingers as I braced my hand on the felt table lip and eyed up my next play. The solid maroon seven-ball was tucked neatly behind a row of striped decoys and a bank shot was the only way I could get it into the corner pocket—I had never pulled that off.

I set my breath free and mumbled, "You weren't raised to be a chicken." Then, with a smooth motion, slid my arm back and snapped it forward. The next breath lodged in my throat as the cue ball snuck around the other spheres, bouncing off the back wall. I winced as the white ball nearly scratched, but the maroon one kept rolling toward the corner pocket.

It went in.

A bubble of my own excitement was barely contained in my chest, and I turned to Clyde with a grin, striking a pose with my pool stick held out and my other arm akimbo. Before I could say anything, Margaret's voice rose to beyond normal levels as she spoke to Cathy. She wasn't even watching.

"—And she doesn't do anything for me. Mine's such a bad kid, she doesn't even love me!"

That balloon in me popped and the remnants soaked into my stomach lining. Everyone went quiet. The jukebox even finished its track and paused between songs.

Margaret still had a goofy smile on her lips. There was a certain spark that betrayed she was more aware than people thought. Standing up and sticking her chest out, she dared anyone to say differently. I had nothing to say.

Clyde did. "Margaret. Enough. You need to stop."

She glared at him—at all of us. Then, she stomped her shiny cowboy boots to the door and wrenched it open without a word. The tantrum continued all the way down the wooden ramp, and the hollow creaks faded when she reached the truck.

Clyde let her fume in the dirt for a few minutes before he went to the window and hit unlock on the key fob.

I stared hard at the shiny spheres on that green field, wishing that life's problems were as easily solved as making a technical shot. Tables had filled up with bikers, old guys, and barely-legal teenagers laughing and smiling, but ours was quiet. It was still my shot.

I missed.

When we got home, Clyde left Margaret to fend for herself. She banged the door three times before she managed to pull the handle and push it open at the same time. Then, her feet folded under her and her body flopped to the ground. All she did was giggle.

Clyde threw up his hands and kept walking. "Just leave her."

I half-dragged her into the house and into bed stomach-down so she wouldn't choke if she threw up. Aspirin and water were left on her nightstand. She wouldn't remember any of it. A tiny part of me still hoped she would.

The sting didn't really come from her words—repeated at home, family gatherings, and camping trips. They did awful things to the head, but that wasn't what ate at me. It was just one more thing she would miss in my life.

Like that bank shot.

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### **Judge's Comments**

"That one time at the bar." This phrase from the first line of Kristine Groth's bold story told from the point of view of a thirteen-year-old daughter of an alcoholic mother holds the damaged heart of this piece. The teller—referred to only as "brat" (it's an affectionate term) by her stepdad—spends this one time at the bar watching her mother get drunker and drunker, and overhearing her talk about what a rotten kid she (the teller) is with her friends. She's not a rotten kid. She is a broken girl who tries to hang on, tries to make things better by doing as she's told, by playing a good game of pool, by listening to the bar stories of her parents' friends, by easing her passed-out mother into bed even though her stepdad, dejected and disgusted, tells the girl to "just leave her." This is an ambitious story of sadness and hope, made from material that I expect Kristine Groth will return to often in her writing life.

**Third Place Fiction**  
**2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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The Vampire Diaries  
Michael Wilson

Hi. My name is H R, which is short for Holiday Rambler. I'm a 27 foot long travel trailer. I've been pulled all over America and it's never a vacation for me because I am expected to do all the dirty work while my owners enjoy all the benefits of retirement. I thought I was along for the ride as they explored the National Parks. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered my real purpose. I was to be the nanny for their dog. This rude little Chinese crested hairless pedigree looked down her snotty little nose at me with contempt.

Before my current owners adopted me, I lived pet free in Florida. I was a contented house on wheels and adored being parked year round at a senior community that had rules against pets. My original owners handpicked me from a factory nearly twenty years ago. I came equipped with a full kitchen, half bath, queen size bed, air conditioning, front and back doors, and plenty of windows and screens. I was built right the first time and built to last. Or so I thought.

When the new titleholders retired in 2010, they window shopped for a used trailer to explore the National Parks. By lucky chance, they found me in a back yard. I was the picture- perfect little darling for them and they showed me off to all their friends. I imagined living out my days and nights as their special baby. In the beginning, they showered me with all sorts of presents. New tires, a new mattress, a fresh paint job and an upgraded electrical system, all these gifts made me feel like royalty.

Then I was introduced to the real princess. They called her Bella, but I came to know her as Bella Lugosi. The very first time I babysat her it was me that shrieked in terror as she slashed my screen door wide open. I felt as though vampire fangs had been sunk deep into my veins. My blood curdling screams were ignored. When the Wilsons returned, I was left abandoned while they consoled the little aristocrat. It seemed they only cared about her feelings; not mine.

When we arrived in the Florida Everglades, the park ranger warned us against taking the dog on the walking trails. The alligators were looking for lunch and they had Chinese in mind. I got trapped babysitting Bella again. As soon as we were left alone, I got violated once more. She completely shredded my screen door; top and bottom. "Oh you poor baby, did you miss us?

"Were you scared all alone? It's OK. Good Bella." My pay for babysitting was half a roll of duct tape to cover up my tattered screens. Geez, if they had wanted to see alligators, why didn't they take the gator bait?

Stupid dog never learned a thing. Next time I had to babysit, she tried to shred the door again. When her owners got back her paws were all entangled in the duct tape. I laughed myself silly. My pay this time was a new screen. Stupid owners never learned much either. In the following months, the screens over the bed, over the sofa, and over the dining room table were all mutilated and had to be replaced several times.

At Yellowstone Park, she couldn't go on that one hike because of the Grizzlies. I couldn't bear having her in the trailer going crazy. When we all got to Glacier Park, I suggested we just leave her on ice to chill out. Then we went to King's Canyon in California, where I thought they should've left the little princess. Alcatraz would have worked too. Or that canyon in Arizona would have been a grand place to drop her in a hole a mile deep. When they got to the giant redwoods along the Pacific coast, at least I got a break. She got to go on those hikes. I wish big foot had been real; he could have had a nice little lunch. A rattle snake had its eyes focused on her once in New Mexico. So did a bald eagle in northern Michigan. This bird actually tried to make her into a hat. I cheered for my new feathered friend, but as usual, no one listened to me.

I have proof the problem isn't me; it's her. One time in North Carolina, they left her home alone in a house when they went out for dinner with Cousin Amy. When they returned, the dog was nowhere to be found and the only clue was a missing screen in the backyard window. Unfortunately for me, a neighbor heard something scratching at their back door a few houses away. My hopes were dashed. She had run away but was returned to my custody.

I'm currently in storage until the summer. Everyone recognizes me. I am the trailer with the shredded venetian blind. I can't wait for the first camping trip of the new season. I have a few surprises up my sleeve. I've done my homework and made my shopping list. Vampires hate crucifixes, holy water, direct sunlight, and garlic. Here Bella Bella Bella.

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### **Judge's Comments**

Talk about your surprises! This story is a charmingly funny piece that makes up its own rules as it goes. Michael Wilson uses the title to lure unsuspecting readers like me in, and then he shifts things up immediately with his hook. I have read thousands of stories in my life, but I guarantee that this is the only story I have ever read told by a Holiday Rambler, a hulking old (yet proud) recreational trailer. And H R (his name is H R, he tells us so in the second line of the story) held me captivated as he gave a brief history of his quiet beginnings ("I was a contented house on wheels and adored being parked year round at a senior community...") and then went on to give the dramatic and brutal details of his present day life. The storyteller was not who I expected him to be; the vampire was not who (what?) I expected either. In the hands of another writer, I might have felt tricked. In the hands of Michael Wilson, though, I felt delighted.

**First Place Essay**  
**2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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Boots on the Ground  
Wesley M. Schmitz

South Carolina's verdant landscape passed by with little ceremony. The beautiful, seventy degree weather mocked us through the age stained windows. The Bluebird bus evolved into its own biosphere, a world apart from the everyday life behind us. A maelstrom of unfamiliar accents swelled through the air, amplified by the austere interior of our transport. The only scent more powerful than the Old Spice in front of me was the sweat behind me. The cloying fog within the bus dwarfed South Carolina's impressive humidity.

Three days had passed since I arrived in South Carolina. Vaccinations, gear distribution, and Power Point presentations somehow managed to claim sixty of those hours. Apprehension, fire guard, and restless cat naps accounted for the rest. The thirty mile ride to Fort Jackson offered reprieve from the stale bureaucracy of initiation. My mind drifted to the events leading to my southern vacation.

I was fifteen when the world Trade Center fell. The patriotism, fear, and anger that swept through the nation in its wake became a third parent. I wanted to learn why these things happen. Rather than balancing my high school studies, I filled my course schedule with history and literature. General Patton's biography replaced The Lord of the Rings in my personal library. Consequently, war films and documentaries supplanted science fiction films on my Saturday nights. For the first time, I appreciated history, and history is war. As a soldier, I would a part of something lasting, something meaningful.

Images of burning towers, men clawing through the beaches of Normandy, and R. Lee Ermey raced through my head. The only sensation more powerful than the apprehension was the exhilaration. The training ahead of me promised growth, challenges, and adventure: everything an eighteen year old yearns for.

No one spoke to anyone in particular. Half heard rumors of what to expect found their way to my ears. Some said our deployment locations were already decided. Some said drill sergeants could still hit us. Others described second hand information from friends and family members. As far as I was concerned, none of it mattered. We would know soon enough what the military had in store.

My eyes focused on the seventy-five pound rucksack before me. Somehow, I managed to force five complete uniforms above my issued three-piece sleep system. Canteens and an entrenching tool were fastened to the exterior of the pack. Survival manuals, land navigation supplies, a rain poncho, and snivel gear threatened to burst the seams. Chalk flavored toothpaste, disposable razors, and dry deodorant filled the remaining nooks and crannies. Every pound insisted on sapping the feeling from my thighs.

My boots, still infused with the aroma of fresh leather, gnawed at my heels. Raw skin melded with damp wool under the oppressive footwear. Blood, sweat, and swamp would eventually render the boots pliable, maybe even comfortable, but not yet. Shifting canvas and creaking seats signaled consensus from my peers. Trying to ignore the discomfort, my attention returned to our travels.

The vibrant forest showed signs of distress as the miles ticked by. Lanes cut through the woodlands to prevent controlled burns from spreading too quickly became more prominent. These firebreaks gave off the scent of a morning's neglected campfire, though no sign of a recent fire could be glimpsed. Abandoned guard houses and miscellaneous shacks marked the shift from civilization to militarization. Rounding the final corner, menacing concertina wire surrounded a manned gatehouse. We had arrived.

The Bluebird's air brakes engaged, creaking to a reluctant halt. One hundred yards of asphalt baked in the midday heat, choking what little oxygen remained in the bus. My hands couldn't wipe enough sweat from my eyes. Once more, confusion and irritability took hold within the confines of our vehicular prison.

"What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

"Shut up and wait probably."

"Figures..."

A wave of silence cascaded from seat to seat. Broken words ceased in mid-sentence. Two men approached in step, each wearing the Army's distinctive mottled woodland camouflage pants, a black short-sleeved shirt, sunglasses, and the hat: the hat that marked a drill sergeant. Never had Smokey Bear's head cover appeared so menacing.

Confidence and charisma preceded the first drill sergeant as he entered the bus. One glance at our ragged, sleep deprived, morose faces told him all he needed to know. The drill sergeant's voice resonated throughout the bus, completely in contrast to his relatively slight frame. He introduced himself and voiced his expectations.

"My name is Drill Sergeant Perez. For the next nine weeks, you belong to me. Listen carefully. Y'all better be trackin' like heroin addicts. I will not repeat myself for your bene..."

An innocent cough interrupted his forceful oration.

"Do that again and I'll shove this boot so far up yer ass my knee sweat will quench your thirst! That's it! Rucks above your heads and hold em!"

My rucksack leapt into the air, powered by panic and confusion. Drill Sergeant Perez continued his profanely vivacious oration, yet I heard nothing. The salty sweat continued to burn and tear as if it were a fiery razor. My muscles faltered as seventy-five pounds of torture bore down upon me. Wavering from side to side, the uneven weight of the rucksack

refused to cooperate. With mere seconds remaining before the pain rendered me debilitated, the drill sergeant's voice breached my stupor.

"Now get off my goddamn bus!"

The bus pitched as thirty rucksacks plummeted in unison. A sense of panicked urgency overwhelmed us as our bodies wrestled their way through the aisle. One by one, we recruits spewed from the bus like ants from a mound, falling into formation on the sweltering asphalt. The remaining drill sergeant wasted no time greeting us.

"I'm Drill Sergeant Copeland, and since I'm not killing people right now, I'm gonna smoke the dog shit outa you to fill that void in my heart! Push-ups! Now! Until I'm tired!"

With defeated expressions, we assumed the push-up position, also known as the front leaning rest position. After twenty-five repetitions, I could barely move; others had already collapsed. My hands braced against the burning ground, struggling against the gravity that threatened to break me.

"Did you think this would be easy? If anyone could be a soldier, I wouldn't be a soldier!" Drill Sergeant Perez howled over the collective agony of the recruits. "Now, on your feet!" With misplaced optimism, we managed to rise and stand at attention. "That weren't nearly fast enough! Grab your rucks and run around the bus; we call it 'circle the wagons'!"

I fell in with the platoon, jogging in a loose circle around the bus. Our rucksacks pressed heavily with each stride. The pace steadily lessened as exhaustion undermined our resolve. After ten minutes, our ragged breathing symphonized with the sound of combat boots scuffing the asphalt. The sound mimicked a panting sled-dog team dragging luggage across the pavement. With a final exasperated grunt, Drill Sergeant Perez ceased the arduous task and ordered us into formation.

Within twenty minutes, my life transformed irrevocably. The trials meant to forge adolescents into warriors wasted no time in leaving their impression, physically and mentally. An intense pride swelled within me from merely surviving one morning. My muscles threatened to shut down. My eyes, bloodshot from the exertion, struggled to remain open. My palms bled from push-ups on cooked asphalt. Nevertheless, a surge of dignity and honor overcame the physical discomfort. I could do this; I *wanted* to do this.

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### Judge's Comments

This personal essay reflects upon a difficult childhood experience. Her choice: unaffordable pearl white shoes. Parents' choice: practical too-big-so-you-can-grow-into-them dull black shoes. With her new black shoes, the little girl learns that life is not a fairy tale and that others may make her choices. Through the author's use of narrative, dialogue, and detail, this common childhood disappointment becomes an agonized and individualized rite-of-passage, bringing insight, growth, and maturity to her. At the same time because the

incident takes place in another country and culture, it reflects the universal learning of how choices are made for us and by us — and the consequences and great significance this realization may have.

**Second Place Essay**  
**2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**A Room for Daughters to Grow**

Madison Lowery

Upon first being planted and into the beginning stages of their lives, seedlings are extremely vulnerable. Their growth depends on what their roots soak up from the soil, the light that is available and the space they are given to grow in. Similar to young plants, a child's development depends deeply on what they are absorbing through their surroundings and the space that they are provided to grow in. The poems "Breaking Tradition" by Janice Mirikitani and "Abbot Academy" by Julia Alvarez both explore the complexities that arise when young generations of women are either uprooted from their surroundings or are not given adequate conditions to develop in. As Alice Trupe states in Reading Julia Alvarez, Alvarez's "writings [often] revolve around immigration and assimilation, bicultural identity, Latino(a) culture in the United States, literacy, women's roles, and patriarchy", all of which are present in her poem "Abbot Academy" (Trupe 121). In this poem a young Latina girl expresses her distaste at being sent to a boarding school where she believes that she will be "tamed" into the American ideal of a lady. Similarly, as Guiyou Huang claims in Asian American Poets: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook, the themes presented in Mirikitani's works are often "in response to degrading images of Asian American women" and specifically in "Breaking Tradition" she "writes about the compassion, strength, and survival skills of Japanese women through three generations," (Huang 237). In this work, Mirikitani uses a narrator that is both a mother and a daughter to describe the conflicts that inevitably arise between generations of women and the debilitating effects that cultural limitations can have on those attempting to survive within the boundaries of expectations. These two poems express that in order for younger generations of minority women to break free from gender expectations, the requirement to assimilate into American culture, and the overall confinement of oppression, they cannot simply rebel against the generation prior, but they must instead forge their own identity.

Both "Abbot Academy" and "Breaking Tradition" begin with lines that express that the gender expectations imposed on young women by their mothers make it difficult for them to discover and grow into their own identities. The authors' choices of points of view in each poem makes for drastically different perceptions, which in turn, influences the tone of each poem. "Abbot Academy" is narrated by a daughter harboring anger against her mother while "Breaking Tradition" is narrated by a middle-aged woman who has her own daughter and is also harboring an ill feeling toward her own mother. "Breaking Tradition" opens with the narrator claiming, "my daughter denies she is like me," (Mirikitani 2). She later duplicates this phrase by also denying she is like her own mother and eventually explains that this distaste is rooted in a resentment of their culture. The tone of resentment represents that idea that separations between generations are painful. The narrator in "Abbot Academy" echoes the idea that the sense of betrayal felt by daughters could provoke retaliation. In the first line of this poem, she bitterly explains, "Mami sent me to Abbot where they tamed / wild girls - or so she'd heard - into ladies / who knew how to

hold their skirts down in a breeze / and say 'Excuse me' if compelled to speak" (Alvarez 1-3). The emphasis here is that the mother is doing the "sending" and this is seen as a betrayal by the daughter, thus fueling a further separation between the two. This stanza also sets up the qualifications for "ladylike" behavior that are presented in each poem and indicates that the mother is setting the standards, again. These behaviors include controlling the inhibitions of youth, practicing modesty, and knowing how to stay silent, all with the vision of transforming the "wild" daughter into the American ideal of womanhood. Trupe explains, "this cultural mandate that hold up a happily ever after as the goal for U.S. girls limits Latina girls' models for [leading] fulfilling lives," (Trupe 126). The ultimate goal of being molded into marriage material ends up dictating what a young girl can become and these limitations are echoed in "Breaking Tradition". When the narrator is reviewing the confines of womanhood, she sorrowfully admits, "we feel our hands / are useless dead speechless clamps / that need hospitals and forceps and kitchens / and plugs and ironing boards to make themselves useful," (12-15). Here, the mother admits that her own possibilities have been whittled down and the idea of "speechlessness" as a trait of womanhood is paralleled. In *Images of Asian American Women* by Asian American Women Writers, by Esther Ghymn, the stereotypes in literature surrounding Asian American women are explored and the point is made that "speaking is [often] properly associated with strength" in literature, therefore, the speechlessness encountered by the narrators in each poem is evocative of their lack of power (Ghymn 14). Furthermore, the "need" that the narrator describes feeling towards domestic items and tasks is indicative of the limited possibilities that girls are often given. There is merit to the idea that children can only be what they see and therefore when young girls are exposed to extreme gender expectations, it limits their ability to form complex identities.

Furthermore, the pressure to assimilate into American culture is already heavy for immigrants as a whole, but it becomes increasingly more difficult for minority women to assimilate because the patriarchal society limits their possibilities to explore complex identities. The complications surrounding assimilation are highlighted by the narration, as Trupe explains, "[minority] characters are sensitized to inequalities because of their perspective, which is shaped by a bi-cultural, divided identity," (Trupe 122). This division is explored by the narrator in "Abbot Academy" when she describes, "I was deposited at Draper Hall / to have my edges rounded off, my roots / repotted in American soil," (Alvarez 14-16). The goal of the mother is to Americanize her daughter by "depositing" her at an educational institution to help her assimilate, because the United States has not yet adopted a system of multiculturalism. The phrase "repotted in American soil" presents a clear conflict because the narrator is expected to forgo what she has already absorbed from her Latina culture and replace it with purely American ideals which is ultimately unfeasible. In addition to cultural assimilation, a complex layer of unique gender assimilation is presented in each poem. In "Abbot Academy", the narrator's further explanation of the type of woman her mother desires her to become results in her describing, "ladies who learned to act like blonde even if they / were dark haired, olive skinned, spic-chicks like me" (Alvarez 9-10). There is a faint echoing of the previously stated "ladylike" behavior but in these lines it is tied to the expectations to become not just an American citizen, but an American woman. America's patriarchal system has developed a societal expectation and ideal for women that often includes the image of a blonde. The

narrator's phrasing of "act like a blonde" provokes images of vapid women who are known for a lack of intelligence which is connected to a sense of powerlessness. Ironically, Latino families often immigrated to America to escape tyrannical governments, however, Latina women found that "the patriarchal family reproduced the oppression of the dictatorship" that they had fled from when they left their home countries (Trupe 126). Despite physical differences, female minorities were expected to mirror the ideal of American women through a powerless mentality. The best hope of achieving this was through children because young roots are more capable of being repotted. However, expecting children to turn their backs on their culture while adopting new traditions creates a divided internal identity. The narrator in "Breaking Tradition" experiences a similar division between cultures and explains, "I deny I am like my mother, I remember why: / she kept her room neat with silence, / defiance smothered in requirements to be otonashii, / passion and loudness wrapped in an obi," (Mirikitani 16-19). The narrator's tone of denial is used to fuel the reader's distaste for "smothered defiance" and the suppression of desire. Mirikitani often "needed to refute the stereotypes of Asian American women and protest images of them as foreign enigmas, passive victims, sex slaves, ... [therefore,] through her works she deconstructs these racist images" (Huang 236). The grandmother in "Breaking Tradition" is symbolic of the oldest generation of Japanese American women and the "requirement" they felt to continue the practice of "otonashii", a Japanese phrase for docile and obedient behavior. The ties between a docile nature and "acting like a blonde" are strong as they both represent a lack of power meant solely for women. Ghymn claims that "there are parallel stereotypes [of passiveness and silence] for white women as well," and goes on to claim that "the problem of discrimination is not limited to Asian American women but it is common to all women," (Ghymn 4). Therefore, the real problem is not with cultural assimilation but lies instead with the treatment of all women in a patriarchal society such as America.

The previously stated gender expectations and pressure to assimilate into American culture ultimately leads to further confinement of the collective women's spirit in each piece of poetry. A plant growing in a room with limited sunlight will find that its leaves can only grow in one direction and will be in a constant state of strain towards the limited light, no matter where it is located. The women in "Breaking Tradition" mirror confinement of this manner closely. Here, the narrator expresses a desire to tell her daughter about "this room we lock ourselves in / where whispers live like fungus / giggles about small breasts and cellulite / where we confine ourselves to jealousies, bedridden by menstruation" (Mirikitani 7-10). This poem carries the analogy of the room as a system of confinement. The desire of the mother to tell the daughter about the room highlights the importance of "storytelling as a means of achieving shared understanding" but the mother unfortunately never divulges these thoughts to her daughter (Trupe 121). This stanza also showcases that the women feel they lack an identity beyond their gender as the narrator claims the women "confine ourselves to jealousies". Phrases such as this attempt to make the point that though patriarchy and gender expectations may build the walls of confinement, the women themselves hold the key and often use it to "lock themselves inside" of these limitations. The imagery in Mirikitani's work insists that if women continue to confine themselves to gender stereotypes then their daughters will also be affected and continue this harmful cycle without ever realizing that they can free themselves. In both contrast

and similarly, the narrator in "Abbot Academy" experiences a type of confinement that locks her in while also giving her the keys to escape. After the narrator prays to God to survive at the boarding school she claims, "He listened. The next day I was assigned to Miss Ruth Stevenson / who closed the classroom door and said 'ladies, / lets have ourselves a hell of a good time" (Alvarez 24-26). This stanza hints that there is freedom to be found in education. However, this is problematic because the education taking place is happening behind closed doors which parallels the analogy of "the room" in "Breaking Tradition". Education is a means of power and in society, the power of one group depends on the powerlessness of all others. Therefore, education of women beyond the transformation into "American ladies" as "Mami had heard," is not fully accepted by the patriarchy. Perhaps this is indicative only of the point of view in each poem, but here is where the reader can begin to see the divide in the plots. The daughter of the narrator in "Breaking Tradition" seems to be trapped in a cycle of gender and cultural confinement because the generations of women before her fail to communicate that she can escape from the room at any time. However, the narrator in "Abbot Academy," despite being educated behind closed doors, is being handed the keys to unlock herself from these limitations.

Ultimately, true freedom and empowerment come from forging new individual identities that are not tainted by gender expectations or cultural limitations. The differences between desiring this freedom and actually achieving it are highlighted in each poem. The final stanza of "Breaking Tradition" consists of the narrator describing how she views her daughter: "her pouting ruby lips, her skirts / swaying to salsa, teena marie and the stones / her thighs displayed in a carnival of colors / I do not know the contents of her room. / She mirrors my aging. / She is breaking tradition" (Mirikitani 43-48). The daughter is "breaking tradition" by adopting a multitude of other cultures while rebelling against the passiveness of her own Japanese American traditions. This attempt to break out of confinement ultimately fails, because the phrase "I do not know the contents of her room" implies that there is still a place of limitations. The daughter is straining towards the crack of sunlight in the corner thinking that she is escaping, but in reality, she is only enhancing the locks on her cage. The mother's description of her daughter provides images of sexuality as she details the daughter's "ruby lips", "hips swaying", and "thighs being displayed." Asian American Literature, a reference book by Lawrence Trudeau, claims that Mirikitani's works often convey a criticism of explicit sexuality because "in a racist and sexist society, sexuality is vulnerability because it is subject to violent appropriation," (Trudeau 340). This vulnerability fuels the cycle of women's oppression because sexuality is not equivalent to empowerment. Unfortunately, the daughter exchanges the stereotype of passiveness and limits her identity to a different kind of Asian American stereotype. Meanwhile, the narrator in "Abbot Academy" is given the tools to explore a complex individual identity through education. The narrator details how they shared "a hell of a good time" by "reading Austen, Dickinson, / Eliot, Woolf, until we understood / we'd come to train - not tame - the wild girls / into the women who would run the world" (Alvarez 27-30). The ending to this poem has a tone of triumph that "Breaking Tradition" lacks and presents the resounding idea that being a woman does not necessarily mean being a lady. Here, the narrator is exposed to stories written by a similar oppressed group: female authors. Trupe explains that "storytelling and literacy have political implications; they empower people. This is why 'social sustainability' involves education," (Trupe 128). The identity that this narrator finds

is indicative of the idea that "education liberates and is essential for women especially, but for youth in general," (Trupe 127). Ironically, the confinement of the classroom is also the key to freedom and the development of an individual multicultural identity.

Overall, each of these poems speaks of the importance of allowing young minority women to develop complex and individual identities that go beyond gender or cultural stereotypes and lead them out of the cycle of oppression. Gender expectations, often imposed by mothers, create a standard for behavior and a resentment between generations of women. These standards are fueled by the requirements to groom daughters into suitable wives which was often the prevailing role for women of the time. Furthermore, the expectations of foreign women to assimilate into American culture further limits these available identities as young generations often find themselves confined by the stereotypes of their culture in the patriarchal society of America. These realities about the power systems in America ultimately create structures of confinement that prohibit women from developing to their full potentials. However, through education there is a graduation from confinement and women are able to find freedom from previous limitations. It could be said that all mothers plant the seeds of their children's spirits with good intentions. However, it is inevitable that that there are some who will never give their daughters the tools to break down the walls that block out the sunlight, there are some who will absorb toxic resentment from the soil they grow in, and there are even more whose leaves will strain and tilt towards the limited sunlight, dreaming of an escape but their spirits will never thrive. "Breaking Tradition" and "Abbot Academy" make a plea to give young women the light to grow so that their identities can become rooted within their own spirits and expand beyond the confines of limitations. These poems desire a freedom that allows new generations of women to thrive and develop until their flowers become beacons of hope for others and their own seeds float far and wide, undeterred by the expectations of others.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This essay is outstanding in both content and form. This skillfully written research paper analyzes two poems which express the challenges facing minority women in their search to develop personal identities. The author compares and contrasts complex themes of foreign and minority women breaking cultural and gender stereotypes through education. These clearly delineated premises are explored and supported by research and documentation. The content is made accessible through coherent, developed paragraphs, effective transitions, complex sentence structure, concrete and specific diction, and imaginative, unifying analogies. "These poems desire a freedom that allows new generations of women to thrive and develop until their flowers become beacons of hope for others and their own seeds float far and wide, undeterred by the expectations of others." This essay helps us to see ourselves through the eyes of the women about whom the author has written.

**Third Place Essay**  
**2014 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**The Spangled Pearl White Shoes**

Meiling I

Everyday we have to make dozens of choices. Some choices, such as what to wear and what movie to watch, are simple to make. Have you ever faced the situation that you have no right to choose? If so, would you be willing to accept or deny choices other people made for you? Some of you may never regret but some will.

Whenever I go to a shoe store and see many varieties of shoes, I always want to look for the pair that I never had the chance to own when I was a child in Taiwan. It was a pair of spangled pearl white shoes with a pink bow, which I miss deeply. Until this day, even though I often spend much time in children's shoe stores, finding the shoes for my girls, but I still cannot find the exact same pair. Decades had gone by and I am no longer a little girl. I studied hard and graduated from a prominent university with a decent degree in my country. Although I live a happy life now, and married to a nice man who is an executive in a machinery company, and can buy as many pairs of shoes as I want, I know that pair of spangled pearl white shoes with the pink bow that I deeply miss will never come back to my life. That pair of shoes remains unforgettable memory from my childhood, because it symbolized my resentment of growing up poor.

In my country, Taiwan, every public school student wears almost the same uniform; girls wear white shirts on top with knee-length blue pleated skirts and boys also wear the white shirts but with short blue pants. We all need to wear the black shoes as part of the uniform; this is the policy everyone has to follow. During the beginning of each new semester, parents are busy preparing the children's school supplies. For example, my parents would take my brother Huendun and me to shop for some new clothing for the new school year. However, we did not buy things each time, because it depended on the condition of my old clothing. If the clothes were torn or ripped with a big hole and were not wearable, my parents would take us to buy new ones. If my parents said we needed new clothes, my brother and I would cheer for many days because we usually did not have new clothes to wear.

My parents were both working in an eyeglass frame factory. Their jobs were to assemble each part of frames to make eyeglasses, and their jobs did not earn them a lot of money to raise a family. I remember at the end of each month, our money was always tight. We often ate rice with only soy sauce and nothing else, so we knew we may not have enough money that month. When the new semester came, I often felt my parents would worry if they would have the extra money to buy our school supplies.

When I was in the fourth grade, I had a pair of black shoes that were really worn out and were becoming small for me even if I tried to bend my toes. I had been wearing this old pair of shoes since I was in the second grade. My parents would always buy shoes that were a

couple sizes too big for my brother and me, so we could wear them longer. Therefore, most of the shoes I wore back then were much bigger than my feet at that time. Because of the loosely fit oversized shoes, embarrassment happened to me so many times that I always had to go back to pick up my shoes when I ran too fast, which drew a lot of laughter from other students. Finally, I told my parents I really needed a new pair of shoes, although I thought my parents would refuse. One night after dinner, my mom was washing dishes. The sound of water flowing down from the faucet almost made my voice inaudible. I raised my voice and said to my mom, "Ni ker yi mai yi shuang xin xie gei wo ma? Jio der na shuang chuan bu xia ler." (Could you buy me a new pair of shoes? The old ones cannot fit me anymore.) I showed my old pair of shoes to her, but she continued to wash the dishes. I asked myself, "What if she didn't hear me?" I was nervous that I did not speak loud enough.

My mom did not answer; the water continued to flow. She may not buy me a pair this year, I thought. Just when I was ready to turn around and go back to my room, I heard her said, "Hau, wo men zhao shi jian qu xie dian." (Fine, we will find time to go to the shoe store.) I could not believe what I heard — she finally agreed. But she told me to wait for next month when they had enough money and she would take me to buy a new pair of shoes.

I counted day after day, and finally the big day arrived! My parents told me they would take me to the shoe store in the afternoon. I could not wait for a second; I was full of joy and cheer because I had been to the only shoe store in our small town so many times to search for my new shoes on my own. The pair in the display behind the window looked so beautiful. Whenever I went home from school, I would always detour to the shoe store to see that pair. They were beautiful pearl white shoes without too much design and they looked neat and trim. They drew my attention immediately when I saw them the very first time, because this pair of shoes was similar to the one that my neighborhood girl had. She lived in a big house on the top of a hill with a tall fence. Nobody knew her name or what the house looked like inside. All we knew that she was a wealthy businessman's daughter, probably the same age as me. However, we had never talked or played with each other and neither had my playmates living on the same street.

One time I saw the neighbor girl shopping at the shoe store with her mother. She was wearing a pink puffy princess dress with this pair of white shoes. The way she dressed looked like a girl from a movie that was so elegant and unreachable. I liked what she wore; I always wished I could be born in her family, and wear the new clothes everyday, then I would look like her. This pair of white shoes were the shoes she wore. This was the pair I had dreamed of for a long time, and I was really determined to get them.

When my parents brought me to the store, I went in first and told the clerk that I wanted him to bring me that pair of white shoes. He brought them to me, and when I wore the shoes I felt I looked as elegant as the rich neighborhood girl. I thought my parents would like it too. But my parents brought me a black pair of shoes instead and said, " Ba na shuang bai xie tuo diao, chuan zher shuang hei xie; wo men bu huei mai na shuang bai xie." (Take off the white ones and wear these black ones, we are not going to buy that pair of white shoes.)

"Wo wei sher mer bu ker yi mai na shuang bai xie?" (Why can I not get this white pair of shoes?) I said it out loud with all my courage. I knew my parents would ignore what I said. "Ni bu ren wei zher shuang bai xie bi jiao shi her wo ma?" (Don't you think this pair fits me better?) But my parents said I needed to wear black shoes to school, not white shoes, and they could not afford to buy both pairs. I hated that I was born in this blue collar-class family and I could not have anything I wanted.

"Wo zhi xi huan zher shuang bai xie, ni men jin tian ruo bu mai gei wo, wo jio dai zai zher li zhi dao ni mai gei wo." (I only like that white pair. If you do not buy that pair today, I will stay here until you buy it for me.) I could not believe how daring those words came out from my mouth. My parents did not say a word. They turned around and went home. I felt so embarrassed standing there, I reluctantly took off the shoes and my eyes filled with tears, and I thought, "Why could I not get that white pair of shoes? Why were my parents so cruel to me? Why was I born in this family? Why could I not be like the girl who lived in that big house? She probably had many pairs of shoes to choose from each day." I cried on the way home. I did not care how other people looked at me. All I wanted was that pair of white shoes.

When I went home, I threw myself into the bed and cried sadly until I fell into a deep sleep. When I woke up, it was dark outside and my pillow was wet with my tears. I knew I must have cried for a long time. I went downstairs to see if my parents were generous enough to buy me that pair of white shoes. However, the reality was not what I had hoped for. They did not buy me the white pair of shoes that I wanted. Instead, I saw the dull black pair of shoes lying on the table.

I still remember that silent, emotionless despair. That was what I got for fourth grade. From that day on, I knew there was no fairy tale. Not everything will happen according to our wishes. Since then, I had learned not to expect things that are beyond my control or capabilities. I do not blame my parents for not buying me that pair of shoes; I do not resent that there was no fairy tale either. I know with all the efforts that I make, right now I am the person who can make my own choices and make a better life.

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### Judge's Comments

From the time the World Trade Center fell when he was fifteen, the author was committed to being a soldier... "a part of something lasting, something meaningful." By eighteen, he's in a bus on his way to basic training. In this outstanding essay, the author pulls us in and takes us with him as he travels to boot camp and his first 20 minutes there. His description, narration, selection and arrangement of details, word choice, tone, and point of view are all spot on. From the steam and sweat of the opening bus ride, to the raw skin gnawed by new boots, to the 75-pound rucksack held over his head, to the Drill Sergeants' commands, to the pitch-perfect concluding paragraph, the essay vibrates as a living, unified whole. "An intense pride swelled within me from merely surviving one morning. My muscles threatened to shut down. My eyes, bloodshot from the exertion, struggled to remain open. My palms bled from push-ups on cooked asphalt. Nevertheless, a surge of dignity and

honor overcame the physical discomfort. I could do this; I wanted to do this." This author offers the reader the opportunity to share in a profound personal experience that illuminates the capacity and strength of the body and soul.