

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2020**

2020 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

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Mentor: Lauren Smith

Delta College

"Yesterday Yearning, Tomorrow Tolerant"

Author: Emma Skogseth

Mentor: Benjamin Stancil

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"Hunger"

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Essay

"Fresh Vegetables"

Author: Alexandra Hagan

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Author: Justin Rymal

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Muskegon Community College

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Washtenaw Community College

Fiction

"A Short Tale of an Eccentric Millionaire"

Author: Emma Tebo

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Muskegon Community College

"The Choice"

Author: Aryn Blanzy

Mentor: Lauren Smith

Delta College

"Pink Belly Blues"

Author: Jordan Scenna

Mentor: Jennifer Tucker

Washtenaw Community College

**First Place Poetry
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

"Grandma's Garden"

by Taylor Hart

There's one thing I learned from all the childhood visits:
My grandma knew how to take care of living things.
Aside from her cats' wide eyes that watched us in the windows,
Her flowers wrapped around the entire house,
Colors and petals of all sorts bloomed with enchanting features.
Every visit we didn't even have to ask what we'd do for the day,
And help her fill up all the watering cans.
We'd spend all day outside taking care of the plants, the earthy smells wafting.
The worst part was having to pull up all the weeds that infected the grounds.
Their lengthy laces entrenched deeply below the surface,
Making it a difficult process to uproot.
She explained to us that they were the evil taking hold of the garden,
And we had to put a stop to them,
Before they could overrun and strangle the life, their hands too strong to stop.

She taught us to be gentle with the fresh growth,
Not to be afraid to get our hands a little dirty.
Hers showed she was never afraid, with the dirt embedded into her fingernails.
We learned to care for the most delicate of plants,
Keeping our eyes open to all colors, shapes, and ideas,
To see the beauty Mother Earth possesses for all varieties of life.
She said if we didn't water them, then they'd perish.
Only the love of the ones who cared could preserve them.
She always insisted on the need to pull weeds, to extinguish their path quickly.
Just like a fire catches to gasoline, fast and destructive.
At this young age, I learned how to bring water to the world,
How to stop the weeds from taking over the things I cared about,
No matter the circumstance.
At least until my Nana started to slip away.

I think she guided us for as long as she could,
Before she lost the joy in it all,
And we had stopped visiting her garden.
She started to not care as much, growing tired of the constant battle of life.
The weeds had found a way into her soul,
Wrapped their long white tendrils around her mind,
And took over with their menacing growth.
Her thoughts grew corrupted and her memories of us faded.
Soon enough, all the life disappeared,
And the flowers withered away into shriveled petals and decay.
All that remains is the jungle of weeds and agrestal thickening.
As Nana taught us long ago:
Should the garden be unkempt,
Then it will be overrun with disaster.

Judge's Comments

"Grandma's Garden" is reflective, sentimental, and romantic in nature. Good use of language, tone, and memory. Good use of color, light, and sound to convey clear images.

**Second Place Poetry
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**“Yesterday Yearning, Tomorrow Tolerant”
by Emma Skogseth**

A yard sign cannot send you to hell,
But damn, I wish it could.
They are ornaments upon tree branches of hate,
Hate for those who love different, pray different, look different,
Hate that is so pervasive there is no telling,
Where it begins or where it ends.
It feels like there's truly no coming together,
For when you pluck that sign out by the legs,
And toss it in the trash,
They come back bigger, louder, stronger,
Doubling down on how they'd like to be seen.
I'm starting to think that my brighter tomorrow,
Is your yearning for yesterday,
And our moving forward may stall the progress,
On your urge to rewind.

A Facebook post cannot send you to hell,
But damn, I wish it could.
Freedom of speech seems to only apply,
When you feel as though no one is listening.
But why would people listen,
To someone seeking to paint our neighbors,
As something less than human,
For the sake of painting themselves,
As a condition to be desired?
I'm starting to think that love thy neighbor,
Only applies when they look like you,
Love like you, worship like you,
Yearn like you for yesterday.

A poem cannot send me to hell,
But damn, I feel like this one should.
There are messages abundant,
Of reaching hands out across the aisle.
But when my hand has been bitten by the teeth of others,
Who hate my friends for who they love,
Who look at me as less for not believing in more,
Who don't see my peers for all they are,
I don't want to reach my hand out across that aisle.

But,
I'm starting to think that we've turned a new leaf,
And before us lie blocks of change, of promise,
 Of a better, tolerant tomorrow.
So, to hell with hell and yard signs,
 Facebook posts and angry poems,
I will reach my hand out across the aisle,
 And I hope that whoever grasps it,
 Strips away the anguish,
The pain we've brought each other in the past,
 And has turned a leaf of their own,
 In favor of a better, tolerant tomorrow.

Judge's Comments

"Yesterday Yearning, Tolerant Tomorrow" displays a socially and politically conscious voice. Moves from uncertainty to hope and togetherness. The concept of not knowing/knowing is made clear by the writer's use of language and imagery. Inspirational and encouraging tone.

**Third Place Poetry
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**Hunger
By Christian Thompson**

Hunger

how selfish of man to think himself the hunter
even Artemis betrayed folly in her station, haughty and
proud for it is Gaia the Mother who raises us
and releases us
into her own labyrinthine wilds so that she
may reclaim us each
on
e
by
on
e

from mud and clay we were fashioned, and into that muddy womb we return

*“The world is big, beautiful, and
ferocious; it is I who decides how it treats
me.”*

hungry and full of
teeth.
it cannot be tamed
but it may be communed
with
it may be danced

it may be scarred with rosebush thorns that etch our names into
mountains

she
may
be
exalte
d
and
shall
excite
in
turn

the world is
hungry and
beautiful

and it is ecstasy to be eaten by her

Judge's Comments

"Hunger" works metaphorically. The writer's tone is self-reflective. Has elements of romanticism with religious overtones. The deconstructive order of the piece illuminates the idea and concept of control versus being controlled.

First Place Fiction
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition

A Short Tale of an Eccentric Millionaire
by Nicholas Rossiter

Todd was stuck in his bed. White sheets hugged his thin body, a reminder that he had done this to himself. He had tucked himself in and was now much too comfortable to leave. Years as a personal caretaker had made the movements automatic, even if he was performing them on himself. Despite being a man in what was supposed to be a woman's profession, Todd was the best at what he did. Serving as a personal caretaker for some of the world's brightest and most affluent, Todd had done well for himself.

But that was all over now. The covers felt heavy, the way they clung to his body was constricting, suffocating. There would be no personal caretaker to hold a mirror to his nose, checking for the faint mist that would signal a soul under the covers. It was just him. An empty house with an empty husk within the white-plaster walls. He would have had music to accompany his death rattle, but he had simply forgotten. The short journey to his record player was too far, and he wasn't even certain what he would play. He thought it was odd that something so trivial like music was giving him such a feeling at this time, but it couldn't be helped.

His hands crept up to the top of the covers, near his neck. His delicate hands gripped the edge of the sheets, brittle joints cracking and grating against one another to make the movement possible. Despite the pain, his lips crept upwards in a smile. Just like when he was a child. His mother had always hated it when he grabbed the covers like that, looking like a frightened victim from a horror movie. If only he could remember his mother's face. Only her words of disapproval and shea butter lotion accompanied the memories of his hands on the edge.

It wasn't always like this, there would be times when he was lucid, walking around his house, touching things and actually *feeling* them. He remembered that, but it was fuzzy. Like his vision years before, the memories had faded to sensations, able to remember the smell or taste of something, but not the whole of it. He could never place the actual *thing* that the smell or taste accompanied. They were whispers of memories now, his mind was fading rapidly. Todd could only watch the memories drift from him, the harder he clung to the most important ones, the more quickly they evaporated from his mind.

The world had long grown unfamiliar. It was no longer the place of wonder it had been in years past. All adventures forgotten, the four walls he was surrounded by were the farthest he now cared to venture. His door was a gateway to a place he no longer had a desire to inhabit. The house he had bought decades ago was dear to him, but he no longer remembered why. It was simply the shell around his bed, and his room by extension. Todd was trapped, but he was also perfectly content with his situation. The world was dangerous and unknown, and Todd wanted no part of a world he no longer held memories of.

The bed was the only refuge his mind and vision held. No matter what happened, his bed was always the comforting place he could return to on the off chance that he had to leave his room. The sheets far outmatched any caress he could remember. The pillow was the perfect height and width, he had searched the world longer than he cared to admit for a

pillow that would properly support his head and neck, only to find it from a peddler on a country road, surrounded by desert for miles all around. When he had first learned of the disease that would take his mind away from him, he focused all his efforts on making his body as comfortable as possible.

The floor to his home had been first. To prevent any dangerous falls, his entire floor was covered in a foam-like substance akin to a firm birthday cake. For a few years, it was a fun novelty that even young kids would participate in. Todd was still a happy -if eccentric-millionaire then. Now though, those days were far behind. His eccentricity had quickly turned to insanity from the outside viewer. The floor was just the beginning. Soon, he had slides installed where every stairway used to be, so there would be no risk of falling down the stairs and breaking his aging body. The neighborhood children again delighted in their rich neighbor's funhouse as their parents looked on in concern for the kind old man clearly losing his mind.

For any parents still letting their children play in the old millionaire's home, the antiques were the last straw. Todd used his influence to bring in plenty of relics from all around the world. For the largely orthodox neighborhood, seeing holy objects and artifacts from all around the world frightened it to its core. And thus, began a wordless war between the neighborhood and Todd. The resentment of the neighbors for Todd's monstrosity of a home only grew when the gargoyles entered via moving vans and strange trucks alike.

Todd wanted a different gargoyle for all nineteen continents. In a past life, he would have remembered there were only seven. Regardless of how many continents there were, the gargoyles would keep watch over him from their region's spirits. Getting one from each continent was sure to cover all of his bases. Long they watched over him, until the day that he would retire to his room for good, casting off their watchful gazes through the closing of his bedroom door.

Todd would grow lonely long before that moment, but he had his stone guardians to make do. He went about repurposing the gargoyles into friends that were sharing his home. They were each moved to their separate rooms, with special instructions on what interests the statues had, who their friends were, what music they listened to, even what they preferred to eat before bed. Neighbors would hear hushed rumors about a secret force of stone creatures in Todd's home. Children would imagine that the monoliths were akin to the fantasy creatures they had been acquainted with, while adults would conspire, thinking that the word "gargoyle" was a code for something much more sinister that the government was plotting.

The distrust in the neighborhood only grew as the house did. With every room addition, the neighbors believed it was another government-issued soldier, ready to enforce crude laws onto their god-fearing homes. They invested in guns, and drew the curtains tight over their windows, sparing no expense at keeping the invisible forces of Todd's home at bay.

The gargoyles grew more lifelike as the years grew long. Soon Todd would begin to speak to them, asking how their days had been, how their pasts had affected their presents and would continue to affect their futures. He talked for hours with the monoliths, imploring them for answers that eluded him. Often these questions were matters he had never resolved before his unfortunate existence as a hermit. Whatever sort of coping method he had created for himself, it appeared to work for a time. He was oblivious to the neighborhood's growing suspicions of what was going on in his home, enveloped in the

small community he had manufactured for himself.

When the gargoyles asked for birds to accompany them, Todd nearly smacked himself on the forehead at his stupidity. *Obviously*, gargoyles would love for birds to accompany them. So, he went about contracting the builders to switch their expertise to bird-catching. They floundered throughout the neighborhood catching birds, and the neighbors watched with bated breath. How soon before the builders pulled out their military gear and went from house to house, kidnapping kids and parents alike? The builders were oblivious to their concerns, enraptured on their task. They were working off of commission, after all. The more birds caught, the better the pay.

When a sufficient number of birds had been secured, the workers let them loose in the home. They immediately flocked to the gargoyles, who complained that their new companions wouldn't have enough space to fly around. The builders reluctantly got to work expanding the ceilings of the amalgamation they had been working on for years now. It seemed that the gargoyles were content, and their protective energy over the home had increased to the pleasure of Todd, who was overjoyed that everything was going smoothly. At this time, he had lost most of his sight and hearing, instead choosing to feel his way around the home, but he was happy to be surrounded by friends.

He had hung ornaments from his bedroom ceiling years ago, before he had finally closed the door. He was struck with memories of them now. He could still feel the pins underneath his fingers, pressing the tacks into the ceiling, cautiously releasing the support of his hand and finding delight at the free-hanging ornaments. They were trinkets and baubles taken from all corners of the world, with the express duty of protecting Todd as he slept. While the gargoyles did a sufficient job at protecting his home, he needed more security for his bedroom, and the ornaments granted him this much.

He saw them now, their auras of protection. Each held a different color, the area around them pulsating, swelling and collapsing with their own protective energy. He raised his arms to them, feeling his aching joints soothe themselves within the healing energy. He ran his fingers through their auras, watching the energy ebb and flow around each digit. He did this until his arms grew slack once more, he returned them to the edges of the sheet and closed his eyes, for good this time.

The builders weren't certain when Todd died. The group stood there, awaiting orders. Like lovers do when they don't know if they should kiss one another or not, inaction was the norm. Eventually, one sighed and walked out of the funhouse he had helped create. He waved to a few of his favorite gargoyles on his way out. He didn't know why, but he felt like they understood. He lightly brushed away the bird that had perched itself on his shoulder. He liked that one, it was named Reginald.

He made his way to his car, considering taking some materials with him. Some of the tools the old man had bought for them were quite expensive, and he knew some pawn shops that would pay a hefty price for the equipment. He didn't know what it was about seeing the tools they had used over the years, but he didn't take any. He now spared a glance at the house. It was truly ugly, all things considered. Countless additions had made the place top-heavy, balconies had been swallowed up and converted into new rooms, there were chimneys that no longer stuck out from the roof, for that had been raised multiple times. It looked like something out of a fantasy novel, but not in an elegant way, it was quite tacky.

As he drove away, he raised his rearview mirror to gaze at the home one last time.

Todd had promised all the builders they would receive one last check upon his death, but he couldn't help but wonder about the gargoyles and birds they had left within. What would become of them? Would they fade and crumble like the old man? He slowly turned his car around, unsure of what he was doing. He returned to the neighborhood, driving slowly up Todd's driveway. But there was no house there, not anymore. Just a foundation and a few bags of bird seed. It was as if the old man never lived there at all.

Judge's Comments

This story was almost as wonderfully eccentric as the millionaire mentioned in the title. The eccentric, but ugly and tacky, house was described so well that I could see it in my own imagination. The gargoyles guarding their rooms. The birds that were their friends, and the strange "fun house" aspect to the eccentric mansion were brought to life by the author. At the end, when the builder walks away from the house after the millionaire's death, the twist was quite unexpected. Did the deceased millionaire, who had created a fantasy world within the walls, also somehow create a house that destroyed itself upon his death? Was the builder who walked away, after saying goodbye to his bird friend Reginald who had been perched on his shoulder, one of the protective gargoyles come to life? Or was there never any millionaire or any house or gargoyles at all? Maybe the eccentricity of it all was simply that there was never anything there but a man who liked to feed the birds.

Second Place Fiction
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Choice
by Aryn Blanzy

She grabbed the only thing she could see: a small, tan, circular hamper, and crammed as many clothes in it as she could. For the three of them, it wasn't much, but she had to be quick. Her phone vibrated. Three minutes.

Two small boys sat comfortably on the couch and watched their mother scurry around the trailer in between glances at the Paw Patrol rerun quietly playing on their small television screen. She was running solely on fear and adrenaline. She began to feel her skin crawl. Her spit became thick with dehydration, her stomach slowly knotted up, and her heart raced. It had been three hours since she'd taken anything, and the withdrawals were setting in. She repeated under her breath, "I can do this. I can do this. I can do this."

Three minutes passed and she heard a car horn blow from outside the window. She grabbed the two boys' hands and quickly led them onto the porch. She stepped back inside and picked up the hamper that contained everything they possessed, yet absolutely nothing at all. And then she paused. She felt fear warm her face and every doubt came crashing to the forefront of her brain. "Wait here," she told her sons as she set the hamper down beside them. She walked toward the getaway car and stopped at the driver's side window, bowed her head and muttered, "I can't do this," before walking back to the porch. She grabbed the hamper with one hand and guided her confused children inside with the other.

The boys sat back on the couch and watched her take the hamper full of clothes and empty it into the washer, unaware that she was washing those clothes of the failed hope that lay within their threads. The front door suddenly opened, and the boys jumped up. "Daddy's back!" He quickly handed her a small blue pill, she popped it into her mouth, closed the lid on the washer and cranked the nozzle to "light load." She swallowed the lump in her throat, then joined the boys on the couch and began to forget.

Judge's Comments

The shortest story of all of the entries really tugged at my emotions. The main character's desperation isn't necessarily described outright, but I could feel it as I was reading the story. Her desperate need to escape a life of addiction, and likely abuse. Her hope that her children will go with her quickly and quietly. And, ultimately, her defeat. Her story was heartbreaking, even though it was told in a short and concise manner. I really felt for her.

Third Place Fiction
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Service
by Jordan Scenna

Jerry smiles and hands me a small spray bottle. Inside is a clear, indistinguishable liquid, and he commands me to rub some on my hands. You know someone is trying to make a believer out of you when they never break eye contact, and he's looking dead at me. "You got a girlfriend young man?"

"Well, kinda, there's this one..."

"In thirty seconds, your hands are going to be the softest they've ever been. You're gonna thank me, your girlfriend will thank me, your whole family is gonna thank me." Immediately I feel like I'm being conned. Jerry is sitting at table twenty-two in my section with what must be his wife. In between mammoth bites of rare steak and gulps of red wine, he's been opining the miracle that is alkaline water. That's what's in the bottle. Water.

"Feel your hands, aren't they soft, yes or yes. That's 2.5 pH. It's acidic, not alkaline so don't drink it. Alkaline's the one you drink."

"Who knew water was so versatile," I blathered.

"This is gonna clean your hands better than they've ever been cleaned before. This is what they use in Japanese hospitals to sterilize all the equipment. Scalpels, Forceps, and Retractors. All of it. And if its good enough for the Japanese, it's good enough for you."

I rub my hands together. I don't feel anything.

"Tap water has been poisoning people for years. Trust me, I'm forty-four years old and I'm in the best shape of my life. Do the research if you want."

When I look at Jerry what I see is a fiftyish looking man with a round stomach and glasses. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he cuts his hair by placing a horseshoe on top of his head and shaving the center bald. Jerry has been trying to get me to buy a four-thousand-dollar water ionizer from his group, the Cleanday Oasis WaterLife Ionizing Company, or COWLIC, for short.

"COWLIC stands up above the rest. The thing pays for itself, with all the money you're going to save on medical bills."

"And hand lotion," I add. "So, you're basically like Jesus, curing the diseased, walking on water."

"We're Jesus adjacent." He doesn't miss a beat. Hate the player and the game.

"And the best part is, once you sign up your friends and family, you get a percentage of every Cleanday Water Ionizer they sell. And a good-looking young man like yourself, you'd have no problem. It's a win win, yes or yes." I pocket Jerry's business card along with some literature that he conveniently pulled from a portable file folder. He had it with him. Lucky me. I told him thank you, and I'd think about it. You can't be rude to a guest. There's no percentage in it.

"Can I get you two anything else at the moment," I ask?

"Nothing right now my good man." You're doing a great job, great service." I squeak out a thank you. I have got humiliation down to an art form.

I'm talking to Bill Murtle and he has mash potatoes in his pockets. Bill is table thirteen. Always thirteen. Bill loves to come for the lunch buffet, which he has been banned from, twice. You're not allowed to stuff food down your shorts for later, I guess. When I look at Bill what I

see is a bowling pin that has suffered way too many banana splits. He sports a thinning faux hawk out of necessity, his arms are comically short, and he comes in every day at four o'clock. Every day. A diner without a pause. He tottles to his table calling out "Hey, Boo," to all the waitresses. Talking to Bill is like running an ultra-marathon in a bistro apron and non-slip shoes. I barer my teeth. A replica of a smile.

"Hi Bill, how's it going, back for dinner today huh?"

"Great, just great. So glad to be here." He means it. "I talked to my doctor today, he says everything looks good, I took my insulin." Bill makes a stabbing motion over his swollen belly. "I don't know what I'm gonna have just yet, just not a lot of carbs. Don't let me have a lot of carbs. And sugar, no sugar."

"What are you drinking today," I ask him, as if I didn't know.

"I'm gonna be here awhile, OK, but you can bring me coffee, with lots of fake sugar, you know, pink. And bring a lot, at least ten or fifteen." I'll bring twenty.

"You got it."

"Look at you!" Bill gives me a big thumbs up. "Look at you" is Bills affirmation. It's how I know I'm doing a good job. Over the next three hours Bill will enjoy an appetizer, a salad, two entrees, and two desserts. I will refill his soda four times, his coffee six, and spend untold minutes listening to his ongoing feud with his sister.

"She wants everything, all of it, she's trying to cut me out completely. Mom left both of us this money, the house, and she wants the kitten caboodle. Well, she must have her reasons. It'll all work out."

"I'm sorry Bill, that must be tough. My brother and I..."

"She's rotten, sorry to cut you off, she's rotten and selfish." He softens his voice. "I don't think Mom even loved her. I know I'm not supposed to say that."

I like Bill. He's exhausting; an emotional abyss. But he's also an unrelenting optimist, and even on my worst day, it's contagious. He's also, at his word, eighteen years sober, and we have that in common. Sobriety. We have different coping mechanisms though, his being a deep plunge into the world of aged beef, rich bechamel, and chocolate mousse. I deal with the vacancy left by drugs and alcohol by losing myself in the mundane safety of domesticity. I work my tail off to afford a simple car, with a simple apartment; simple furniture; a simple existence. He seems to be doing just fine.

"I think I'm gonna start off with...ya know, what I had last time...as an appetizer."

"The kids shrimp and fries."

"Yeah, that's right; Look at you!" A pat on the back. A job well done.

"I'm on it," I say. "Let me know if you need anything."

It's Saturday night and we're not taking any more walk-ins. We're booked front to back with reservations scheduled fifteen minutes to close. I'll make money. Lucky me. Cap and Elle don't need reservations. They work with the company, providing the black rubber floor mats all restaurants use to keep the staff from slipping on olive oil and breaking their salad-makers. This has made them millionaires. Floor mats. They come in five nights a week and request a couple different waiters. Tonight, it's me. When I look at Cap what I see is well-kept silver hair and tanned wrinkled skin, despite the fact that we are well north of the equator. He's well into the autumn of his life. So is Elle, who dementia has crowned the Queen Bee of platitudes.

"Everybody does the best they can with what they have," she says as I'm trying to take her order. It's getting busy and I'm falling behind.

"Everything happens for a reason," she says as I'm getting double sat with two four-tops.

"What are you drinking Cap," I ask, as if I don't know.

"Squeeze two oranges in a highball and put crushed ice on top of it; the crushed ice. Then soda water, but use the soda water from the bar in the hotel, it's better." Cap is putting me behind. His orders read like bipartisan pork, with the special requests and the need for everything to be baked long and hard. I can hear the groans from the line cooks. Their souls are singed with grill marks from guests like Cap.

I have a full section now and everyone needs something. Table twenty-three is complaining her steak is over-cooked.

"This is too well done," she says.

"I thought you ordered it well done."

"Yeah, but this is too well done. I can't eat this."

"I'm sorry miss, I'll take care of it right away." She smiles with a triumphant look on her face.

"Thank you," she says. Sometimes I think people just come here for the apologies.

I have so many things to get for my tables that I'm losing track. Twenty-two needs salt and a side of horseradish. Thirteen needs more butter, and I have to get a steak knife down before the entree hits or my boss will kill me. I have to check on that recock for twenty-three and bring that glass of wine I haven't dropped yet to twenty-one. We ran out of baked potatoes, so I have to beg forgiveness at fifteen and see what new side they want. I have to greet thirty-two; I have no idea how long they've been there but their starting to dart their heads back and forth like ravenous Meerkats. Please God don't let them have any questions about the menu or I might die. I'm sweating and I'm wondering how visible it is. I'm trying to drop off a side of heated barbecue sauce to Cap and he's explaining to me the advantages of an Embraer Phenom versus the Eclipse 550. Cap's comparing air crafts, meanwhile, my section is crumbling behind me.

"How long does it take to cook a steak?" asks twenty-three.

"Are you stomping those grapes yourself?" asks twenty-one.

"No baked potatoes," whines fifteen. It's amazing how mad people get when dinner doesn't go as planned.

"The Embraer has a cruise speed of five-hundred and twenty-one miles per hour."

My brain is shutting down. No more orders it's telling me, just run. Leave. Save yourself. I stumble past Jerry's table.

"Hey," he says. "Alkaline water will change... your... life."

Really? Will it? Because I think I'm ready. I gather what's left of myself and stare into Jerry's eyes.

"How do I get in touch," I ask. He grins.

"I'll give you my phone number. Now can we get a dessert menu, yes or yes."

"Certainly," I say. "Whatever you need."

Judge's Comments

I loved the beginning of this story. The conversation between the server and the pyramid scheme salesman from COWLIC was simply amazing. It was ridiculous and funny, and exactly how pyramid scheme people (especially those trying to sell something that's actually nothing) seem to talk. When I read the line that Jerry, the fancy water salesman, says about COWLIC water being "Jesus adjacent," I actually laughed out loud. The pace goes from slow to frantic, and reminds of packed nights at restaurants. Well written and interesting. I think I can see why the server might be interested in being part of the "Jesus adjacent" pyramid scheme by the end of the story.

**First Place Creative Non-Fiction
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**Fresh Vegetables
by Alexandra Hagan**

When I was in seventh grade, I decided to go for a walk through a little neighborhood called Frei Drive located about five minutes from my house. It was a rather cool, late summer day with the clouds dancing loosely above my head. Down the hill in the backyards of the houses, I could see the Menominee river cutting graciously through the land like a smooth silver snake. In front of me lay a slightly broken up road with a few potholes scattered about. I continued down the road past a little park consisting of a big blue swing set and a red and yellow merry-go-round. In every yard, the grass was cut neatly, and the flower beds were perfectly weeded. Spread periodically throughout the neighborhood were little square gardens with vegetables growing in perfect health. Some were on my left in the yards of the houses, and some were to my right in the woods. Wide gravel paths connected the gardens in the woods to one another. The perfect little neighborhood. Little did I know that someone living in the neighborhood would completely change my perspective on life.

One house caught my eye. It was painted dark brown, and it had a freshly paved driveway shaped like a teardrop. It looped down from the edge of the road, to the edge of the garage, and back out to the road. In the middle of the loop grew two apple trees. One seemed smaller and younger, while the second was older and wiser. I did not realize that I had stopped to admire the house until I heard the quiet buzz of a small engine. Suddenly, three golden doodles whipped their way from behind the edge of the house moving full speed at me. I knew better than to run from them, so I froze in fear. When they reached me, they came up and started sniffing me all over.

“Hold on guys!” yelled an unfamiliar voice. The call came from the same direction the dogs had come from. Emerging from around the corner, an older man riding a golf cart approached from the side yard. He was wearing a white striped shirt, a pair of light khakis, and a pair of rectangular glasses. His white hair was cut short and neatly combed down to reveal a thin section of hair on the top of his head. He called the dogs back over to him, and they obeyed his command. Next, he waved his hand towards me signaling that he wanted me to come over as well. He stopped the golf cart in front of the wiser tree and waited for me to approach him. Despite my family always telling me to not talk to strangers, his presence exuded a warm, family-like feeling that persuaded me to ignore my initial response to walk away. After all, he had just saved me from the golden doodles.

“Why, hello young lady,” he remarked. He smiled and nodded in my direction. “You must be Mark’s littlest one.” I gave a shy nod. My family had moved to the area before I was born because my dad was asked to serve as a priest at the local Orthodox church. It was normal for random people to recognize me because I looked very similar to my older siblings. “Why don’t you let me give you a tour of my gardens. I’ll even let you pick some vegetables to bring back home.” His offer seemed genuine, so I climbed aboard the golf cart and began my tour. He took me past the fenced-off gardens scattered throughout the neighborhood. Each one of the little gardens were ones he had put in himself. Some of them

were in his back yard, but most of them were in his neighbor's yards and in the woods. As we explored the neighborhood, I wondered why he had the authority to place gardens wherever he pleased. He showed me just about every type of plant he had proudly grown. All my probing questions were answered emphatically, whether it was the name of the plant, how it grew best, or what kind of maintenance the plant required. We then drove past his seventy-five-year-old tractor, which he was clearly very fond of. Finally, we arrived at his largest garden, which was placed along the edge of the river in his back yard. I assumed he must have given this tour dozens of times because his words slipped out of his mouth with such fluency and confidence, almost like he had practiced the script with every ounce of his spare time. Throughout the entire tour, a sense of peace and calmness radiated from him and spread to me; any nerves I had previously felt disappeared. When I was in his presence, I felt welcomed into the neighborhood as if I had lived there my whole life.

"Why don't you go out and pick a few vegetables for yourself," he suggested. I climbed out of the cart, unlatched the garden gate, and chose a few ripe tomatoes. "Great choices! Why don't I take you on back home now?" I nodded once again and jumped back into the cart. He drove me all the way home. Once we arrived, I thanked him for the tour and told him I would have to visit him again. "Oh, you better be back young lady! I'll be expecting you."

I walked into my house with fresh, perfectly ripe tomatoes cradled in my arms. My mother asked where I had been. At the end of my explanation, I sheepishly mentioned that I did not recognize my tour guide. My mother smiled softly and told me who he was. His name was Dale Frei, and he lived in that neighborhood with two of his daughters who lived a few houses down. The neighborhood was named after him—Frei Drive--and he had several little gardens set up throughout the neighborhood for his family in the area. His other three daughters lived out of town. He and his wife attended our church before his wife passed away and his mobility decreased with old age. Eventually, he decided to start coming to church again for his wife's annual memorial. I had never noticed him in church before, but after learning this information, I felt obligated to see him regularly. Besides, I had promised him I would come back to visit him soon.

A week later and I decided to keep that promise. He said he thought I had forgotten about him. I assured him that I was simply busy with other summer activities and realized that he was simply teasing me. That time, he gave me a bushel of fresh apples. His only request was that I made him some fresh apple cobbler for his ice cream. The next day, I fulfilled his request. This pattern continued for the rest of the summer, and every time I arrived, he gave me a hard time for not having visited him sooner. The rest of the year was filled with delicious fresh fruits, vegetables, and conversations about life. I received wonderful advice about not only growing plants but for living a joyful life. He would tell me about his loving wife and how much he missed her; however, he would also reassure me that it was alright because each day brought him one day closer to seeing her once more. He took every day as a blessing and spent his time doing what made him happy: gardening. Once school came around, I forgot about my visitations and I did not take the time to visit him until the next summer. Occasionally, I would see him in church with his daughters. He would see me out of the corner of his eye, signal for me to come over, and sarcastically complain that I had forgotten about him. Other than those small occurrences, summers were when I spent the most time with him. In return for his kindness, I spent some of my eighth-grade summer helping him plant vegetables. I learned more about both gardening

and life that summer than I had learned before.

Over the years, my initial feeling of visiting out of obligation changed into a yearning for a grandparent figure in my life. I grew up with both sets of grandparents living far away from me, so I would be lucky to see them once a year. Dale's kindness and welcoming personality made me start to think of him as my own grandfather. His confidence and peacefulness inspired me, so I wanted to spend more time with him to learn from him. My weekly visits eventually opened my heart and let him fill that role of a grandparent I was missing.

This past summer, I did not get the opportunity to visit with him at all. Every time I thought about it, I felt guilty because my summer was booked. A few months into the fall, I was informed that he was diagnosed with lung cancer and in a critical condition. I visited with him when my dad went over to his house to bring him communion. After spoiling me with a piece of his fresh apple pie and complaining that I had not visited him, he cleared his throat and told me something I will remember for the rest of my life.

"Do you know why I have lived for so long? It is all in your head. The reason I have made it this far is because I never give up mentally. That just drives my body to do the same." These words stuck in my mind from that day forward.

In late February 2020, after a sudden decline in my health, I was sent down to Milwaukee and diagnosed with Leukemia. With the diagnosis came some of the hardest changes in my life. I had to adopt a completely new lifestyle away from my friends back at home. About a week into treatment, I received a letter addressed to me from Dale Frei. Tears came to my eyes when I opened the card.

"Dear Alexis, I am pleased that you are responding to treatment. We are both in a time that we have a lot of people praying for us. When you get home, I will make you an apple pie. Keep up the good work. All my love, your friend Dale."

Now, I take life one day at a time. My spirit is driven by my inner voice to go on. His strength inspires me to push forward, even when it seems like everything is going wrong. I live life knowing that if I have people to love, I can make it through anything life throws at me. I knew I would get to see him again, even if that meant listening to him give me a hard time. I came home a month after I was initially diagnosed. As I had hoped, my final visit before he passed was filled with laughter, love, and freshly baked apple pie.

Judge's Comments

"Fresh Vegetables" takes us through a young person's meeting and connection with an elder in the community with whom the narrator learns not only literal gardening but its symbolism as connection and community. The elder shows the narrator how to face her own challenges, including loss, and move beyond them. The language is metaphorical and descriptive.

**Second Place Creative Non-Fiction
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**The Crucible
by Justin Rymal**

Little pops, like a distant firework rattling off its last cacophonous crump of detonation followed by a hissing death rattle. There was at least a half dozen of them touched off by the latent embers creating a curious dimpled effect across the drab grey basin of the firepit. It looked a bit like a battlefield of the first great war, pock-marked with craters and barren. I perched there at the iron rim of that pit, six feet deep without ashes with a rough radius of three feet without heat-warped edges. Eyes darting between successive blasts, trotting boat shoes and a gruff voice behind me startled me. "Kinda' cool right? Never throw batteries in a fire kiddo."

My father's grin was ripe with warmth as he approached, the epitome of a stocky working man with short brown cropped hair. Almost like a dwarf of ancient mythology with his hands worn to a leathery finish, his arms flecked with heat blisters. "It's interesting, cool to watch for sure" I intoned. He offered down a shining metal rod with a worn rubbery grip. Its haft was fluted like a knight's armor to fold up on itself, so you could extend it to a desired length or retract it. Situated on the end was a soot-blackened magnet fixated there by a spotty weld that looked like melted ice cream. "Can't have them going off all night, other than the batteries there's some metal scrap in there if you can dig that out to." As my eyes rolled over the length magnet-rod his voice dulled as he projected it in a different direction. Already walking away, he said in some sort of cruel irony only revealed later "Just holler when you're finished." Alright I thought, that's fair. Calling back "Sure thing" before getting to work.

As the zenith of afternoon approached my trove of scrap metal and black scored batteries was admittedly small, but it was no easy task. The magnet was powerful, so the iron rim of the pit needed to be avoided, lest it take hold and must be pried free. Scrap by scrap, battery after battery I freed from that tomb of ash like treasures unearthed in silty black sand. A few more maybe, then I could report my collection. My left hand grasped without any true firm purchase on the dirt and I eased forward and down again reaching and sifting. A little further, bending down into the abyss the dirt shifted beneath my fingers. My kneeling stance faltered and my grip on solid ground failed utterly in one indelicate breathless moment.

I don't think time slows in harrowing moments because the pain was instantaneous. My palms were shooting with hot white pain. My kneecaps now dug into the black ash warmed with a frightening pace. I bolted upright as a soldier would snap to attention, pushing myself to my feet came easy as the ash beneath my palms sweltered against the enormous heat dwelling in the embers below. I dashed back knowing surely at the edges of the pit cooler cinders resided. My hands were cherry red, blistered and pocked while my shoes drooped and stuck to the ashes as the rubber melted. Hoisting my gaze up to the afternoon sun I hugged the iron skirt of the pit, which hid no latent heat. It quickly dawned on me that it was not the heat that would be my prime adversary but instead- the height.

At nine years old your stature is not quite at its peak to say the least. How tall was I? No clue, but the pit was certainly taller than me, at least by two heads. The pain subsided momentarily as my mind raced, but only one option formed at the time. I needed help.

The sun edged towards the edge of the pit like a sunset on a black iron horizon. I cried out till my voice was hoarse and my vocal cords were burning true as the cinders inches

underneath my shoes. Tears weld up in my eyes and my gut wrenched at the notion that nobody was coming. Nobody would come. Mom would be at least three more hours, and my father- had he forgotten about me? That thought was harder to swallow but not impossible. He was a drinker, and the drink had a boxer's grip on him. Maybe his work was just as intoxicating, so much so that he had nudged aside the thoughts of me skirting the edge of that infernal firepit. My soot blackened form sank at the thought, I was alone. In that moment I came upon the realization that this was now my fight, and my charge was to escape that hole.

Singular determination like that is potent, like a caged animal bearing a rictus snarl in defiance of death. These odds were not so terrible. My eyes danced around like sparks searching for a way out. How I hadn't seen the paint can at the edge of the pit before bewildered me. Was I so blinded by a need to be aided that I had not sought to aid myself? Pushing the thought aside I mustered myself, laying down a foothold on the dilapidated can and grasping the very edge of the pit with outstretched arms. With a heave of adrenaline-fueled strength and a stern constriction of muscles my feet left the ground. My right leg swung up catching the outer rim of the pit. One foot yet dangling down I pulled up just enough to overcome the edge then rolled on my right side to the safety of sunbaked dirt. Strength of will settled over with a crease of a smile across my sooty face.

Tension hung in the air above the dinner table that night. My mother was brimming with unspoken fury at my father for letting me doddle by a fire. I was utterly torn. Should have been just as mad at my father for letting me alone with such a dangerous task? Where my mom's eyes were edged with pity and surely a desire to have been there something else lived in my dad's. I think he was proud of me. Certainly, regretful himself but that was only surface level. Something told me he knew how I felt, in a glimmer of a passing glance over me he knew that I alone overcame the challenge set before me without his aid. Surely not every burden in life is meant to be shouldered alone, but sometimes *you* must be enough.

Judge's Comments

"The Crucible" is a retrospective of a horrific and dangerous childhood event. The writing is powerful, very imagistic, filled with concrete language, metaphor. The narrator builds tension in a story that also reveals the complexity of family relationships.

**Third Place Creative Non-Fiction
2020 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**Pink Belly Blues
by Jordan Scenna**

As I slumped down onto the couch, folding under the weight of mistakes that could never be undone; I cried out, “Where are my keys?” I couldn’t remember where I had left them, and it was time to go. I couldn’t remember anything anymore. When you’re dealing with the inconsistencies of human memory, everything is based on a true story. The past few months were hazy at best, and I was a specter, haunting the people and places that I could still make out through the fog. “Where’s Thor, I yelled? I need to say goodbye.” Thor was my dog. As soon as my butt hit the couch, he hopped up next to me and dug himself into my leg. This was his spot, nobody else’s. I scooped him up and placed him on my lap. He was a little dog, seventeen pounds soaking wet, which he was, because I was sobbing into his soft white hair. “I love you so much, buddy. I’m so sorry!” I told him. Holding him close, I kissed the top of his head. He was my little boy, and I had failed him.

The place I was leaving him for was a rehab facility a few hours away. For years I struggled with heroin addiction, whiplashed by vicious swings from recovery, to relapse, and back. I was just enjoying two years of sobriety with the love of my life, Julie. Julie was also a recovering addict. There are great risks when two addicts get into a relationship. Usually when one ship sinks, you can find the other, submerged in murky depth, beside it. But we had been through so much together, and I loved her immensely. No one can understand an addict like another addict, and Julie knew me through and through. She knew I would fall deeply in love with Thor. But sometimes, as it is said, love just isn’t enough.

I am what you call, a “dog person.” It isn’t subtle. Every time I drive by someone walking their four-legged friend, I usually say something like, “aww, dog.” Julie knew I loved dogs and she put the wheels in motion to find one for us. As the fates would have it, Thor was introduced to us at eight weeks of age, and it was love at first bite. One sunny afternoon, Thor was brought to our house by a friend who worked for a pet adoption agency. Some ogre of a man had dropped him off at a rescue, exclaiming, “I can’t take care of this thing!” It was a tentative first meeting for Thor, but I was smitten. He was three pounds of blinding white hair and deep teddy bear eyes. He circled my feet cautiously, trying to smell me out. “Who is this guy,” I imagined him thinking. As I sat down on the hardwood floor beside him, he began to nibble at my fingers. Not in a menacing or defensive way, but just a “Can I see myself biting this guy for the next fifteen years, kind of way.” I laid down prone and tucked my hands under my chin. With small, slow steps, Thor moved towards me and wrapped his little body around the crook of my elbow; his eyes fluttered and shut; then he fell asleep. I didn’t move for fifteen minutes.

There’s an unmistakable magic at the beginning of every relationship, and this was no exception. One of my favorite memories is when Julie and I tried to take Thor on his first walk. First of all finding a harness that would fit a three-pound Maltese-Bichon mix was nearly impossible. Once we managed that feat, the next hurdle was getting Thor around the block. He would walk a few feet, and then plop down on a neighbor’s lawn to examine an ant hill or terrorize a flower bed. Once we got him moving though, it was blissful. Julie and I walking down the block of our suburban neighborhood, hand in hand, with our new family. I couldn’t have scripted it any better. It was more than I thought I would ever have.

Addicts can experience a ceaseless and prodding unease, even in sobriety. Maybe even more so. When there isn’t any drug to dampen the everyday aches and anxieties that one inevitably endures, the potential for disaster can be at its greatest. Julie is an extraordinarily talented woman.

One of her many talents is photography. She started working freelance as a photo editor for a local company who did shoots for companies like Ford and Toshiba. Along with this job, she also worked at her family's law office as a clerk. I was working part-time at a local restaurant and had just gone back to school in pursuit of a degree in physical therapy. Needless to say, we were busy. I was home mostly during the day, so I spent a lot of time with Thor. We went on walks, ate meals together, and wrestled. The things a man and his dog tend to do. He would sit by my side while I did homework and followed me around while I tidied up the house. We became close. So, when Julie started staying out late every night, we worried together. Night after night, Julie would stay late clerking at the law office, trying to get work done that she didn't have time for during the day. Often, Thor and I would go to sleep alone. We tried to slumber as our stomachs tumbled with fear and panic and uncertainty. Where was Julie? What was she doing? Every night I felt sick and desperate. I held Thor close and tried to calm my imagination, but it was proving impossible.

The night I died Thor had a terrible ear infection. We had taken him to the vet, where they prescribed him ear drops, which he hated. I held him between my legs, telling him it was ok, "it'll be over before you know it, buddy." After I administered the drops, I left the house and started driving. Without much of a thought, I drove to an old drug connection. "Making a reservation," it's called in recovery parlance. I had been planning to use, either for days, or weeks, or months. I needed relief from some stress, some omnipresent pressure, and I didn't do anything about it. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't use any of the tools I knew I had at my disposal. All the painful lessons learned in the last two years had been laid down at the doorstep of a trap house. I didn't think about Julie, Thor, or the terrible consequences that awaited. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in a hospital emergency room. I had overdosed and fallen out in a hotel room nearby. Somehow, before I went unconscious, I had managed to call Julie. All I managed to say was, "I need help." By the grace of the universe, and Julie's ingenuity, she found me and took me to the hospital. The hospital workers brought me back to life; ripped, yet again, from the stone grip of death. One of the first things I asked Julie when I awoke was, "where's Thor?" With a look that encompassed fear, sorrow, and exasperation, she told me, "where you left him."

The euphoria of heroin intoxication is hard to communicate to the uninitiated and the price to be paid for using it, is equal in its facility for destruction. Shortly after my overdose, I left Julie and Thor, and checked myself into a rehabilitation center. During that stay I came to the painful realization that Julie and I couldn't be together. No matter how much we loved each other, it just wasn't enough. The dangers were too great. I went to live in a three-quarter house in a different city and began rebuilding my life once more.

Julie used to tell me that when I went to work, Thor would sit in front of the picture window and wait. There was a sadness in his eyes, like he thought his friend was never coming back. After work I would come home, burst through the door, pick him up, and let him lick me; my face awash with dog kisses. It was wonderful. He still lives with Julie, and she takes great care of him. But now, I imagine him sitting in that window, night after night, waiting for me to come home, and I never do. Thor was a gift from the universe. A gift that I wasn't ready for. I blew it, and from some mistakes, there is no recovery; there is no going home.

Judge's Comments

The narrator brings us into his life challenges with tactile, detailed clarity that enhances our emotional investment in the story. It is filled with poignancy, honesty in the face of difficult self-realizations. Here, also, the descriptions work to make the narrative have a real and lasting impact.