

**Liberal Arts Network for Development  
Creative Writing Journal  
2021**

## 2021 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

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### Poetry

"The Forest"

Author: Ben Bolstrum  
Mentor: KD "Kaitlin" Williams  
Schoolcraft College

"When My Mother Had a Love Affair "

Author: Charlotte Jones  
Mentor: Cynthia Brandon-Slocum  
Gogebic Community College

"Unraveled"

Author: Katie Marken  
Mentor: Jennifer Tucker  
Washtenaw Community College

### Fiction

"12 Gods"

Author: Hassan Darwiche  
Mentor: John Rietz  
Henry Ford College

"Sputnik's Perfect Day"

Author: Brice Spencer  
Mentors: Brianne Lodholtz  
Montcalm Community College

"Bruises"

Author: Kennedy Bettancourt  
Mentor: Ben Stancil  
Montcalm Community College

### Creative Non-Fiction

"A Stage in the Sky"

Author: Micaela Camp  
Faculty Sponsor: Cynthia Brandon-Slocum  
Gogebic Community College

"Tomorrow Never Comes"

Author: Ashley Fessler  
Mentor: Sarah J. Smith  
Lake Michigan College

"Prodigal Habits Die Hard"

Author: Benjamin Skujins  
Mentor: Shauna Hayes  
Muskegon Community College

**First Place Poetry  
2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**"The Forest"  
by Ben Bolstrum**

The forest lives for everyone.

Long, tangled branches live for squirrels and chipmunks to mark their home.  
Clear blue skies live for birds to soar to their heart's content.  
Winding paths live for travelers on their long journey.  
Clear waters live for fish to explore.

Nights come and go in the blink of an eye.  
Harvests are bountiful for the expanding village.  
Snow falls free in the valleys below.  
Flowers bloom for a tomorrow that won't come.  
The forest shares its secrets.

Long, tangled branches live to be cut down and sold for lumber.  
Clear blue skies live to be polluted by chemicals until they fall grey.  
Winding paths live to be paved into roads for morning commutes.  
Clear waters live to be exploited by corporations until they run barren.  
The forest lives for no one.

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**Judge's Comments**

The poem is inspirational in tone and lucid in its description of nature. It also shows both the evolution, yet destructive nature of life (by mankind). "Clear blue skies live to be polluted by chemicals until they fall grey."

**Second Place Poetry  
2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**"When My Mother Had a Love Affair"  
by Charlotte Jones**

When my mother had a love affair  
with the Lord, I wish I could say that I remembered. My mother's bible sits on my bed  
stand, bruised, and weathered like an elder's skin; its spine practically broken, some pages  
are torn, missing, and others folded. I imagine my mother with her King James, leather-  
backed Bible. I recall the sight of her, developing that mahogany tone, as the pages turned  
yellow ochre from the unforgiving sun.

The lamp next to me echoes warmth, like that wood stove heat climbing up the stairs. I am  
tucked safely under the covers; a bible in my lap, knees hugged to my chest. Delicately,  
my eyes scan the silhouette of words; an orchestra well performed. I turn the brittle page  
and my heartbeat quickens at the neon highlighter. The contents spill out, some diving into  
my heart. Some escape.

I wonder at the days my mom drank from His river of life before leaving  
her oil lamp empty. Her blond curls slowly fade from my memory, but I don't recall her  
ever studying the bible. I observe the note-filled margins—a sign that she once wholly  
followed the Lord. The corners of my mouth begin to rise and tears blur my eyes at the  
thought of singing with her in Heaven.

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**Judge's Comments**

The writer has a strong sense of language. A sentimental and (almost) romantic poem full of  
memory and senses. The narrator juxtaposes the "bruised and weathered" Bible with the loss of  
the mother and the renewal of spirit in knowing that the narrator will eventually "sing with her"  
mother again in Heaven.

**Third Place Poetry**  
**2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**“Unraveled”**  
**By Katie Marken**

Don't run away  
Stay  
Fight  
Cry  
Rest  
Build  
Persist  
Be brave  
Forge on

Establish boundaries like the ocean.

Spillover them in crushing waves to protect your peace.

Brace for the gales that are sure to follow as you spread roots gravitated in reality.  
Go toe-to-toe with darkness and those things, people, and memories that wait there.

Release  
Fall  
Break

Not in two, not crushed nor crumbled, but shatter into a billion pieces, more than all the stars in the sky  
Read

In every book you study, pick up another part of yourself,  
A puzzle of intense complexity only you have the power to meticulously assemble anew  
Reconnect and reinvent yourself

Sometimes you have to journey where you're at  
Right here - right now, in the last place you want to be in  
Embrace the suck

Turn your face towards your truth like you do when the sun's light turns warm after a seemingly eternal winter.  
Embrace the vulnerability in exposing your soul to the elements

Then, when the time's right, run towards  
Speed forward to the life you dream and deserve  
Hope

Open your heart to cliffs of uncertainty and adventure  
Gaze out over them  
Dive off and know your parachute will open on the way down

Fall in love first, with moments in time,  
then with the journey marked with how far you've come, and then with yourself  
The opportunity for healing exists in the frigid corners of your mind manifesting as internal chaos  
While no one was looking...  
I made myself brave.  
I made myself strong.  
I made myself unbreakable.  
Darkness bears the gift of growth,  
you need only be brave enough to open it.

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**Judge's Comments**

This poem feels like a mantra at its core. An inspirational poem that is open to all readers, regardless of race, gender, or other external identity markers. The narrator encourages the audience to move forward, outside of darkness. "Speed forward to the life you dream and deserve" the narrator writes. "I made myself brave. I made myself strong."

**First Place Fiction**  
**2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**“12 Gods”**  
**by Hassan Darwiche**

**1. Dionysus**

We have met before. You may not remember me, but I remember you very well. Though it has been a long time since I last checked up on you, I been able to keep myself quite busy with my own drunkenness. The seasons pass, and I am distracted by the vastness of my own existence. ***I have become madness.*** The wandering god. Ringing any bells? If you dig deep, you may remember me from that nightmare you had a few years back. You may have lusted after me in a nightclub on the corner of West and Tucker. You may remember me as the shadow lurking in the background of your most guilt-ridden memories. Or... you may not remember me. But I have always been here. Wandering.

**2. Hermes**

They'd kill me if they could see the light in my mind. The god of thieves and liars. I go on flowing without obstruction, manipulating the time and things around me until I am content. When I was 4 and discovered a field of dandelions behind my garage, I ripped through them until there was nothing left. An unrelenting chaos I've never wanted to let go of. ***I have become mischief.*** This is the nature of the world I was forced into. I raise my lyre into the night sky and beg the heavens to come down soon.

**3. Poseidon**

I won't lie to you. The weight of anger became too heavy. Another night, and I might have destroyed entire dimensions with the ideas in my mind. I've come to terms with the fact that I am better alone. It has now been 36 days since I jumped into the water and left my heart behind. Day 15, I thought about breathing in the entire fucking ocean. ***I have become destruction.*** Once I felt guilt for a few seconds, but I reminded myself that I can always create entire realms of comfort in this darkness I've been granted. Day 37: I'm pretty sure I heard the ocean weep.

**4. Ares**

Sometimes I can't materialize feelings, but I'm not to be blamed. We never learned that in school. It's all becoming too much. I am punished by the insincerity of this life. I can only stand behind the real things: the sound, the taste, the feeling. The world coldly reminds me that I am here for eternity. ***I have become hatred.*** All modern wars are fought with death. One day they won't be. Let me tell you a story about a man who wakes up in the middle of the night. Every night. He is very tired throughout the day.

**5. Hephaistos**

I allow myself the small pleasures. John Coltrane records while I'm in the shower. ***I have become bitterness.*** Tonight, I feel pain and I feel sadness and yet, I still stand here waiting for someone to find me. I make peace with my selfishness and animosity and absolve myself of any questions I've asked. The sun sets and I realize that I no longer know what I'm looking for.

**6. Aphrodite**

Sowing the seeds of infidelity. ***I have become passion.*** My existence is haunted by the animosity of old lovers, but I barely ever think about their naked bodies anymore. The girl from last night left her cigarettes on my coffee table and several of her blond hairs pasted on to the face of my bedsheet. The governor asked us to stay at home last month right after the pandemic hit and so I caught up on a lot of sleep. I thought of calling her and staying up on the phone all night, but my conscience wouldn't let me.

**7. Artemis**

Towers of human consciousness that reach for the brightness past the sky. ***I have become loneliness.*** I once had a vision of a place where men were wolves and rain was made of dust. I know what you must think of me by now. I hear “heartless” and I hear “harmless”, but there is nothing here besides a stream

that refuses to stop moving because it cannot stop moving. One man alone without a body outside of his own body. I dig my fingers into the fabric of my own existence, but the yarn is too tightly knit.

### **8. Zeus**

After all the years passed, I told myself that I'd spend my time saving the world from myself, but at some point, I became the world and inherited much of its impatience. I am the end of pain, pacing through the streets like clockwork, trying to find the same thing in another set of eyes. I am a new perspective, yelling obscenities at you for your old ways while also thanking you for finding me. I am self-awareness, scratching my name into bathroom mirrors, reminding you of who you used to be. I am the remnants of love, always thinking the same thing, while always doing another. But I am also fear of death, grasping your heart with both hands and pulling it down just a little bit lower. ***I have become power.***

### **9. Apollo**

I am the son who is drowned by daughters. Disappointed in love. Endless days stretch into an infinite night. I fear that my existence is dwindling. One cigarette after another. The years pass, and some of them get married, but most of them simply learn. I once had a lover that turned into a tree. I wear her branches on my head. How's that for a laugh? ***I have become persistence.*** There are entire worlds of novel beauty occurring in bedrooms that I'll never be invited into. All these women, and they're still not enough.

### **10. Demeter**

The first kind of awakening that happens after an open fire in grief. I see moonlight illuminating the trenches of solitude, but my darkness hides in a cavern that cannot be reached by the prying light. ***I have become vigor.*** Bathing in daylight. I got lost in Raleigh while looking for something I'd lost. Sometimes I'm consumed by the immensity of this world. My mind can't help but listen. I smile at images of mountainsides and beachfronts. All at once, I can hear everything I've ever heard.

### **11. Hera**

Grating voices from memories that would have been better off forgotten. ***I have become compassion.*** Two nights pass, and a glass of whiskey carries my heart farther than anyone's love ever could. I've been content for a long time. Fear, sadness, and loathing. At some point, I ruined all that I had brought here. These melodies have faded into some kind of tranquility. I won't allow anyone to strip me of my lonesomeness. I'm fighting this love with knuckles bruised purple.

### **12. Athena**

The necessary cruelty of the modern world. My birth struck fear into the hearts of the other gods. I feel a thousand seas crashing behind my eyes. I'm falling through skies that don't remember my name. The birds don't mind. For weeks, the smell of life (a shift in perspective) placed me in another time. ***I have become reason.*** I woke up this morning feeling forgiven.

### **Hades**

I am not 13 to the 12. I am one. Alone. Unmoved by their sacrifices. I heard the music. Fantasy of a place over the rail of a balcony. Counting the blocks. Few people can walk alone, dream alone like me. My mistakes greet me like hungry wolves with the scent of blood in their ugly snouts. I don't mind them. ***I have become peace.*** If this light could melt into the shallow sky, I'm sure it would give rays to the earth worth living under. My life has been long. I have become many things.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This was one of the most unique works of short fiction that I have seen in a while. The author wove Greek mythology with the present day in such an interesting way. They may have lost their communities of people who believed in them, but they still exist in this modern world. I would love to read a full story about each god.

**Second Place Fiction**  
**2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**“Sputnik’s Perfect Day”**

by Brice Spencer

I leap upwards and onto the smooth chilled counter. The counter is mainly empty except for the sink in the corner at the end. I by chance turned my head to glance over at the table on the other side of the kitchen. I hop down and waltz my way over to the table and leap up as I had done before. There is a stack of papers on the table, my insides rattled as I purr with enjoyment. Ahh this will be perfect I think to myself, I know exactly what to do! I’ll push them onto the floor! With my left gray and white tiger striped arm I reach out and swing my paw down in a gray blur to scoop the papers. I could see with my heart full of delight the stack is barely hanging onto the table. This is it, I know it, as my rattling intensifies with suspense. I give it the last littlest nudge that wouldn’t kill a fly. Thud!

Before celebrating too early I heard the famous cry, “Sputnik!” Ahh it was my servant.

His distress call was followed by the sound of his heavy footsteps rushing into the kitchen to see what I’ve done for him this time. Usually, he is quite a pleasant guy but today I ammet with a scowl and daggers for eyes.

“Why do you always do this Sputnik! You’re such a jerk!” he degrades.

“Well, I’m doing you a favor, you need to take breaks from just sitting in your office allday” I snap back.

“Sputnik, quit your meowing at me, you know what you did.” He bends down to pick up the papers and heads back out of the room where he came from.

I honestly don’t know why he never listens to me, it’s like he doesn’t hear or understand what I’m saying to him. It’s now time for my second favorite part of the day, I guess. I hope this will be more interesting and exciting than the last part I ponder to myself. I shuffle out of the kitchen and into the hall. It has a soft carpet. I make a sharp left turn and creep into the room that gets stuff done, Dad’s office. There I find him sitting at his wooden desk he rolls down so I can’t get in there at night. He is conspiring with my sworn enemy, the glowing screen with clicky buttons! It’s on the desk and opened as he is typing away at something apparently more important than his pride and joy, his reason for existing, the only reason he could ever possibly get out of bed in the morning, his beloved son and boss, yours truly.

I make my way across the slick hardwood floors over to Dad’s feet. I brush up against them going one way and went back through the opposite. This is the trick that gets him everytime. To top it off I add in some strong purring, this will gain his trust again.

“Sputty are you behaving now little buddy?”

I stretch my front half up to be on his lap while my back legs are on the ground. He always says I look like a noodle while doing this. He reaches down and with one hand and pets the top of my head and caresses my ears. I hop up on his lap to let him adore me.

He takes the bait, now it’s time for my next move. I look over at his screen. The warmth radiates from the clicky buttons. I walk up in front of it and sit on the buttons Dad is always pressing.

“Sputty you’ve got to move, you can’t be up here, I’m trying to work.”

Dad said annoyed. I flop over on my side and roll over onto my back with my front paws bent in half in the air.

“Sputty that’s cute but we go through this every day, I have due dates you know.”

He reaches up and scoots me off the buttons and onto the desk. The audacity! Who does this guy think he is? Just because he’s bigger than me, he can tell me where I can’t be. Not in my house. I look over to the rows of buttons and find the biggest one. Dad sees me looking at it too.

“Sputnik don’t think about it” he hollers. But it’s already too late as I am already reaching out and pressing the button.

“Sputnik! No!”

But it’s too late, the glowing light goes out. I have conquered it! Before he could take any sort of disciplinary action I dart out of the room.

On to my favorite part of the day. I head out back into the hall and follow it into my favorite

room, my fortress. My fortress is enclosed and is filled with windows with screens and sunlight. I stroll by my cushiony bed that is all white and what I could assume would feel like to sleep on a cloud. I also have my castle in the corner of the room where it gets a lot of sunlight and has the best view. Out the window in the yard there's a fence and a box full of seeds to lure birds in for me to watch. Sometimes I just want to go out there and pounce on them. I climb up my four-level castle and lay down in a circle on my perch. It is covered in squishy tan strings. I ate a couple of them once, but I don't think I would do it again, I also wouldn't recommend doing it the first time either.

I glance outside and everything is still. I can feel the warmth flowing through the window and onto my pedestal. It is like being covered up with a blanket that is fresh out of the dryer. I close my eyes and bask in all my happiness. I just enjoy lying down in the sun. Enjoying my life in my kingdom.

Before I know it, the yard is still empty, but the sun is behind the fence now. The sky is a mixture of dark blues, oranges, purples, and yellows. I meow and hear nothing. I meow again and this time I hear the footsteps of my humble servant as he enters the room. To my delight he has come prepared with my favorite treat, a tuna fillet. It doesn't take me long to finish my fillet while Dad is stroking me from in-between my ears down my back and up my tail before starting over at my head again.

When I finish my snack, he kisses me in between my ears "Night, I love you Sputty." He softly says over his shoulder as he walks out of the room.

I know Dad is going to sleep, now is my time to truly shine. Not like the sun but like the full moon outside of my window, dark and mysterious. With a bound I leap to the floor to check the perimeter of my fortress. I need to make sure there are no intruders, especially of the tasty rodent or insect kind. I'm full of disappointment as I complete my lurking around my fortress as I have not found any intruders tonight.

I leave the safety of my fortress to lurk around the rest of my kingdom. I am cautious for I am unaware of any potential intruders. I finally make my way into the room with another ginormous glowing screen and a cold cushiony smooth couch. However, I am upset to find Dad has replaced the blinds I climbed and chewed last week with curtains. I liked to use the blinds to get my food unstuck from in-between my teeth. How am I supposed to use cloth instead?

I see something from out of the corner of my eye. No, it can't be. It is, it's Otis! My beloved lion plush. I've had this since Dad brought me home as the little King I was. I lost him last week under the dryer, I thought I'd never see him again. Excited, I pick him up in my mouth and throw him up in the air. Plop. He falls back onto the ground. I lay on my side and hold the top half of him with my front paws and kick him with my back ones. I stop to lick my front paw before continuing. I stop for a second. I see a shadow of something small and round on the other side of the room. Upon closer inspection I'm delighted to find one of my many balls with bells in it. I lunge and send it flying across the room. I run over to it and in a sweeping motion follow through and send it flying once again. I again chase after it, I try to stop but slide across the hardwood floor. Thud! I hit the wall. After a moment to recover I decide I'm done playing with my ball for tonight.

I slither my way into Dad's bedroom. My hair stood on its end. I fear there is a threat in my kingdom as I hear a deep growling, a bear possibly. I am relieved upon closer inspection as I realize it's just Dad snoring in his sleep. I hop up onto his soft squishy bed and make my way over to his side. I lay down curled up by Dad's arm. Looking at the blinds I notice the sun is starting to come up. I feel Dad's big strong, arm wrap around me in his sleep. I snuggle in closer to him. I am exhausted from my rough day, so I gently drift off to sleep with one last thought on my mind. I'm glad I get to do this all over again tomorrow because Sputnik today has been your perfect day.

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### Judge's Comments

As an animal lover, I enjoy stories that give an animal's point of view. The story was both funny and touching. The author cleverly created Sputnik, an adorably mischievous kitty. I was also touched by the portions of the story where Sputnik thinks he does things for his "servant's" (dad's) benefit - knocks over the papers and steps on the computer keyboard to get his dad to stop working. The story is very relatable for anyone who has worked from home with a pet!

**Third Place Fiction**  
**2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**“Bruises”**  
**by Kennedy Bettancourt**

I tapped my trembling finger on my coffee cup, the heat of it burning through my skin. I waited in silence for Marcel to return home. It had only been less than a month in this new house, but that's all it took for me to realize that there was something else within this house that wasn't supposed to be here.

I hear the door open. Shoes softly pattered against the floor, telling me my husband is home and the door opening wasn't another trick. His presence calms me, knowing a human was here with me.

“Suzette?” His smooth voice echoed through the house, bouncing off of the bare walls. I couldn't put photos of us up. They'd be knocked off during the night.

“In here,” I reply, my voice wavering in the air. I'm terrified. I'm terrified to be alone in this house. I'm terrified to know that I can't defend myself against this thing. I'm terrified of something happening when my guard is down.

“Hey? Are you okay?” He questions, setting his keys onto the counter and taking a seat next to me. His tone was light and unknowing. He didn't know because he was always at work. The spirit never showed itself to him, almost making me feel like I was going crazy. Almost? I did feel like I was going crazy, absolutely insane.

I clench my jaw, resting my hand on the glass mug, feeling fear drip down my spine. How would I explain this to him? Tell him that I want to move again? Tell him that there is someone else living in this house that I can't see? We haven't even been here for two months. He's going to call me psychotic.

“Hey, come on. What's the matter?” He asks more firmly, taking my hand and sliding it into his own. His hands were rough and familiar. I glance at him, seeing genuine worry float through his pupils.

“Marcy,” I say, clearing my throat, “there's...” I'm at a loss for words. How do I tell him this? How do I explain?

“Suzette, you're scaring me.” He squeezes my hand tighter, showing me how he's now having anxiety as well. “Tell me what happened, please.”

“I can't, Marcel,” I breathe out. My heart was racing. “You won't believe me. You'll call me crazy. You'll throw me into a mental institution.”

He suddenly looks confused. I would, too, if I were in his shoes. “Sweetheart, I won't. I promise. Just tell me what—”

“There's a spirit in this house,” I spit, my lungs failing to keep my breathing steady. “It hit me. I felt it touch me. It touched me, Marcel.”

He sits there astonished. His lips part slightly, but no words come out. Then the grip on my hand is gone, and I feel my heart break. He thinks I'm crazy. He's going to leave me.

“What? Are... did you get hurt?” He stands up and grasps my face, searching it for bruises or cuts. He moves away the hair on my forehead, revealing the bruise that had already started to develop. His fingers brush it and I wince, the sting wearing off after a second. “Are there any more bruises?” He goes to the freezer and grabs out some ice. Putting it in a bag, he brings it over to me.

I watched his movements carefully, unsure of his thoughts. He presses the cold bag to my head while listening to what I had to say.

“The force knocked me into the laundry room wall, Marc. I-I couldn't see if there were more bruises, but I'm sore.” Tears clawed at my throat. The memory of what happened only a few hours prior replayed over and over.

“Okay, so... this spirit hit you into the wall? Show me.”

I walk over to the laundry room. The wall had a huge hole in it, broken from me falling into it. My body shape and size fit it perfectly. There's dust covering the floor; I hadn't been back in here

to clean it. I was in shock. I crawled away, a scream caught in my throat. After realizing what happened, I stayed far away from the area. I sat in the kitchen, in that very spot, and waited.

"Oh my god..." he gasps, grasping my upper arm. "How... and you're sure you didn't trip? Maybe you dropped a sock and slipped on it. Maybe-"

"Marcel," I hush, catching his attention. "I walk into the kitchen at night to get a drink, and I can feel eyes on me. Things move around by themselves. Things disappear. It's okay if you don't believe me. I didn't expect you to. I know what I felt, and I know it wasn't a damn sock."

I said those words almost angrily, but with an understanding of his theories. He was trying to find something reasonable to blame it on because there was no way in hell he was going to believe a ghost could harm his wife. I knew better than that.

"We just moved here, Suz. Can you..." He seemed almost hesitant to ask. "Can you just be more careful until I can figure everything out?"

*Be more careful? Are you kidding me?* He doesn't believe me. He's not even trying to believe me. He thinks I accidentally did it. He thinks since I hit my head, I remember it wrong. *Is this the part where he throws me into a mental institution?*

"It's not that I don't believe you. I'm just... skeptical. I can't just believe this without having solid evidence. You could've just mistaken one thing to be another." He gets worked up trying to explain himself without trying to upset me.

Too late. I guess a hole in the wall and a bruised up wife wasn't enough.

"Marc, relax. I know what I felt, but hey, maybe you're right. Maybe I remember it wrong. It's fine. Let's go eat dinner and talk about this later. Deal?" I strain a smile, feeling my lips wobble.

"Deal."

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### Judge's Comments

The title makes the reader think this story might be about one thing - abuse - but turns out to be about another thing entirely. There's a bit of suspense, a bit of frustration, and a bit of disbelief.

**First Place Creative Non-Fiction  
2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**“A Stage in the Sky”  
by Micaela Camp**

It was mid-afternoon, the sun burning brightly as darkly colored birds soared above singing their cheery tune. I smiled as I spotted the soft pink truck driving out of the trees, its music bringing joy and excitement to me and the other kids. The soft pink hues reminded me of flowers in the spring, the words Ice Cream bold and bright below the window. We all lined up at the truck cash in hand impatient, ready to buy the cold tasty treats. We were on a school field trip that day, to where I don’t remember. Perhaps it was a museum or the zoo, or perhaps it was a trip to the park itself? Perhaps I’ll never know.

When it was my turn to pay, I stared up at the menu my little hands eagerly pointing at the brightly colored bomb pop as I held the money in my hand. The coins felt like ice in my hands, a stark difference from the crunchy paper currency that shared my grasp. I remember the tall man behind the counter handing me the bomb pop, his face hidden behind the counter I couldn’t see over. I remember the coldness of the melting popsicle trailing down my hands onto the bench I rested on. The way it tasted on my tongue, the refreshing coolness of it. The brain freeze I got from trying to eat it all too fast. As I sat there waiting for the cool sensation in my head to go away, I watched birds flying through the brightly painted sky. The way they moved in the sky like dancers floating across the stage was mesmerizing. Their dark wings seemed to flow like fabric as they flapped and waved their wings to the song they created. The cheers of kids chasing after each other around me sounding as if they were a rowdy audience heckling the dancing performers above. The birds call only a quiet

song amongst the noise and chaos.

I wish I knew why that day remains so vivid in my mind. What about those birds in the sky struck out to me? Why do I remember just that moment so well but not the field trip I was probably eagerly waiting for all week? Perhaps something about watching the birds that gave me a wave of calmness, a moment away from the chaos that awaited me at home that evening. Perhaps just that brief moment alone on the bench watching the performance of the sky made me feel alive and free, wishing I could join them up above singing a song only the birds knew. Perhaps I remember it all because I still wish to be up there flying free as a bird, nothing to hold me back, soaring without a care in the world.

Perhaps I remember it all because I had never had a popsicle like that before, its taste ingrained in my memory just like the memories of lemonade on hot days, the cooling taste familiar and distant. Perhaps at that moment, I had decided it was the best popsicle, that I’d plead with my mom to buy some for the house so I could share the marvelous flavor with my siblings. Perhaps I remember it because it was not memorable at all, the birds flying up above like I’ve seen a thousand times before. My classmates laughing and cheering like they would at school. The ice cream truck, seeming the same as all the ones I’ve seen before. Perhaps my mind had chosen this moment as a way to remember them all.

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**Judge's Comments**

The writer employs descriptive detail which allows the reader to share in crisp, tactile memories of childhood. In this short piece, we see clearly what the writer experienced many years earlier when watching birds: “The way they moved in the sky like dancers floating across the stage was mesmerizing. Their dark wings seemed to flow like fabric as they flapped and waved their wings to the song they created. The cheers of kids chasing after each other around me sounding as if they were a rowdy audience heckling the dancing performers above. The birds call only a quiet song amongst the noise and chaos.”

## Second Place Creative Non-Fiction 2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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### "Tomorrow Never Comes"

by Ashley Fessler

I don't know how long I've been sitting in this horribly uncomfortable folding chair. It feels like mere minutes, then hours, then seconds. When I first arrived, I had pulled the chair as close as I could to the edge of the bed, tucking my legs under me and leaning over so my head could lay on his lap. That was maybe three hours ago. I scrunched up the brightly colored quilt my mother had made years ago into a makeshift pillow as I stare up at Daddy's face. His breathing is labored. His whole body shakes with each strained breath. His grey beard is overgrown and a little shaggy around the edges. He'd asked me to bring his trimmer for him a couple days ago, but I guess he never got around to using it. He was too weak then anyway. I like his fluffy beard. It reminds me of when I was little and I used to tease him about looking like Santa Claus. I run my fingers through his beard and half laugh, recalling the memory. Trying to memorize someone's features in the last moments of their life is proving to be pointless. Grief is clouding my mind and I can't think straight.

This room is bizarrely quiet and still. No beeping machines. No chatter in the hallway. No hum from an oxygen tank. This was all left behind when Daddy was transferred from the hospital's general medical unit to this place. It is solemn here. A place where I won't look anyone in the eye because I already know what they're thinking and, I don't know why, but it bothers me. The sun is already starting to go down. The room is filled with a soft amber glow filtering in through the windows opposite where Daddy and I are. All things considered, it's a lovely Spring day. Daddy deserves a lovely Spring day.

I like to think that he knows I am there with him - holding his hand, smoothing the wrinkles in his shirt, kissing his forehead. After all, I'm Daddy's baby girl. No, I'm sure he has no idea. His arm is heavier than I thought it would be as I lift it up to reposition his hand. I make it work. I spread his large hand to cover my cheek. It's warm and comforting against my tear-stained face. The skin on the palms of his hands is dry, but I don't mind. I lay there in this pretzel position, allowing the memories to flood my consciousness as his hand lays over my face. I sob. I sob harder and I make no attempt to hide it. He doesn't know I'm here and I proceed to have a one-sided conversation every now and then. I tell him how much I'm going to miss him and how I wish he could stay. I can't bring myself to leave him. How can I leave? The agony of knowing those are likely the last moments I will be spending with Daddy are pure torture. Leaving feels like I'm giving up on him; like it is my choice to say goodbye. I have not been given a choice.

A soothing hand rubs circles on my back as my tears soak into the white blanket below me.

"Can I get you anything, sweetie?" a kind-looking nurse softly asks me. I turn my face to make eye contact with her and slowly shake my head. I don't sit up and I don't try to hide my blotchy face. She nods. "I'm just down the hall if you do, okay?"

The nametag clipped to the collar of her scrubs reads "Jennifer." Jennifer doesn't hover. I am grateful for that. I am also grateful for the look of understanding in her eyes. It's not a look of pity or sympathy, which would be easy. No, it is the look of empathy. She knows exactly what I'm feeling in this moment. I'm not sure if that makes me feel better exactly, but it makes me feel less alone and out of control.

My heart begins to race as I know it's nearly time for me to go. I've been here for almost eight hours today. I'm exhausted and drained, but that seems so ridiculous. I would endure another thousand days just like today if I knew Daddy would be here with me. Working up the courage and strength to say goodbye, I lean up and take a deep breath. More tears spill down my cheeks. I am facing the inevitable and I am terrified.

"Be brave, Daddy. I love you. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" I whisper through the sobs I try to choke back as I lean down to kiss his forehead and smooth my hand over his face. "I love you."

Tomorrow never comes.

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### Judge's Comments

This piece is powerful and intense, expressing the depth of sorrow experienced by watching a loved one die. The description is both external detail (quilt, father's beard, nurse's name tag) and internal agony-- "I tell him how much I'm going to miss him and how I wish he could stay. I can't bring myself to leave him. How can I leave? " Very moving and honest.

**Third Place Creative Non-Fiction  
2021 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**“Prodigal Habits Die Hard”  
by Benjamin Skujins**

A voice that once invoked passion and comfort now sprays a flammable stream that catches rapidly. “Which excuse is it this time, hon?” The nickname birthed from a place of love now launched at me in battle. It’s beautiful, historical significance dismembered. Watching the staining tears of hurt roll down her cheeks I spin around, “I’m going to Three Oaks!” Subduing the lump in my throat I sneer and march out of our, once, dream home. With the keys plunged into the ignition, the tires squealing out of the driveway, and my white knuckles clenching the steering wheel, I make the quick drive to the casino. I feel blood surging to my face, melting my brain. My ears start to ring and everything around me begins to sound as if I’m underwater. I notice tears forming in the corners of my eyes, I often have allergies this time of year...

A knock on the car window draws me back into reality. I’m awake. “Your keys sir,” the valet in a red suit and cap holds out his hand at the car window. My muscle memory had taken over and now I’m in the casino’s parking lot, under the entrance’s drive-thru canopy. I exit my car, handing my keys over to the valet and allow the familiar ambiance to blow my burdens away. Under the massive marble archway, the darkened windows and teasing light fixtures whisper to me an ardent plea. I answer the calls. Upon entering, a blue wristband is shackled to my left arm. My hand brushes down my faded jeans to the indent of my wallet in its pocket. I am drawn in by the overwhelming noise of digital bouncing coins and gunfire of spinning wheels. The combined smell of nicotine and rotting buffet food bounces through my nostrils. Such sights and smells welcome me home.

My eyes browse the seemingly unending lines of glowing slot machines until one vacant area catches my eye. The presence of a wafting cold breeze enough to deter anyone over 60 years of age surrounds a cluster of machines. One unoccupied Wizard of Oz machine draws my attention. On the machine’s screen, Judy Garland stands in the center of the yellow brick road with the lion, scarecrow, and tin man surrounding her. The brick road transforms into a cascading waterfall of golden coins spilling all the way down the computer’s screen where, at the bottom, an animated munchkin greets me with instructions. I dig my fingers into my pocket and pull out my leather wallet. I make a loud creaking sound as I plop down on the cracked leather stool. I slide out a fragile fifty-dollar bill from my wallet and finesse its limp body into the machine. 5000 credits and a grinning munchkin.

Every credit fed into the machine is another step closer to wealth. To happiness. No longer is it bordonuas to convert my cash into credits, it’s just a routine as simple as making ice cubes. I begin spending my credits more generously. Each bid higher than the last. The flashing messages of “Try Again” and “So Close” coupled with the mocking laughter of the munchkin starts dismantling my hope. The machine frustrates me until I bang the armrests, all while feeding it more bills. I realize that Judy has no intention of cashing out, so I move to the next machine. And the next one. And the next one. Repeat.

My temper at its peak and my wallet the opposite, I make my way towards the bar. Among the bar chatter and rattling machines, I let the bourbon wash through me, isolating my mind from the surroundings. Its familiar, burning sensation like sticky magma weaves its way through my ribs. It burns away the frustration.

The anguish.

The futility.

The lights of the machines begin to blur and melt together. The bar chatter becomes indistinguishable, and the noise of my surroundings feels as though I’m trapped in a fishbowl. I briefly stand up and I’m drawn to the earth at terminal velocity. I clutch the edge of the bar table and retreat back to the stained wooden bar stool. My head pounding, I know the best decision would be to get up and leave, but leave to where? To my car? To my house? To her?

Once again, I awake to the knock of a valet. I must have fallen asleep in my car. In the very faint light of the sunrise, I can see the valet and, at his side, a security guard with an embroidered badge, armed with a small baton. The valet gestures me to roll down my window. Briefly acknowledging the stench coming from my car, he continues, "First they tell me they have to kick you out at close and now you're still here! We don't open for another 4 hours!" I look at my wrist expecting to check the time on my watch, but all that's remaining is my damp, blue wristband. "My wat-"

"You gotta leave," he interrupts.

I start my car and roll down the windows, despite the coolness of the morning air. My car's clock reads 5:34. I maneuver out of the empty parking lot and roll my windows back up. My head is pounding, and every small noise is funneled through my ears, perceived at ten times the decibels. My mouth feels stale and dry. I pull into the nearest gas station. After parking in one of the few well-lit spots, I peel myself out of the seat of my car, leaving a deep imprint. My clothes stick to my back. I notice the corners of my eyes start to shrink and go dark, and I start wobbling. I clutch the roof of my car to stabilize myself before I walk inside. I immediately make my way to the bathroom.

After gargling water and washing my face, I look at myself in the cracked mirror and begin to see myself as she does. "Did that satisfy you?" I think. I always remember the suffocating feeling of dread and regret following these impulsive trips, but the memory never outlives the hopeful desire that returning one more time will absolve all my burdens. I look down at my blue wristband and back at the mirror before leaving the bathroom. I open the door and, out of the corner of my eye, catch the employee quickly spinning around to pick up and place a couple of items in the aisle adjacent. I didn't realize I had been in there so long. I gather several items and bring them to the register: a Coca-Cola slushy, a Mounds bar, a bottle of water, a bag of Doritos, and a pack of mint gum. "That'll be nine sixty-five" I open my wallet and I'm greeted with seven dollars and a wet wipe. "That's all I've got," I put the water back.

In my car, I devour the snacks and drain the slushy relentlessly. I embrace my brain freeze while continuing to drink, almost as my punishment. After finishing my breakfast, I move towards the back of the car to open the trunk and stow my jacket. Inside, I'm greeted with a sizeable mound of green paper. Money! A warm shower of relief and hope wash over me. Luckily, there was nobody in the parking lot to hear me shouting, and dancing, and weeping on the ground. "Where had this come from?" I thought, "I was on a losing streak last night!" I start counting each bill, giving each one a devoted second of my attention. After counting until the sun was nearing its highest point in the sky, I bundled the last bill. I knew I had around 15,000 dollars in my trunk. I hadn't really contemplated where this money came from until I left the gas station parking lot and headed for the bank. Had I gotten lucky after falling into my drunken daze? Had I been generously gifted the money out of pity? Had I stolen it?

On my way to the bank, I see a billboard for the "Three Oaks Casino." Almost instantly my left arm feels heavy, and I look down at it and the blue wristband. Instinctively I get into the lane over and pull into the casino parking lot. I don't consider the conversation to myself in the cracked, gas station mirror and, instead, become blinded by the desire to double, triple, quadruple my winnings. Fifteen-grand might be enough to prove her wrong this time, but with one hundred-grand, that'd be enough to justify every trip to the casino throughout our years together.

I frantically gather as many bundles of cash as I can into the pockets of my pants and jacket and I enter the casino. The employee at the front desk replaces my weathered, blue wristband with a brand new one. "Back for another lucky night, huh?"

"I guess," I reply avoiding eye contact.

Again, I browse the aisles of machines. The loud machine racket and the smell of nicotine and stale food appear even more welcoming. I walk with my shoulders back at a purposeful, powerful pace.

The minutes and hours blend together just as the munchkin laughter is lost in the ambience of noise. I hop through different machines each one tempting me, telling me it's the *one*. As I ran out of the first set of cash bundles I brought in, I make another trip to the car without contemplating. Just a moment later, I make another. And another. Finally, I'm once again sitting at the bar wondering how fifteen-grand was just as easy to blow as a few hundred. How could I have possibly been going for that long? I look at my wrist with the blue band, and then up at the clock. 9:26 P.M. I try to let the comfortable burning of the bourbon and the complaints of other bar-goers mitigate my

brooding. But this time, however, I had made it, I was there. I made it to my goal and threw it away, but there was nobody else to blame except myself. No excuses. Her voice bounces around in my head insufferably. I have to get out.

I roll off the tarnished bar stool and briskly weave through the different machines, past the front desk forgetting to wish them a good night, and out into the darkening parking lot. I'm hit with the daunting realization that even if I had a destination in mind, I had no money left for gas. I run out of ideas and I begin to feel trapped as if my conscious is stuck in an eternal loop. My left arm feels heavy again. I run back inside and ask an employee for a pair of scissors. "Here ya go." I walk back outside towards my car and steady myself against the hood. Raising my shaking left arm parallel to my eyes, I carefully position the scissors around the blue wristband. I slowly squeeze cautiously with my right hand. Why had I returned? I account for my overall instability and trembling hands. Where can I go? The scissors creak and slowly start to close. What now? The blades of the scissors come apart and fall to the ground. I do the same.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This first-person account of gambling addiction effectively relates the physiological effects of addiction, effectively building the tension to engage the reader.in their fruitless effort to fight against this illness: "With the keys plunged into the ignition, the tires squealing out of the driveway, and my white knuckles clenching the steering wheel, I make the quick drive to the casino. I feel blood surging to my face, melting my brain. My ears start to ring and everything around me begins to sound as if I'm underwater."

## LAND Creative Writing Contest judges

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### Creative Non-Fiction

Nancy Owen Nelson has edited and co-edited academic books, and published critical essays and creative nonfiction and poetry. She earned degrees at Birmingham-Southern College and Auburn University. Her poems have been published in *The South Dakota Review*, *Graffiti Rag*, *What Wildness is This: Women Write About the Southwest*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Oberon*. Recent publications include her memoir, *Searching for Nannie B*, published in 2015; and most recently, her poetry chapbook, *My Heart Wears No Colors*, 2018; *Portals: A Memoir in Verse*, 2019; and *Divine Aphasia: A Woman's Search for her Father*, 2021.

### Poetry

Paul Rodgers most recent published poem reflects on the impact and legacy of Joseph Beam and the writers of the *In the Life* generation. He completed a novel and is working on a book.

### Fiction

Shannon Rossi is a professional journalist. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Print Journalism from the University of Michigan – Dearborn and a Master of Arts in Media Studies from Wayne State University. She was a full-time staff writer for The News Herald for several years. Ms. Rossi currently contributes to the Dearborn Press and Guide and The News Herald. She earned her Master in Library and Information Science degree at Wayne State University. She recently completed a film archive project for the Henry Ford Museum of Innovation after earning a Graduate Certificate in Archival Administration from Wayne State University.