

**Liberal Arts Network for Development  
Creative Writing Journal  
2022**

## 2022 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

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### Poetry

"Walk with me"

Author: Brandon J. Kwiatkowski

Mentor: Carol Finke

Kirtland Community College

"Refuge "

Author: Sarah Schjoneman

Mentor: Michelle Dunnum

Mott Community College

"My Black's Voice"

Author: Sidnei Austin

Mentor: Kaitlin Williams

Schoolcraft College

### Creative Non-Fiction

"My Own Hair Color"

Author: Karen Hempel

Faculty Sponsor: Sarah J. Smith

Lake Michigan College

"Beloved"

Author: Michelle Silva

Mentor: Sarah J. Smith

Lake Michigan College

"Land Mines"

Author: Ashely Trent

Mentor: Ruth Ann Schmitt

Henry Ford College

### Fiction

"Worms"

Author: Georgia "Wren" Beatty

Mentor: John Rietz

Henry Ford College

"Insurrection"

Author: Bonnie Goupil

Mentors: Rosalie Sanara Petrouske

Lansing Community College

"A Deadly Dull"

Author: Brendan Harris

Mentor: Shauna Hayess

Muskegon Community College

**First Place Poetry**  
**2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**"Walk with me"**

**by Brandon J. Kwiatkowski**

Walk with me sons, and talk with your dad.  
I will show you the ways to become great men.  
I'll guide you through this walk of life,  
and show you how to treat your wife.  
Although you are small, and it seems strange,  
I made a promise I can not change.  
From the moment when you first seen light,  
clearing your room from monsters at night.  
I held your hands when you were just boys,  
I did my best to fix your toys.  
When you fell and scrapes seemed to bleed,  
I tell you to shake it off-be strong like me.  
At times I may seem mean or tough,  
but this world can be scary-sometimes rough.  
I'll teach you these ways not to scare,  
but so you know how much I care.  
There are parents out there that feel the need,  
to influence by crappy actions or what's on TV.  
They miss the fact a child is a sponge,  
too worried about 'stuff' and their image might smudge.  
They forget about the ones they were meant to guide,  
worried about themselves and push the kids to the side.  
Yes; I am just a man and I do make mistakes,  
but it's how we fix them that soothes the aches.  
Times have been tough but you won't be able to tell,  
a child shouldn't be troubled by the problems of hell.  
I am your protector and I hold this true,  
I will protect your mother and always you.  
Hell has no fury like a mother that's true,  
but the universe has no power of what a father would do.  
No man nor beast could cross my sight,  
you mess with my family and I'll take your life.  
You five are my life I hold that so dear,  
there's nothing to fear as long as daddy is here.  
As you get older my wisdom will hold true,  
you'll remember ol' dad told you that too.  
"One day you'll see when your my age",  
won't just be something I use to say.  
You'll teach your children the same as I try,  
you'll wipe their tears if they start to cry.  
Showing them how they shall go,  
keeping the peace as head of the home.  
You will be great men with good heads on your shoulders,

able to move mountains as if they were boulders.  
Education is important; keep it number one,  
there is plenty of time for friends and plenty of time for fun.  
Friends will come and they will go,  
hearts will be broken and you reap what you sow.  
Life goes fast as we get caught in the building,  
remember to live and always love your children.  
Try to hold your temper I know it's hard at times,  
try to be forgiving and find the love that binds.  
Don't worry about the small stuff just do your very best,  
sometimes you'll feel stumped because life is a test.  
Always communicate and never grow apart,  
squash out the drama before it can start.  
Don't worry that much if troubles get you down,  
I'm right behind you- just turn around.  
I'll have stories to tell and your children will be laughing,  
"what was daddy like" I'm sure they'll be asking.  
I'll tell them you were great and I'm proud as can be,  
I'm happy the Lord gave you five boys to me.  
And when your old men and dad is just a picture,  
remember when you were little "daddy's gonna getcha".  
Remember the men that I taught you to be,  
I tried to do better than what was taught to me.  
One day when we're ready and we're awakened from our sleep,  
we will walk together just my sons and me.  
I love you boys and please hold this true,  
I'm thankful for the day that God gave me you.  
Now walk with me boys you have a lot to learn,  
so much to teach you of the life you deserve.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This poem calls to mind the English, Romantic poets from the 19<sup>th</sup> century who often wrote about love, nature, and life. The poem is a declaration of love from a father to his sons. The poem opens with "Walk with me sons, and talk with your dad." The father encourages his sons to continue to grow and warns them of the dangers they may face ahead; he is preparing them for life. The father also reassures his sons that he is truly proud of them: "Don't worry that much if troubles get you down, I'm right behind you –just turn around." The writer closes with: "Now walk with me boys you have so much to learn, so much to teach you of the life you deserve." The father's gentle voice and straightforward language exemplify both the love and fear that many parents have for their children's lives.

## **Second Place Poetry 2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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### **“Refuge” by Sarah Schjoneman**

I am a woman,  
a vast land,  
a holy city.  
The outline of my body,  
a border you wish to cross in the night,  
While you flee the wreckage that is your homeland.  
You cannot claim me,  
You cannot burn me to the ground as you have so many cities before.  
I am a woman,  
A vast land,  
A holy city,  
And when the ash settles,  
I will still remain.  
The imaginary borders you have tried to create will swallow you whole,  
As you fall to your knees  
And beg for my refuge.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This poem opens with “I am a woman, a vast land, a holy city.” The poem presents a woman in her fullness, defying expectations and embracing both her strength and beauty. She asserts: “You cannot burn me to the ground as you have so many cities before.” She understands the world around her and its destructive nature, yet she affirms: “When the ash settles, I will still remain.” In this, we see that the woman was here, in life, in the beginning, and will be here in the end. She has been overlooked and even taken for granted, but in the end knows that: “As you fall to your knees and beg for my refuge.” In this instance, we see the woman as the giver (and mother of life). We all come from her, and we all shall return to her.

## Third Place Poetry

### 2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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#### **"My Black's Voice"**

**By Sidnei Austin**

My black is alive, restless  
and enraged with flames  
harboring screams of ancestors unnamed

News says a boy was shot  
a gun snuffed out skittled dreams  
Daddy beaten black and blue  
nobody knew his name  
those tone-deaf ears bury my black cries  
callous eyes dismiss balled fists  
with tongues weaponized

Listen  
My black yearns, grasping for  
holy peace, for a chance  
to survive, to simply be  
what must it take  
for my black, to breathe  
for my black, to dance  
for my black, to sing out melodies  
what must it take to notice me

If it must,  
my black will burn, it will rise  
in legions, bleeding  
on suburban streets  
soon my black will walk with unchained feet  
a head held high and arms to swing  
one day my black,  
your black, our black  
will be free

What must it take?

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#### **Judge's Comments**

This writer presents a strong and contemporary voice in poetry. The poem is reminiscent of African American poets from both the Literature of Slavery and Freedom and Black Arts Movement. The writer's plea and direct address to the audience is moving in both its tone and use of language. The writer says: "My black is alive, restless and enraged with flames harboring screams of ancestors unnamed." Connecting the past with the present also brings forth a contemporary feel to the poem. The writer not only speaks of "ancestors", but also of a "boy who was shot" and how a "gun snuffed out skittled dreams", and "daddy beaten black and blue". This language illuminates the violence and police brutality in many urban communities. This is a great observation of both one's collective past and questionable future as the poem ends with "What will it take?" This poem ultimately demonstrates the connection of art, social commentary, and politics.

## First Place Fiction

### 2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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#### "Worms"

by Georgia 'Wren' Beatty

Things started simple enough - I was going about my life as a veterinarian. I worked primarily with pets and strays, lots of cats, dogs, and illnesses. For whatever reason, there seemed to be a sudden increase in animals with worms, both in pets and in strays. I couldn't figure out what it could be. My team and I did everything we could, even going so far as to quarantine the afflicted animals.

I first noticed the changes a week into the spontaneous outbreak. While it was normal for there to be swelling near an animal's stomach, this was absurd. A tiny purse dog had an abdomen the size of a grapefruit. Week old kittens seemed to double in size and couldn't move at all. Beyond that, upon examining a stool sample, there seemed to not only be live worms, but hundreds of tiny eggs, some hatching right before my eyes. I had to take my break early to vomit in the restroom.

Every night I would go to bed and find myself unable to sleep, curious and confused by this worm mutation. I started forgetting to eat, and found that I felt sick at the very prospect of food. All I could think about were the worms. Wiggling. Hatching.

As days passed, the animals looked worse and worse.

And as the days passed, I looked worse and worse.

My team and I spent hours working to help the animals, or even to figure out what was going on. These worms were nothing like any of us had ever seen.

After about two weeks of trying to remove the worms, something... happened.

We were working with a dog, a small one, whose stomach had grown enormous, making the skin tight and irritated. We had been in the middle of attempting to get a stool sample, when it happened.

The poor animal's stomach broke open from all the pressure.

All I could process was the worms. Billions of them. So many that there was nothing else in the mess. Just white, wriggling worms. My hands shook. I couldn't move. I heard screaming and retching behind me.

I don't remember leaving or cleaning up, but the next thing I know, half my team is handing me resignation forms and requesting my signature. That day, my hair started falling out. My stomach was bloated. My sight was fuzzy.

I couldn't get out of bed. I woke up, and couldn't will myself to move. I knew that I needed to be at work, with half my team gone, there was no way that the others could handle the hell taking place alone.

The moment I stood up, I knew I was going to be sick. I clamped my hand over my mouth and bolted to the bathroom.

Once I was retching and felt that there could be nothing else in my stomach I paused. Disgusted, I looked closer at the puke with the awful curiosity that one only gets from total desensitization. Though, no amount of desensitization could let me process what I was looking at.

Worms.

A scream fell from my mouth, along with two more worms. The sight made me want to vomit all over again, but my swollen stomach had nothing but worms to offer.

I was crying. I flushed the toilet to just get them away from me. I stood, gripping the counter for support, and looked to the mirror to try and pull myself together so I could call in

sick. Then I saw it. Nestled along my eyes waterline and stuck in the tears tracking down my face.

Eggs.

I shrieked again. Falling back and hitting the bathroom floor. I had started crying again but I didn't know when. I could feel pressure building in my stomach.

Wait.

There was pressure behind my eyes.

No.

Maybe I was panicking.

But I saw...

Can humans get worms?

Yes.

I felt the pressure in my stomach and eyes break. And everything went dark. I couldn't see, but I could feel what was no longer there and I could smell. Oh god, the smell. I had no idea when they had gotten inside me, but they had been there for a while. It took far too long, but eventually I stopped feeling anything. But not before I felt something on my tongue.

Small.

Wriggly.

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### **Judge's Comments**

I can only describe this story as a fantastic use of a small amount of words to evoke a large amount of horror. I wanted both to see how the story ended and stop reading simultaneously. It was very well and very simply written. But by the end, the author had given me a creeping, crawling feeling. Excellent work.

**Second Place Fiction**  
**2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

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**“Insurrection”**  
**by Bonnie Goupil**

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Contact: Independent News Agency  
(555) 123-4567

**Sunday Updates**

WASHINGTON, DC –

- The majority of the United States is preparing to celebrate the nation’s tenth Victory Day tomorrow with fireworks and the annual parade through Washington, DC. President Trump has announced that he will not make his traditional appearance in this year’s parade, due to safety concerns amid escalation of the conflicts on the west coast and in the northeast. The domestic terrorist group who calls themselves “Blue Tsunami” (BT) have been steadily advancing into civilian areas, and President Trump has the military on high alert, poised to strike with deadly force if necessary. Negotiations with BT have thus far been unproductive.
- MAGA Security raided a club in Nashville, Tennessee and identified several individuals with gender identity disorder and sexual preference disorder. Due to overcrowding of the existing rehabilitation facilities, they are currently in holding and will soon be sent for their required rehabilitation at the new offshore facilities, which are set to open by the end of January. Reintegration into society depends on the individual’s response to treatment and may vary from a successful twelve- week program to permanent residence in the facility for those who cannot reintegrate.
- Along with North Korea and Russia, the United States will be moving forward on plans to drain the swamp at the United Nations (UN) and force their hands to reinstate the membership of their respective countries. After signing the Putin Pact in 2027, sanctions were placed on all three countries, and they were subsequently banned from the UN. Leaders of the Pact countries plan to have a military presence at the January 26<sup>th</sup> meeting of the UN General Assembly, to demonstrate their strength and intentions to assume their rightful roles in world government.
- Following the 2028 elimination of several government social programs including social security and welfare, hundreds of shelters were set up by churches across the nation to house the poor and elderly. The effects of this blight are now becoming apparent, as morgues are overflowing with those who have starved, frozen to death, or committed suicide. President Trump’s plan to keep the scum off the streets is coming to fruition as this group of undesirables is slowly eliminating itself.
- The United States birth rate skyrocketed in 2030, following the federal ban of

contraceptives. The birth rate for 2031 is expected to eclipse that of the 1955 baby boom. President Trump said, "This is big news. The best news." As these children age and become taxpayers themselves, President Trump says that he is hopeful for reduction of our national debt, which is at an all-time high.

- Progress on the Canadian wall has been paused since November but is set to resume this spring when the weather improves. When complete, it will be the largest border wall ever erected and will be visible from space. The final budget for the wall's construction has climbed to over \$50 billion, more than four times the final cost of the completed Mexican wall. Like Mexico, Canada has not responded to President Trump's demands that they contribute funding to the wall's construction cost.
- Government approval ratings across the board have recently dropped into the single digits. President Trump's historic decision to eliminate presidential term limits and the passage of the 2024 Voter Morality Act were widely praised at the time, but have recently come under great scrutiny, due to the hateful propaganda spread by the BT domestic terrorist group. President Trump reportedly has a plan to combat this resistance, though he has not yet revealed exactly what that plan will entail.

May God bless our leader, President Trump.

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### **Judge's Comments**

It was interesting that the author chose to write the story as a series of news-like bulletins. The author did a great job of gradually moving into a very, very biased source of "news," proclaiming the glory of the leader by the end of the story. Giving the story a dystopian feel plays on very real fears about the future of Democracy in the United States.

## Third Place Fiction

### 2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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#### **"A Deadly Dull"** **by Brendan Harris**

the father's eyes are cloudy, a fine mist working over the whites until they are dull grey voids.

he sees a shadowy figure in front of him, looming over him, watching, waiting. this is the grim reaper, he thinks. he has come for me again.

this isn't his first brush with the paranormal. for months now, ghosts had haunted him, turning his once peaceful home into a circus of spirits and apparitions. it was innocent enough at first; what started as corporeal shades in the corner of his eyes progressed into poltergeists and demons taking the forms of intruders, knocking over glass bottles and breaking furniture. his orderly rooms became mazes of debris as the ghosts made messes faster than he could clean them up. they played with his memory, too. they took forms of loved ones and played with their features, making him question the names and faces of his friends, his family, even his own children. when he told his son of the hauntings, he grew indignant, saying there was no such thing as ghosts. but nothing else could explain what was happening to the father's home.

time and time again, his cries would fall on the deaf ears of his son until he finally ended up here: the nursing home. my son must be getting rid of me, he thought. he never did listen to his father, so his only recourse is placing me here, out of sight and out of mind. but his change of setting didn't stop the supernatural experiences. now, nearly every day, this shadowy figure that he called the reaper would visit him, standing at the foot of his bed, glowering at him, waiting for his time to run out. he would call for help, and each time the reaper would disappear, leaving only him and the bewildered nurse in the room. at least she didn't treat him like a lunatic.

now, as he stares at the figure, its features begin to soften until he can make out his mother, in perfect black and white like she had stepped out of a polaroid. he can make out her colorless features; her striped dress, her wavy hair, her long painted nails. her face, however, is misty and translucent, shimmering and shaking in the dim light. she holds a hand out to him, beckoning him to take a walk with her. he shakes his head violently, knowing to resist the illusion.

then, without warning, it hardens into a masculine form: his own father, rough face, short cropped hair, cotton shirt. his colors are present, but they are subdued, hard blacks and browns smudging his skin like ink blots on paper. his face, too, is murky, the only exception being two black pits where his eyes should be. they bore into his soul, always judgmental. he remembers how unfeeling and cold his father could be. this form doesn't beckon him, it just stares, all-knowing and all-encompassing.

again, it changes, now into his oldest son at age 17, pimples still dotting his boyish face. he looks happy to see him, waving at him feverishly. he is tempted to wave back, but he keeps his hands down, opening his mouth to shout but saying nothing. it starts to laugh and point at him, opening his mouth wide to mock him.

then, it shrinks down even shorter, now taking the form of his youngest as a child in elementary, still holding the stuffed rabbit he could never part with. he looks at him from under the foot of the bed with concern in his eyes. he hears him utter "Dad?" before becoming out of focus and indiscernible. as much as he wants to believe him, he knows the concern is fake, conjured up in an attempt to make the father feel vulnerable and weak.

the reaper continues to do this rapidly, only staying as one form for enough time to be made out before changing, again and again. he can hear it start to laugh, knowing the torture it is inflicting on him.

**this** is the grim reaper. he has come to take me, he thinks.  
he wishes he was dreaming, but this apparition is very real. finally, he lets out a scream, raw and piercing, but he is surprised to find that the voice that escapes his throat isn't his now but the voice of him as a child, weak and afraid. this causes him to scream louder. this existence is hell.

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the youngest son stands over him, watching him scream with a broken voice. his eyes stare at him but never *look* at him, any familiarity lost in the deep wells of his pupils. the son shakes his head, wishing that his father would recognize him. it had been like this for weeks now, but he still keeps visiting, hoping for any change but coming up with nothing every time. when his father called him, he would always show up, even when his ranting about "ghosts" was incoherent and childlike. he would watch him rip up furniture like a rabid animal until his hands were raw, collapsing from exhaustion at the end of it. of course, the father would never remember these episodes. he would always blame it on ghosts and the paranormal, but the son knew better. he tried to be there with him, hoping it would pass. but it never did, and now the son is here, still trying to tend to a dying father. "mr. harris?" a voice calls out.

the nursing home door opens, revealing a tall woman in a white doctor's coat. she looks to the bed, still containing the softly screaming father, then to the son. her face changes to a pitiful look, an apology hanging on her lips.

"i'm sorry, mr. harris, but i think it's time for you to go. you can come back tomorrow if you'd like!"

the son looks to her then back to the father. he doesn't want to believe it, but he knows that the cycle will continue to repeat itself. he knows that the father's mind died long ago, but the body still lives on, screaming and crying at the mere sight of his son trying to visit. he has to remind himself that this man – this shell – in front of him isn't the father he knew. however, this doesn't make the sight any easier.

"no. that's fine." the son says.

a tear begins to roll down his cheek. he closes his eyes for a moment, collects himself, then looks at the father once more, still screaming, voice weak.

"goodbye, dad." he says, turning away and pushing past the nurse. he makes it back to his truck without incident, starting up the engine and putting it into gear. the loud rumbles of the engine mask the uncontrollable sobs that escape his lips as he drives away.

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author's note: this piece was inspired by a song called "deadly dull" by the band movements. if you enjoyed this story, please give that song a listen.

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## Judge's Comments

The story started out feeling like a certain kind of horror story, a dying man seeing the Grim Reaper yet again and wondering what his fate will be after death. It changed into a different, much sadder, horror story. The author did an excellent job of describing the effects of dementia or Alzheimer's disease on both the father with the disease and the son who was trying to help and cope as best he could. Being forgotten by our loved ones or being trapped in your own decaying mind are things that a lot of people fear. The author also evoked the sadness associated with those health conditions really well.

## First Place Creative Non-Fiction 2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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### **"My Own Hair Color"** **by Karen Hempel**

My mother's year had gone badly, you could tell by the color of her hair. The roots were black, her ends blonde, and the middle was an auburn red. She looked like a clown that didn't know she was supposed to take off her wig. An ever-present cigarette dangled from her thin lips. Wisps of smoke curling around her almost youthful face.

She wears what she always wears to church. The black mini skirt with bleached white flowers. A loose black sweater with no bra. Sandals that you can smell from the other room. Yet, there is no denying she knows how to hold herself, how to bat her eyelashes just right. Doesn't matter if she hasn't showered in days, it doesn't matter what color her hair is, and it doesn't even matter that she blatantly hates everyone. The world falls to her feet because she sways her hips.

"We are never going back to that place," she states, taking a long drag of her cigarette. The acrid smell churns my stomach. She pulls her skirt down with a desperate effort. Her hand is shaking, as if she's got Parkinson's.

My siblings and I glance at the church with the big stained-glass windows looming over us. The red doors tower over even the tallest men that had entered for mass that morning. I thought it was strange that the man with the white collar said all were welcome in these walls. Now, they're impenetrable.

"Honey, it wasn't that bad. Did you have to make a scene?" her newest boyfriend asks, lighting his own cigarette.

My mother's face goes red. The cigarette smoke circles around her face the way clouds cover a sunrise. "They're not gonna talk about me like that in front of my children." Tears form at the corner of her eyes, dragging her eyeliner with them. Thin lines of black like she's in a horror movie.

"Let's just go home."

We pile into the car. The drive is short and terse. My mother refuses to let the radio be turned on. Refuses to roll down the window or take a break from smoking. Her boyfriend looks at us from the driver's seat. We all know to look at our feet or out the window. We know to nod at whatever my mother says between drags. The sound of rattling trash at our feet, and my mother's complaints are the only noises in the world.

Once we're home my mother paces in circles in the kitchen. Her boyfriend drives off to parts unknown. My siblings know to hide in our room. They know to play out of sight and as quietly as they are able. I, however, am an unlucky person. I am my mother's confidant. She keeps me standing at attention in the mouth of the kitchen. The gleaming pots we never use are what I focus on. I make sure not to look her in the eye. She will not hurt me, but she isn't afraid to destroy everything around me.

Without warning her hand is around my arm, and she's dragging me outside. The front porch is barely three pieces of wood and some white paint. Our backyard is sparse, with a failed vegetable garden and a crab apple tree. She sits me on the porch and I wonder what she'll do next. I don't wait very long, as she heads inside to grab her hair dye.

She sets down the bottle of 'Blonde Bomb', her hair dye towel, a pair of gloves, and a comb. I've helped my mother dye her hair many times over the years. I know the chemical smell that fills your nose. The way your eyes sting when you get a smidge of it in the corner of your eye. The thick feeling of it trying to permeate your skin through the gloves. I hate all of it but I know better than to complain.

To my surprise she doesn't sit in her usual position. With her legs crossed and her head tilted back. Instead she rears up behind me, pressing me into her thighs. Combing my hair back from my face, before putting the towel around my shoulders.

"I think blonde bangs would look so good on you," she tells me, and the sun starts to feel like it is stinging my bare shoulders. I wiggle and her arms clasp me tight to her chest. "This is expensive stuff, and I want you to be pretty. So sit still."

She puts on the staticky gloves, and puts the dye in her hands. I can hear it being squished between her fingers. Then a rubbing sound like she's making a wish on a lamp. Her excitement to dye my hair is palpable, and it makes my skin crawl. I try to focus on something else, anything else. The crab apple tree that I once ate from. The garden that failed no matter how much my mother and I tried. The sky that seems to be so vast and wide to anyone that isn't me.

I hate the feeling of dye in my hair. I hate the goopy fingers pressing into my skull with no clear direction. Dying anything in the vicinity of my forehead. I hate her and she hums a happy tune.

It seems like hours before she stops. Like, I've spent decades on this hard porch, splinters threatening my bare legs. The sun scorches every inch of my skin, and she hums for the entirety of what I endure. When she's done, she rinses out what feels to be the top half of my head with the hose. She dries it with the towel and raves about how she should be a hairdresser. Touching her own hair while speaking.

She produces a small compact from her pocket and shows me myself. It does look like the top half of my hair is blond now. No clear sections of blonde, just wherever her hands happened to reach. She beams at me from the mirror, and I try to keep my face stoic. I try not to scream at what she's done to me. The rage is steam in my lungs.

"Now you're just like me." She grins and presses her face to mine. I can't help but think she's right.

I am just like her.

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## Judge's Comments

The piece details a fraught, fatigued family relationship as a voiceless child is unwillingly subsumed into the identity of the mother. The sparseness and brevity of the account is effective, and it is balanced by a skillful and intriguing use of imagery and metaphor. The writer conveys sympathy, ambivalence, and despair vividly and with artistry.

## Second Place Creative Non-Fiction 2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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### **“Beloved”** **by Michelle Silva**

A woman once asked me what my husband was. We had been sitting around a campfire at a family resort on the edge of Platte Lake chatting mundanely with the random selection of vacationers assembled for the evening. The setting sun had not yet faded enough to reveal the blanket of stars in the northern night sky when David unfolded from his stoop, wished everyone a good night and made the short trek across a green lawn into our tiny cabin.

“He’s not a night Owl then?”

My attention was diverted from watching the turquoise waters of the lake deepen into a true blue, to the woman sitting a few stumps away. After a moment's confusion I realized she was asking me about David.

“Oh! No, he’s a very early riser, even on vacation.” It was a habit ingrained, even from childhood, of waking before dawn to put in a full day's work, but this was a detail I wouldn't share with a woman with whom I had only had a few minutes conversation. My fireside companion nodded but her curiosity wasn't yet satisfied.

“May I ask what your husband is? I mean where is he from?”

I knew what she meant. What I didn't know was how to answer. I could have given a snarky reply, He's a man, or he's from Earth were always entertaining baits. I reckoned this time the question was from genuine interest and so I replied in kind.

“Well, his parents and grandparents were from Texas, we aren't sure of much before then. Although, my father-in-law insists they are part Apache.”

“Hmm.” The middle-aged woman nodded. “I was wondering if that was it. In any case, he's very striking.”

In any case, I didn't know how to respond to that. It's never been an easy subject, the matter of David's heritage. More accurately, it's never been simple. I was unaware of how complicated it would be when we first fell in love. I presupposed all Hispanics and Mexican Americans shared the same enthusiastic pride in their heritage, but as I would eventually come to realize, and as David would say himself, he is not a Mexican.

The first undercurrents came early on before we were married, like the day we were driving to his house in West Olive passing acres of blueberry fields ripening under a bright summer sun. The fields he used to work, when he was only five.

“Do you mind,” he asked unexpectedly. “That I'm not...white?”

“No. Why would I mind?” I reached for his hand, the skin normally a warm brown, had deepened into mahogany as the summer stretched on. I felt the callouses earned from years of playing the bass guitar and ran my hand up his arm covered with fine black hair. No, I didn't mind. I didn't consider us different races, though perhaps I was subconsciously proud of how we looked together. My blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin a stark contrast to his rich brown. There were no social objections either. We ran in a mixed crowd full of every skin color under the sun. His parents liked me, and mine loved him. It was 2003 not 1940. In that moment as we sat hand in hand, I considered the matter closed.

In time I started to forget we looked different at all. My new father-in-law hung paintings of Native Americans on the walls and had a penchant for leather belts carved with eagle motifs. His mother made rice and beans, but his family was just as American middle class as mine. I was often surprised when anyone referred to us as a biracial couple, it felt so normal to just be us. He tanned and I burned. Sometimes we ate typical American food, sometimes traditional Mexican fare. He taught me to make enchiladas the way his mom made them, and I showed him how my

dad made them until we had concocted some sort of half authentic, half gringo way. We celebrated Christmas and Easter with Turkey and Ham. We didn't celebrate Cinco de Mayo or Day of the Dead. We spoke English exclusively. Whenever people expected David to speak Spanish he wouldn't. If he was asked comment on the authenticity of something Hispanic, he would laugh in his jovial way and give a thumbs up, deflecting the assumption he must be a proud Latino man. I didn't know then that he was concealing the irritation of being racially categorized. Perhaps he didn't know himself.

I would like to say I became attuned to David's wrestling with his heritage shortly into our marriage, but it would be many years before I could begin to understand. The long journey to awareness first came as he told me stories of his childhood.

He told me about the day when he was walking the halls in his public elementary school, a bright eager young second grader, the mixed vegetable eating champion, who made people laugh wherever he went. As he followed the line of his classmates, they passed a teacher who scowled at a group of migrant children. "Look at these cockroaches shuffling their feet," she said with no attempt to disguise her contempt. There was the time David was put in a remedial spelling class, with other brown children, even though he was an excellent speller. Thankfully, it didn't take long for the teacher to look at him and say, "You don't belong here, sweetie." Even worse was the teacher who called him a wetback and physically slammed him against the wall.

High school wouldn't be much better. His guidance counselor told him he might as well just drop out. Why did a young brown man need a high school diploma anyway? In those years a few kind souls stood as beacons of hope, keeping him going to earn his diploma. Still, in the course of time between elementary school and his graduation day David was persuaded that to be a Mexican, or Hispanic was an awful thing. To be a migrant was especially loathsome. He hated being connected to anything that would fetter him to a culture he took no pride in and did not identify with. His parents were from Texas after all, he was not a Mexican.

I naively took these stories and relegated them to the sphere of traumatic childhood experiences which most humans are bound to experience. That was then, this is now. By and large, I could not believe most people were like that anymore. In West Michigan we weren't racist. We had evolved, hadn't we? We lived peacefully through many years, his brown skin not an issue to me. I never witnessed him as the victim of direct racism, although I slowly began to see things that unsettled me. Like the time he was promoted but did not get the same pay as the white man who previously held the position. I reasoned there must be a justification. There were the times he was pulled over and rudely questioned by our local police officer, for no apparent reason.

"Maybe he's just a jerk," I offered after the incident.

"Hmmm. Maybe," David said unconvincedly.

When one of his bosses began continually referring to David as Pedro, it began to dawn on me that maybe society isn't as evolved as I would like to believe. I could not understand why something which made David so beautiful to me made him so much less than to others.

For years all these things lay under the surface of our lives, waiting for the right time to rise up and be dealt with or be swept under again. It wasn't until years after our first son was born that David confessed how relieved he was Marcus looked white. Even though Marcus had David's nose, his hazel eyes and rusty-brown hair lent him an Irish aesthetic, more in line with my ancestry. David adored Marcus and Marcus him. Then, our second son arrived, the spitting image of his father. Brown skin, large chocolate brown eyes, thick dark hair. In Maxwell, David saw the image of himself. The self he was taught to hate, to be ashamed of. After years of dormancy, the past was alive again in the form of a beautiful baby boy, asking to be reckoned with. Slowly and with much heartache, David learned to love his little brown child, and in so doing began to love and accept himself.

It has been many years of learning and accepting, yet still the scars remain. A year ago, Maxwell was preparing to go to a new school with people who would be mostly upper class and

white. David sat across from Max at our rustic hickory dining table in the kitchen he built himself and pricked open the wound once again.

“Max, you have to realize that where you are going you will be different from everyone else. People will be looking at you. You need to work hard. Be the best you can be. Don’t give anyone an excuse to look down on you. There are people in this world who will look at you a certain way, whether you like it or not.”

And there’s the crux of it. The burden David has carried all this time. The real question of who he is. Not a wetback, not a cockroach. No, never those things. Not a Mexican, not Hispanic, not Latino, yet somehow all these things. By nature of their complexion, David and Maxwell carry with them the responsibility of representing an entire culture whether they like it or not. I know the world is a different place now than when David spent those days in elementary school, but I leaned against the counter and simply listened as a father cracked open his heart before his son. I don’t worry that Maxwell will be called a wetback or slammed against a wall. When people look at Maxwell next to me, I sense more curiosity than animosity, but I will never know what it’s like to be the only white person in a room. So, I stand silently and love them both, praying that my love will be enough to protect and to heal.

On a hot August afternoon, at a waterside park in his hometown, I gave David a present for his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was a kit from Ancestry DNA. Maybe we could finally put this question and this struggle to rest. The results were a bit surprising. Overwhelmingly David carries the ancestry of the Native American tribes of the southwestern United States, with a bit of Italian and Portuguese woven in. So, maybe something like Apache after all.

I recently reminded David of the conversation with the woman at Platte Lake all those years ago.

“Remember that lady who asked what you were, the one who thought you were very striking?”

David smiled in his boyishly charming way and said, “It’s because of my high cheek bones.”

I laughed and wrapped my arms around him, running my hand down his dark brown skin covered with fine black hair, until I could feel the callouses on his fingertips. Maybe we’ll never fully understand what makes us who we are, how much our past, our heritage forms our person. In that moment, in my heart, I affirm what I’ve always known about who he is. It’s in his name, David. It means Beloved.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This narrative is an intimate account of racial disparity from the viewpoint of a white spouse who slowly comes to realize the silent, private struggles of her husband. The quiet but palpable tenderness of this piece makes it simultaneously affectionate and wrenching. Guided by love, the writer explores what constitutes the essence of a human being.

### Third Place Creative Non-Fiction 2022 LAND Creative Writing Competition

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#### **“Land Mines” by Ashley Trent**

The light in the kitchen doubled as the door eased forward and the scent of my father’s cigarettes filled the room; he was home from work at the usual time. He carried a garment bag over his shoulder, smiling sheepishly at me while clutching his cigarette between his lips. “Why are you just getting home now?” I asked, the confusion apparent in my voice. His mother passed away that morning, and I received the call seven hours earlier. I stood with the entire room between us, my feet rooted but prepared to retreat, not yet sure of the mood he might be in.

“I had to go buy a suit for the funeral.”

He was too calm, too cheery for this occasion.

I had long since grown accustomed to trying to make my way out of the house by four o’clock each afternoon in anticipation of his typical state of anger. I had observed his explosive temper for fifteen years, and although I had learned to take it in stride, it was still something I feared being faced with.

Once, when I was nine years old, I spilled a glass of water into the carpet in his bedroom. He exploded with fury, his hand connecting to the side of my small head with the full force of his stocky, six-foot frame. Bright white flashes burst across my vision as my head rocked to the side. My hair flew in different directions, and tears ejected involuntarily from my eyes.

Many days brought him home from work, angry and looking for a fight. He might bellow over a single cup or dish sitting in the sink, with words such as “lazy” and “stupid” flying toward my ears with force comparable to that of his hand.

Other offenses worthy of this treatment included (but was far from limited to): not moving furniture to the basement (including a couch—not that I’d been asked beforehand), not understanding my math homework, receiving a grade less than a B on my report card, not knowing the answer to a question he asked, not sorting and preparing the bills properly, or not washing dishes precisely the way he did. Many times, if something was going wrong for him, such as an endless line of cars when we were already late to a family gathering, I caught the back of his hand just the same as if the traffic had been in my control. When Child Protective Services were called, I faced his wrath and spent a weekend anxiously cleaning the house to a pristine state before their home visit.

On days when I was angry enough to fight back, demanding to know why he would say such cruel things to me, it only got worse. His fury would skyrocket. His screams bellowed past his lips like a crazed Grizzly bear. A foamy spit would fly from his lips as he flung words which bit and tore at my heart:

“You’re a fucking bitch, you know that? No one is ever going to love you.”

“Stop crying! You have no idea what pain is! You have no reason to cry!”

“You know I have high blood pressure—do you want to make me have a heart attack and die?”

His fists would pummel the wall, the cabinets, my head—always the head—until I would break down and lock myself in the bathroom—my only safe refuge—hyperventilating through my sobs until he retreated into his bedroom.

Sometimes, my father was my best friend and everything I hoped to become. We would talk about philosophy, music, politics, and the state of humanity. We would make jokes, engage in sarcastic and witty banter, and laugh to the point of tears about puns. In times like these, he was my favorite person in the entire world. I knew this to be the person my father truly was. This was the person I had known as a very young child. This was the person I missed daily and would do anything for.

His outbursts were land mines, and some days I knew where they were and how to step around them. Most days, I did not. I began to look for signs this might be a screaming and hitting day. Eventually, I could tell by the feeling hanging in the air when he came home—if it were light, I would probably be okay. If it hung heavy and burdensome, I was most likely in for it and needed to hide to keep myself safe.

The afternoon his mother died, he stood utterly calm. I asked him questions about how he was feeling:

“Are you okay?”

“Do you need to talk?”

“Can I do anything for you?”

He cocked his head, smiled warmly at me, and said, “You’ve already been through this. You lost your mom years ago. You are so strong.” I knew he meant it. He wasn’t angry.

This was in stark contrast to what I was used to. At eight years old, I lost my mother to suicide. Though I tried desperately to talk about it with him in the beginning, he would become sullen and bitter, telling me to stop feeling sorry for myself and to suck it up. I ultimately dealt with the loss by sitting alone on my bed each night, wailing and screaming at God for taking her from me, at her for leaving. Eventually, my sob-worn body would crumble into a pile on the pink carpet as my father snored loudly in the next room. Now my father was suddenly interested in how I felt about it for the first time in fifteen years.

As we spoke, he lowered himself into one of the chairs, resting an arm on the weathered wood of the kitchen table. The conversation was light and polite. His interest was genuine.

When the tears started, they were his. I threw my arms around his broad shoulders as comfortably as I could. Sobs racked his body as he removed his glasses to wipe the tears away.

“I’m so sorry, Ashley. I tried.”

“I know, Dad, it’s okay.”

He began telling me the details of the night she died that he had never shared with anyone before. My mother had called him from a motel room. She had with her a loaded gun, lots of Xanax and alcohol inside her, and she said she wanted to die. He found her pulling out of the motel parking lot and followed her several miles. Any time he would come near her, she would point the gun at him threateningly. He reminded her of all she had to live for, and she countered with reasons to leave. This continued for hours.

Just when he thought he had her calmed down, as my father told her how to re-engage the safety through the phone, the gun fired a bullet into her chest, severing her aorta. She dropped her half-smoked cigarette on the floor. She was gone before the ambulance reached the hospital.

He told me what it looked like: the scarlet spread across the chest of her white shirt and the way her pupils dilated across her eyes as her head fell backward. I didn’t want to know any of this, but I knew he needed to get it out of his long-tortured heart.

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I implored him to seek professional help, but he said it was too late. In his mind, there was no point. I could only hold him until his tears stopped.

A month later, I found him in his bed. He was cold, stiff, and silent. His heart had finally stopped breaking, but only because it seized. He was finally at peace.

After my father’s death, I held so many feelings inside that I was numb for a long time. I was angry at what he allowed himself, myself, and our relationship to become. The years of abuse and neglect I’d had to endure. And his insistence that he was utterly alone and misunderstood in his pain. He had been blind to my presence at his side the entire time, waiting for him to see that we were a team. I had done all I could to help him see this, but he either didn’t listen or couldn’t hear me. It should have been he and I against the world, at least in my mind.

Some people, including my therapist at the time, offered the theory that maybe my father’s absence in my life might be for the better. I never kept the way my father treated me much of a secret, and even if I had, his land mines had gone off enough in front of my friends that it would have been useless to try.

After he died, I spent countless nights stewing in my anger and hurt – or doubled over, tormented by the pain of imagining what my father must have gone through the night the love of his life and mother of his child took her own life before his eyes, despite his efforts to save her.

This empathy helped me forgive my father, even though the apology could never come to fruition.

At some point, the realization struck that I could carry my anger and resentment, my guilt for his unhappiness and death, my pain for what had transpired in both our lives, and it would wear on me forever—or I could let it go, forgiving him so I could finally be at peace as well.

I realized the truth was my mother took more than just her life with that bullet; she took his as well. The man who was my father died that same night in 1995, but somehow his body kept going until 2010. That snarling Grizzly was not my father, nor had he ever been. My heart will always ache for him, but I have set us both free from my resentment for how he responded to his own struggles through these realizations.

The land mines, after all, were perils for us both.

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### **Judge's Comments**

This piece is thematically rich as it gives voice to heavy, difficult truths. With the burden of experience, the writer illumines how pain morphs into pain and trauma bleeds from person to person. This narrative effectively demonstrates how humans struggle to release themselves from past wounds and reach some sort of equilibrium, and at the end, there can be understanding, forgiveness, and healing.