

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2023**

2023 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

"Knowledge of the Perished" by Alexandra Butler-Ehle

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Gogebic Community College

"Calm in the Chaos" by Nicholas Punla Smith

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FICTION

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POETRY

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"Run, Hide, Fight" by D'Machia Milom

Faculty Sponsor: John Rietz

Henry Ford College

"Fright Night" by Rick Bilodeau

Faculty Sponsor: Annie Schnarr

Lansing Community College

First Place
Creative Non-Fiction
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“Knowledge of the Perished”

by Alexandra Butler-Ehle

Day Zero

My flesh is weakening by the minute, but it has not gone to waste. My mind may be gone, but its information will still spread. The heart still cares, even if it is in decay. I may now be nothing, yet to those studying me, I am everything. The disintegrating corpse holding what was once me lies nestled under the soft dirt, marked by a number alone. I have companions with me on this journey, although we have all been placed in different locations. Some are exposed out in the sun, while others hide in the shade. Some are buried near the surface, while others are embedded much further down. Most are alone in their spot, but a few are accompanied by another. This is all very important so that our watchers can study how we decompose under various circumstances. Forensic pathologists need this crucial information to better learn the rotting human. This information helps find and identify those who didn't choose to donate their body to science. Welcome to the Body Farm.

Self-Digestion

I have been placed in a shallow grave out in the heavy sun. I am alone, but I know that will provide the best results for the questions they will ask of me. At this point I'm still quite fresh. Rigor mortis has come into effect and left my muscles hard and rigid. I am still hungry, yet it is not the stomach that hungers but the body itself. Surplus carbon dioxide creates an acidic environment and makes the membranes within the cells burst, causing them to release enzymes that begin devouring the cells. The process of *self-digestion* commences and the body eats its body. Everything that once kept me alive and thriving is now attacking its own work like an enraged toddler. With clipboards and camera flashes, my audience shall watch me throughout the next space of moving time. Whatever shall I become?

Bloat

The sun has cycled its way past me a few times. My skin has long lost all warmth and the eyes have been greyed out. I do not know how long I've been lying here, but I do trust that the pathologists are delicately keeping track of my time here for their research. This next stage of decomps has left me *bloated*, literally. Bacteria left on my body has multiplied and caused me to emit gases, pushing liquids out of my body and causing me to swell up. I have doubled in size, although I am glad that it is only after I died that it happened. Those very gases have attracted home-seeking flies in need of a place to reproduce. The openings on my face are comfy spots for the creation of maggots. Perhaps they found the bloody foam dripping from my mouth and nose to be inviting? One often worries that in life they may have been a rotten person, but little did I know that in death that was exactly what I wanted to be. Falling apart indeed, yet useful while breaking down.

Active Decay

I may no longer be active, but I am now *actively decaying*. My organs, muscles and skin have all begun to liquify, transforming me into a disturbing human waterbed. Due to the blood decomposition, the lifeless skin that remains has once again changed shade from a greyed green to a mushy red. The putrid smell of rotting flesh attracts maggots. They feast on all the festering soft tissue they can find, taking most of me away but leaving the hair and bones. The grubs take what they can from what's left of me, but they will never take the lessons I will teach my observers. Forensic entomologists will examine the larva, searching for answers in how bodies lose themselves. One cannot guarantee a life of only good, but perhaps that life can be made more meaningful by giving the death to a worthy cause.

Advanced Decay

The *decay advances* further as time takes its place. My soft tissue is almost entirely gone, and what skin remains has been dryly leathered down. Peeking through the hide is bits of my slightly visible skeleton since insects have made their mark as well. The peak of the decom party is over, and the only remaining guests are beetles trying to break down tougher tissue such as cartilage. I can feel myself leaving myself, but I am okay. I am still a useful part of society, even if I am no longer part of it.

Skeletonization

I was once made of flesh and blood. I breathed in air and out carbon dioxide. Now, I have been *skeletonized*. I am nothing but bone—bone and a little frayed connective tissue. The ground grasps and pulls those bones into the soil. Descending from the sky is a crow looking for a hearty bone. Ambitious, it tries to grab a human ulna, only to give up for the more realistic phalange. The femur was already dragged away by a fiery fox. Not a thing is left of me. I am gone and so is my body. My fleshy items have been returned to Earth, but I am now beyond that flesh. Beyond life. Beyond death. The truth is inside all of us, we just need to let someone look.

Judge's Comments

A sober and defamiliarizing account of the body's disintegration after death. This piece presents scientific facts about decomposition, but from the perspective of the decomposing. The author's approach confronts the reader with unconventional definitions of "meaning" and "usefulness," in stark realist terms.

Second Place
Creative Non-Fiction
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“Calm in the Chaos”
by Nicholas Punla Smith

“Ship, shipmates, self.” Every captain and chief mate in the tall-ship industry repeatedly drills this into their crews. The idea behind this saying is the order and priority of caretaking. All of these are important in their own way, but they’re also interdependent. Without the others, none will survive.

Ship comes first. My position as a chief mate meant that I was responsible for training the crew in the skills they needed for the job. At least once per season, I would remind the deckhands that humans aren’t meant to survive at sea, and the ship is the only thing keeping them alive. It seems kinda blunt, but in the middle of the ocean, you are nothing without a ship. This means that in every aspect of operations, a sailor must be asking, “What’s best for the ship?” A prudent sailor takes care not to break any of the equipment that they use, and whenever something fails, it’s fixed as soon as possible. Every piece of the ship, no matter how small, is essential in keeping the boat afloat and going to its destination. If one component fails, other pieces have to compensate for that failure, leading those parts, or even the whole ship, to failure. A crew without a ship is just a bunch of people. Put them by themselves in the middle of the ocean, and chaos will ensue.

Likewise, shipmates have to rely on each other to operate the ship. Every sail generally has at least three ropes that must be pulled to handle it. If you multiply this by the number of sails, even a relatively small tall ship can exceed a hundred lines on its decks. Teamwork is the name of the game: if one rope is pulled at the wrong time, horrible things can happen. On the light end, your shipmates might have to pull a bit harder, or you might have to start the task over, repeating all the steps to get back to where you started. At the worst, the ship grinds to a halt, someone gets injured, or something breaks. Every shipmate plays a valuable role, so you should care for them accordingly. A ship without a crew is just a hunk of wood and steel. If you put this pile in the middle of the ocean, the pieces will scatter, and chaos will ensue.

Self is usually saved for last in the order, but its importance should not be underestimated. If you can’t take care of yourself, you can’t take care of your ship or your shipmates. If you’re sick, injured, dehydrated, or just plain tired, everyone else has to work twice as hard to make up for your place in the crew. A good sailor makes sure they are well rested and hydrated. They keep themselves fit for the job, wear the appropriate gear, and make sure they’re ready to work. A crew without your own contributions will eventually become exhausted. One by one, they’ll become unable to do their job, and chaos will ensue.

Glenn Wolff’s painting *Midwest Twilight #3* seems, at first glance, to be a simple Michigan landscape. Centered on a red barn and adjacent buildings, to the right are some paving stones and, in the foreground, some brown grasses. Poplar trees surround the yard, and between the farm buildings, an oak tree stands tall, painted to look as if it’s a giant head of cabbage sprouting from the ground. A reddish-brown field of row crops rolls down the hill into the trees and lake behind. The sky reeks of dusk. The muted oranges and reds blend together to form a peaceful, almost romantic background. However, there is something peculiar about this painting. Flying picnic tables obscure our view of the beautiful landscape. Falling, falling, falling from the sky. Dozens of them, falling, cascading, tumbling down. All over the place. Some of these tables appear to be worn. They brandish the scores and scars that come from decades of being used.

Whenever I look at Wolff's painting, I feel overwhelmed by the chaos. I want to duck, curl into a ball on the floor, and cover my head with my hands to protect myself from the falling tables hurtling down from the sky. I can feel the bruises forming as they bounce off of me. I can hear them whistling past, splintering, shattering into a million pieces. Surely, if I stay here, I'll end up crushed by the projectile tables.

Bones breaking, chunks of wood burying into my skin. If only there was some way to slow them down or even stop them from falling altogether.

The pandemic threw a wrench into the tall-ship industry. Many of the ships chose to forgo operating because it was physically impossible to get enough passengers onboard to break even while keeping enough space to distance all of them. Most ships struck their gangways, closed their doors, and laid off the crew. In 2021 when everyone reopened, most of the deckhands never came back. Those that were left were burning out fast. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so Cap made a gamble that he hoped would pay off. Since we couldn't find any experienced deckhands, we would have to make do with anyone we could hire. *Lynx*, a Baltimore clipper notoriously known for complex rigging, would sail with the bare minimum of three deckhands, between them less than a year of total experience aboard ships. Teaching them the ins and outs of the hundreds of ropes was the easy part. The most difficult part was getting them to all work as a team.

Sailors are a nomadic group of people. Every sailor has a unique story about how or why they got caught up in the tall ship industry. People wonder what would possess a person to leave home, live in confined spaces with people they've never met before, and constantly be on the move. Most of them are either running from something or chasing an idea down. Usually, the permanent crew works under a contract with the ship with a length varying from three to six months up to a year or more. Ships also supplement with temporary crew members. Volunteers with a week or four to spare who can help out wherever needed. With this constant influx of people, sometimes you hardly feel like you're part of a team.

It was in these times of difficulty when Captain Sean started a tradition. One evening before dinner, when the five of us were seated, he looked at a deckhand dead in the eyes and said, "Would you care to lead us in grace?"

At first, the graces were short, shallow, and sometimes awkward. We learned about everyone's favorite color or flavor of ice cream. But pretty soon, it turned into something more. It was a chance to think about the day and reflect on the small joys, like how we had given a couple a great anniversary or broke the shy kid out of his shell during the field trip. Sometimes, we'd remember our shipmates, thanking them for helping each other or bringing up memories as the temporary crew came and went. Other times it was somber as we remembered our passed shipmates, consoling each other in shared losses to the tall-ship community. One time, we even used grace to sneakily figure out Cap's favorite dessert so we could surprise him for his birthday.

Pretty soon, the crew was working well together. They were kicking ass and taking names. When we were cleaning the ship, preparing the rigging for the day, setting sails, or doing maintenance, I reminded the crew less and less to work together. Instead, I'd just give out tasks, and the deckhands would go out and accomplish them as a team. Cap's and my lives were multitudes



Glenn Wolff, *Midwest Twilight #3*

easier. We started doing more supervising and less managing. The team was self-sufficient. During almost every sail, multiple passengers would compliment Cap on how well the crew worked together and how safe they felt because the crew “must have been working together for a long time.” What they didn’t know was that a mere couple of months ago, we were just a group of strangers on a ship. A bunch of individuals, all pulling on different ropes.

Over this year’s winter break, I flew down to Georgia and helped the *Lynx* with winter maintenance.

“How’s the crew?” I asked Captain Sean as soon as I saw him.

“It’s just me,” he replied. “Everyone’s contracts expired, and we had to fire their replacements last week.” I was so shocked by the situation that I couldn’t put a response into words. *Lynx* was now whittled down to just a ship and a captain.

That January, the coldest on record for South Georgia, made maintenance difficult. On the cold days, Cap and I would sit at the table inside the ship’s saloon, splicing new block-and-tackles. On the warmer days, we’d work on restoring the cannons. They were getting rusty and desperately needed coats of paint. At night, we’d drink beers in the aft cabins, the officers’ common space, the electric fireplace on to keep us warm. The silence and emptiness were unnerving. The ship felt lonely without a crew.

One evening, after a long two days of Cap and I changing the topsail, I found myself standing in the fo’c’sle during my daily bilge checks, staring at the six empty bunks, reflecting. If we had a crew of deckhands, this task would probably only take half a day. I thought about how simple it would be with hands to help out. And how Captain Sean had united a group of individuals for a common cause. And how saying grace around the dining room table brought them all together.

Now, when I sit at the empty table in the saloon, Sean and I occupying the head and foot, I think about the crew that sat around it and the massive tasks we accomplished together. The winter before, when the table was full, we had lowered both of the yardarms from the foremast, each weighing between 800 and 1000 pounds. With eight people, we carried them almost a quarter of a mile up the dock. I think about the squall we had off the coast of the Carolinas and how we all worked together to secure the sails before the wind ripped them to shreds. And I think about the miserable 24 hours we spent motoring into a 40-knot headwind up the Chesapeake Bay. The cold rain pelted our faces, soaking all five layers of our clothes. A person on land could walk faster than the ship was moving.

All of those times were miserable, chaotic, or sometimes white-knuckle scary. And yet, all of them are among my highlights from *Lynx*. What made it so enjoyable was the people I shared the moment with. I was able to trust that the crew would have my back. Now, without a crew to fill the void, the twelve feet between Cap and I feel like a mile. The ship is missing pieces, and because of that, the chaos starts creeping in.

When I depended on the people who shared the table with me, I could find solace in knowing I wasn’t alone. Your crew is what makes the chaos go away, turning horrible times into something better. When I have a group around my table, all of a sudden, the picnic tables stop falling and begin to float away. I can get up off the floor, and we can sit at our table, looking out over the water. With the projectiles not obscuring our view, we are free to stare at Wolff’s twilight scene, admiring the reds, blues, oranges, and purples. Together.

Judge's Comments

This narrative portrays the mundane beauty that results when people unite themselves around a common goal. The author provides a unique perspective of the bond formed between crewmates on a ship, but also a description of the seeds that come to bloom from the practices of intentional selflessness and expressions of gratefulness.

Third Place
Creative Non-Fiction
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“Independence at the Pond”

by Kimberly Hric

I remember the moment I learned to swim. I have no memory of any other part of that day, but every detail of that moment. This is the way it is with my childhood. I remember moments, like snapshots taken with an instant camera. The older I get the briefer these moments have become. What used to be fifteen-minute fragments now have slipped away until only five minutes of the memory remains. A birthday party with the weather unseasonably warm and I am standing on our front porch in a short sleeve t-shirt. The concrete feels cold under my bare feet, the sun is high in the sky but not quite strong enough in November to warm it. My friends are running around our yard, barefoot and squealing. There are no leaves on the trees, but the grass is still green and the ground is moist. It is my birthday, and I am reigning over my subjects from my front porch. I do not recall what game we were playing, the gifts I received, or even what age I was turning on that day. I know that I was happy, happy to be the center of attention for a few hours, happy to be able to play outside one last time in the warmth of summer before the cold November of all my other birthdays returns. Here the memory stops, and I cannot force it forward nor rewind it to any of the moments before I was standing on the porch.

I sometimes wonder if I have made up these memories. Maybe I saw an old photo or had a dream that I have brought into my consciousness. Creating a memory that feels so real. Even if that is the case, it is still my memory.

The moment I learned to swim is much the same. I am watching this memory play through my mind like a short film. I am in the shallows of a pond; my older sister is there somewhere. My teenage aunt and her boyfriend are lying on a blanket in the shade of the willows that surround the pond. She has instructed me to stay in the shallows and I know this is important though I am too young to really understand the danger of this situation. I don't know why I have decided to walk out onto the wooden plank that juts out over the water next to the shallow area. Maybe the sun is hot and the shallow water is too warm. Maybe I want to see the turtles floating on a log out in the middle of the water. At the end of the plank, I look around and then down into the deep water. No one is watching me and no one sees me lower myself into the water at the end of the plank and hang by my fingertips off the wooden edge. As I float in the water, I lean back and can see the breeze sweeping the branches of the trees back and forth out over the pond. The water is cooler and darker here, I cannot see the sandy bottom or minnows flitting through the water like I can in the shallow water by the shore.

I don't know why I let go of the plank, an idea skims through my mind that I thought I could stand up here, that I didn't understand how deep the water was, but I'm not sure if that is real or a rationalization that I have rendered to explain my actions. I sink below the surface and panic explodes in me as my brain registers that my feet cannot feel the bottom. I am wracked with fear and in that same nanosecond I am sure that I am drowning. My body reacts and instinct takes over. My legs are kicking against the tug of the water, arms slapping and splashing against the surface as my head pops back up above the water and my lungs gasp for air. It is only now that I realize the movement of my arms and legs is keeping my head above the water. Relief pushes the panic aside and I am able to reach for the plank. Once again, I am safely dangling in the water.

My body shakes with adrenaline and I am too weak to pull myself onto the wooden

surface. My mind is racing with thoughts that seem to exist one on top of another. That was terrifying! I was swimming. I am in sooo much trouble.

As that thought returns me to the world, I glance around to see who has seen the incident - NO ONE. My aunt and her boyfriend are snuggled up against each other, my sister is in the cattails absorbed in tadpole hunting. I am afloat in the water at the end of a wooden plank, in an old cow pasture swimming hole, on a summer day... and I know how to swim.

Judge's Comments

The skillfully rendered details of the piece welcome the reader into the author's mind to experience a small but powerful memory of childhood agency. The recounting of one's innocent motives from a position of experience engenders fresh significance into the original event.

First Place
Fiction
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“I Want to be a Storyteller”
by Liam Knisley

College Application #42

Clever and Unique Essay Question for you to Answer that We Judge your Entire Personality and Worthiness as a Human-Being off of #7: What are career aspirations? What are your goals and ambitions that attending [INSERT PRESTIGIOUS UNIVERSITY NAME HERE] would help you achieve?

I want to be a storyteller. No, not the “old, wizened man in a lavish chair by the fireplace retelling ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ for the millionth time” kind of storyteller.

(Seriously though, that story sucks. Who the fuck sells a cow for beans? I don’t give two shits if they’re magic or not—they’re *beans*. Even if they lead to a magical castle in the sky with gold-egg-laying geese and treasure-hoarding giants, in reality, you’d be mutilated by those giants in seconds—your viscera splattering across the pristine, angel-white clouds, painting a bloody canvas that even Francisco Goya would squirm at. All while the geese peck and honk at your twitching eyeballs [because geese are assholes]. Case and point, terrible story. Anyway . . .)

I want to tell stories that nobody understands—stories that make Harold Bloom say: “The fuck is this?” [read like General Butt Fucking Naked from the hit musical *The Book of Mormon*] (now *there’s* a story). I want my stories to make no sense at all because I tell stories to make sense of the world around me, and no one can truly experience what it’s like to be me—to be inside my weird mind and to see life as I see it. I don’t care if my stories are “not relatable” or “not applicable to a broader audience.” Do you think I’m writing this for you, you narcissistic cretin? I want to tell stories that the “girl who doodles on her math test for forty-five minutes and suddenly realizes she’s only on the third problem” can relate to—stories for the wallflowers and weirdos of the world. I want to create oddball works of art that the people who play roleplaying games, the anime lovers, and the ones who’ve taken Zoloft and Adderall since middle school because their brains are so fucked up that they’ve not been “normal” for a second might see

themselves in—people who think to themselves:

Huh, maybe I could stop Ketharin the Unleashed from destroying the world and be the hero. Maybe I could do that someday.

I want to be a storyteller because escaping to a fantasy land where I can live out any dream I've ever wanted is a million times better than sitting in my therapist's decrepit office while she asks: "On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your depression?" for the hundredth time. I'd rather slay dragons and down flagons before I face my anxieties. I can triumph over hordes of orcs and goblins but reflecting on the fact that I hate my body? Fuck that; I can't do it.

I think we are all storytellers, however. We're all trying to make sense of an increasingly chaotic world around us—one where our stories matter more than ever. Those stories keep us sane. It's hard to think that there's hope in the world when NBC reports another school shooting—calculating the deaths and tallying each human life as if it's a graphite mark on a piece of paper. I think that's why we tell these tales: our lives are so complex and overwhelming that it's easier to write yourself as a superhero who saves the day or a knight in shining armor who gets the prince than to look in the mirror and peer behind the mask. It's easier to be someone else.

So, I want to tell stories. I want to leave a lasting mark on the world around me. I want to matter. When my body is reduced to dust, I would love for a presence to be felt through the air whenever a young mind with a dream craves adventure. If the stories I weave can spark a flame of creation in someone, my scattered soul will smirk once more. That's what I want to do.

I am a business major, and I have a lot of money.

Judge's Comments

Capturing sarcasm in writing is incredibly difficult. This author was able to not only write sarcasm perfectly, but also to grasp what a lot of people probably thought while applying to their own [Insert Prestigious University Here]. I smiled the whole way through, knowing that regardless of their major, this author should absolutely be a storyteller.

Second Place
Fiction
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“Nameless Army”
by Melissa Converse

“You’re like a goddam bull in a china shop, Myra. Jesus. A complete train wreck. Oof, this shower always gets so hot.” Myra cranks the shower temp even higher. *“No. You’re not a train wreck. People care about wrecks.”* Myra pushes hard on her razor, causing an abrasion and tiny blood droplets to rise to the surface. *“Is today a shampoo day or only a rinse? Fuck it. Just rinse.”* Myra steps closer to the shower head, lets the water nearly scald, wishing it would burn the voices from her brain. *“You care too much. No-one cares about you. Oh, but this new body scrub is nice.”* Myra inhales the coconut melon scent, now filling the shower; exhaling slowly and deliberately in hopes that the voices will exit with her breath. *“Look at you....Pathetic with your new scrub. But, your new dress is on point. Oh, but does it smell new? Crap. Like, ‘look at Myra trying too hard with her new clothes’ smell?”*

Myra notices over the coconut melon the faintest smell of mildew. *“Your shower is musty, Myra. Maybe we should just stay home and clean. This house could use it more than you could use some social interaction.”* Myra latches onto the word “social,” remembering the social security office. She knows she needs to call her mom to schedule an appointment all while feeling a tad bitter it wasn’t her dad still alive. He was always so self sufficient. Myra internally pleads with the universe to not take after her mom. Her dad died so young. So taking after him could be a death wish. Her mom’s longevity; dad’s personality. That’s the wish. Myra feels dark; trapped in her mind’s cave. *“I don’t think it works that way, Myra. You don’t get to pick and choose: ‘Yes, I’ll take a dose of good genes with a smattering of dark humor based in long suffering and an impulse to vomit rainbows at every situation.’”*

Myra remembers the day-old cat vomit on the hallway floor. Still there. *“Myra, you slob! You can never have guests over. You missed shaving your other leg. Push harder on the razor this time.”* Myra’s mind fixates on the dried acid colored vomit while getting her make-up from the cabinet. She’ll use the acid-vomit yellow-green shiny shadow. Make her brown eyes look less like poop and more alive. *“Christ on a Cracker, Myra. Poop and vomit to guide your color palette choices. Only word for this: Pathetic.”*

Myra, gloms onto the idea of words being funny (ignoring the insults): Why is poop - poop? Did the creator think palindromes were worthy of being flushed? The word is so fun! Yet, poop isn’t fun. *“This is why you’re alone. You are literally debating the validity of the word poop as it relates to shit.”* Then, *“Poop! You’re going to be late. Maybe we shouldn’t go.”*

Myra shuts off the shower, grabs her towel and depends on muscle memory to get ready. Sanjay is having guests. Myra loves Sanjay like a brother but does not necessarily like guests. *“We should stay home. You should clean. Avoid being pathetic in public.”*

Myra orders her Uber, a task mundane to most but, for her, equivalent to scaling a 20-foot wall doused in grease while barefoot. She knows better than to drive herself to a party with HER nerves where alcohol will be as well. To calm her. Numb her. Give her brain a break it won’t likely take: *“Go back. Just, fucking GO HOME. Did you even lock the door?! Don’t forget to tip. You’ve forgotten that before. These drivers put up with us and then you don’t tip. It smells fresh in here. You really need to deep clean the bathroom this weekend. Oh! Get bleach!”* Myra hates her brain and its invasive overstayed guests.

"Myra! Hi love! So glad you came," Sanjay adjusts his glasses for what is likely the hundredth time today and not nearly the last time of the night. "Help yourself to whatever you find in the cooler on the back porch. Music is going, and a few other people are here."

"Hey Sanj, thanks for the invite. Love music and a 'few other people,'" a half truth said with a cheeky grin. Sanj loved the way Myra showed up for him, always. How comfortable she made him with her words, the way she didn't presume, her loyal spirit. He knew she didn't see herself the way he did, couldn't. Myra's very presence made Sanjay feel as if there were a joke around every corner but that she always would give the punchline early so he knew when to laugh. Sanjay had told her so last week after Myra wore fake thick rimmed glasses to dinner, mirroring him and his chronic adjustments. That may sound cruel, but this is the gift of Myra: she never comes across as cruel; they had a good laugh. Sanjay felt less so attacked than seen: bonded in their idiosyncrasies - inside and out, seen and unseen.

She heads through the neat-and-tidy ranch house to the back porch: *"Fuck! Now what?!! People are here, Myra. PEOPLE. I wonder if there is any White Claw. No need to be fat AND pathetic. But we're here now. Don't create any questions in their brains that escape their mouths only to be met with your dumbass blank stares in place of answers. Just get to the cooler, Myra... OH! There's Smooj. So many calories. But, a lot of fruit. Yep. That's happening."*

Myra pops her first drink. Watermelon Smooj. She starts counting with intent to stop at three. But good intentions never win a match against *they that remain nameless*. Or, at least, good intentions have not won, as of yet.

The nameless are many. The nameless are strong. The nameless are an invisible force, pulling the strings of Myra's marionette existence. She sinks into one of the purple plastic Adirondack chairs surrounding Sanjay's clay chiminea, a found treasure on trash day this last spring. Sanjay had called Myra to help load it into his Focus' trunk. *That was a sight.*

Over the smell of the chiminea smoke wafting upward from the flue, romancing the evening sky with soft gray feathers, Myra's thoughts were assaulted by Axe body spray. Or was it the Dollar Store brand "Bod..."? Nauseating no matter the brand or type since clearly an entire bottle was used. She zeroed in on the offender: an unrecognized face with a voice just as penetrating as his smell. Apparently, The Odor works with Sanj and is very proud of his workout routine. He's talking with Betsy who seems less than impressed. *While he fumigates Betsy's time and space, we should grab another Smooj. If The Odor starts flexing our way you can brag about the fruit we're drinking. You don't have anything else brag worthy. Hell, you didn't even listen to us about cleaning the bathroom.*

POP - Strawberry Lime. Myra leaves a thumb indent in the can so to navigate the opening to her mouth without worry, a trick she learned before drinking her way out of her freshman year at Ball State. *"But we like tipsy Myra! Oooh, we are feeling more relaxed. Danger? What danger? Slam this one, move on to number three."* Black Cherry. Myra glides back to her purple chair, a bit tipsy now. "A gaggle of guests" Myra thinks, like geese, have arrived. A nuisance overflowing the nearest watering hole. Honking about, they drop preverbal shit all around. The Smooj makes this all the more entertaining and Myra is less inclined to remain reclined. And so she lets loose and makes the small talk and general merriment of social gatherings. One thing her be-speckled friend is right about: Myra has a way with words.

A lull happens signaling an invitation to move on. Myra gladly accepts and sidles away from the geese. Betsy sachets toward the chiminea goose grounds anyway. And Myra isn't ready for that. She works her way toward Sanjay where he is taking in the view of his party.

"Myra, you found the Smooj!", as Sanjay buffs out a possibly imagined glasses smear.

"Well, THEY found me, you could say."

"Always one with the words, Myra. I've been telling a few people about your word-smithing-ways. I'm so proud of you, Myra. ...for starting over again and again. If I didn't know better, I'd say you have an army of creative writing geniuses packed into your

brain."

"It definitely *feels* packed," sharing a laugh, Myra's more strained than Sanjay's. He replaces his glasses. Myra presses him on who to avoid that he's been prattling on to about her writing. "Oh Myra," repositioning his glasses, "your talent should see the light of day... or the ink of paper, if you will." Sanjay, as much as Myra, loves a good turn of phrase.

Eyeing the party crowd, "We appreciate that, Sanj, really we do, but..."

"We?"

"Well, you said it yourself, I've an *army* in my brain." "*When did we first meet, Myra? Do you ever remember a time without us, your unnamed army?*" Myra excuses herself from her insightful nearsighted friend. Her *army* is feeling increasingly thirsty. And, Betsy is making the rounds now on the farthest side of the yard from the porch... and from the cooler full of canned courage. Piña Colada.

Myra feels the Smooj-perma-grin spread over her face. Orange Push-Up. Who doesn't need a boost now and again? And besides, she has now been here for nearly two hours and successfully avoided Betsy. Not that Betsy's not a lovely person, but to Myra, she is perfect...has the perfect life, the perfect career, the perfect everything. And perfect is not in the stars for Myra. Her army was sure to have drilled that into her soul. If only she could remember having signed up for that particular spirit crushing bootcamp. Thoughts begin clouding and Myra is lost in herself a moment too long...

"Hey Myra! Sanjay said you were coming." Betsy's smile is a step back in time. But time had built a wall that distance has fortified. To scale that would take more than the trading of colloquial pleasantries. "Glad to see you! I've been wanting to catch up." Betsy is always so friendly. And pretty.

"Hey Betsy, it's been awhile. How's work?" "*Good, Good. Get her talking about herself.*" Betsy is an editor for the local paper and has many connections in the writing world beyond their midsized Mid-America town. They had been roommates at Ball State. Betsy: always the protector and determined to help keep Myra on track. And Myra, well, Myra was the good time; evicting Betsy from her heady shell and exposing her to "fun".... Until Myra met her soliloquy army and partied herself out of a scholarship.

"Myra, Sanj told me you are writing again. I'd love to put my eyes on your projects... if you'd want some feedback?"

"RUN."

"Sure, Betsy! That'd be great."

"*WHY MYRA? What are you doing?*"

"Great! Stop by my office Tuesday. 10AM work for you?"

"*NO! It doesn't work! None of this works!*"

"You're in my calendar. Let's grab brunch too?"

"*What are you doing? She doesn't want to spend time with you; just look at your writings to confirm you're out of your league.*"

"Brunch sounds great. Tuesday it is!" Myra stands motionless. She can hear other words being spoke.... Something about skiing or tubing? It is water related. Fitting since Myra feels underwater; gasping.

Another Smooj: pineapple mango. Myra is full from the alcohol heavy smoothies but keeps indulging in hopes of her thoughts being drowned before her liver. "*Here she goes again...*" Myra mouths the words: "Shut up," yearning for the voices to let her be. "*Pathetic.*"

And so the party continues. Uncomfortable conversations soothed by the

sugary goodness of Smooj. Myra feels light in her heavy stupor. Everyone is smiling and laughing, hugging and joking... And Myra has ingested enough fruit smoothy to equal three

months of fruit, if the alcohol doesn't cancel that out. "Go home. Please. She's going to have regrets. Shut up! She deserves to have a little fun in our pathetic life."

"Myra, your Uber is here," Sanjay replaces his glasses from atop his head to the front of his face as Myra stumbles toward him.

"Thanks, Sanj," she slurs thick as syrup. "Just get home. HOME! And TIP! For the love of all working class, don't forget to tip, Myra!"

Home. Finally. Alone. Or so she hopes. Would they stay away for just one night? For only a few hours... the nameless now named... her army? "You lost control. Again. You are more of a court jester than a friend. And now you have to share your writing.... With BETSY!"

"You know it's no good..."

"You know you're no good. You KNOW..."

"Maybe you won't wake up. She doesn't deserve to wake up..." "But she will: the world isn't lucky enough to get rid of a Myra so easily."

Judge's Comments

I thought the juxtaposition of Myra's inner thoughts and the face she put on for the people in her life was just wonderful. The brief moment that we got to see another person's thoughts, Sanjay's, about Myra, also provided such an interesting truth to the story. The author's story captured so well how people see and think about themselves versus how others see and think about them.

Third Place
Fiction
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

"Taken"
by Sophia Friedrich

I remember growing up hearing stories from the elders who managed to survive. You would know it's coming when the leaves would change and wither away, when the wind was crisp and biting. They said that savages would come and slowly pick us off in preparation for their dreadful celebration. They'd kidnap us, gut us, and display our remains to ward off spirits. They'd always pick off the strongest and healthiest first, as if showing us the futility of our situation—that there was nothing we could do.

I was born small and deformed, so I managed to make it to the end. I watched as everyone I knew and loved were chosen, one by one, leaving me behind. I tried not to think of what my fate would be, but the changing season wouldn't let me forget. The number got smaller and smaller every day, and I wondered when I'd be next, when my time would finally come. And it was today when my luck had finally run out.

The sky is clear, and the sun shines bright as if mocking my plight. I can hear rustling behind me. As the crunching of leaves comes closer and closer, I can feel immense dread rise up in me, knowing I can't escape and can only vainly hope that I would be passed over. The noise stopped. Long, spindly fingers brushed against my skin, examining me, turning me over. A wheezing laugh was the only warning I had before I felt it grab my head. I had been chosen.

I feel the wind whip about me, and then I'm falling. I hit the back of the truck, slamming against the side. I can feel my side bruising. Suddenly there's a lurch, and we're moving. The vehicle speeds off as I panic, and before I know it, the movement comes to a jerking stop. The hand reaches down and grabs me again. As I'm dragged away, I take in my surroundings. I see a ghastly abode, and to my horror, I see my brethren's corpses surrounding it. Their eyes had been gouged out; their mouths hung open in jagged expressions of horror.

I'm dragged through a dark corridor, and when we come into the light, what I see strikes fear into my very soul. Across a table are wicked tools of torture. The innards of corpses were removed and lay placed in bowls; some were spread on sheets and left to dry out. My horror is immeasurable. It was not enough that we are used as decorations for this sick ceremony, but they eat us as well!

I see them pick up a large, serrated knife and approach me, and I try to brace myself for what's about to happen. They hold me down and plunge the knife into my flesh. I can feel the sharp pain shooting through my entire body as they start sawing. The knife jaggedly cuts away at my skin. They rip the top of my head off, and I can feel it rip out parts of my brain along with it, and they start scraping away what's left. I wish desperately to lose consciousness, but it seems that whatever's keeping the corpses outside alive is keeping me awake.

I can feel an arm reach in through the hole, ripping out everything in its way, the tools scrape away, hollowing me out from the inside. I see my entrails pile up on the table beside me, watching what should be inside me sitting next to me. The last thing I see is that savage's grinning face as it plunges its knife into me.

I've never experienced such darkness. For a moment I'm floating, the only sound being the savage's feet creaking on the floorboards. Then I hear a click and the wind as I join my brothers. I'm put down, and the savage walks away. It feels like a long time has gone by when I hear the sound of screams carried by the wind, and I realize that the savages' holiday must have begun. Suddenly, there's a bunch of footsteps that come dashing towards me, and I hear a knocking on the savage's door. As the door creaks open, there is a jumbled shout of "TRICK

OR TREAT" from a group of voices. I hear a crinkling noise as something comes closer to me, and an incredibly young voice says, "Wow! That's the coolest jack-o-lantern I've ever seen."

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.

**Honorable Mention
Fiction
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**“Sweet as Pie”
by Andrea Lule-Zamora**

Every year the county fair has a pie baking contest, and every year I chicken out of doing it. My husband George always tells me I can do it, but I never had the confidence to try. This year is different, however. George passed away three months ago, having never seen me enter the contest. I know he would be standing by me while I baked, feeding me words of encouragement and praising my hard work. So, to pull me out of my depression, I decided I would enter the contest this year to honor him.

I put on my apron and get to work. I pour through my baking recipes trying to find the perfect pie. Hours and hours in the kitchen, brow sweating and back aching. I made over a dozen pies, but none of them tasted good enough. Something is missing. I am starting to doubt myself, like I always do. I walk over to George’s picture on the mantle. He looks so handsome in his green velvet suit. I look at his quirky yellow tie and his cheesy smile. I miss him. I grabbed his urn and held it close to my chest, wishing it was his warm body instead of this cold ceramic bowl.

I could swear I heard George whisper into my ear the perfect ingredient to add. I could not believe I almost did not think about this. I take him with me to the kitchen for further encouragement. After a few more hours, and a few more batches of delicious berry pie, I decided it was done. I had found the perfect recipe!

A few days later, the county fair opens, and the contest is in full swing. The smell of fruits, sugar, and coffee filled the air. I wish George was here in person to see this with me, but I knew that he was here in spirit. We baked these pies together, with our love. That is why my pies will be the sweetest.

I set up my table and laid out my pies and waited for the judges to come around and taste. The anticipation was killing me, but I could hear George in my ear telling me that it will be alright. And with that, I relaxed. The judges came around and eagerly grabbed the plates. Judge Cindy said how glad she was to see I finally joined the contest. Judge Harry commented on my broach, saying it was very beautiful and that George knew how to pick them. Judge Betty said that George would be so proud of me right now. I must agree with that.

All three of them took a slice of my pie and it was like they died and went to heaven. Judge Harry wanted seconds, but they had to pull him away just to keep him from grabbing the spatula. I felt a sense of accomplishment right then and there. Win or lose, I did it. We did it, George.

If it wasn’t for his constant inspiration, I would never have taken the plunge. The judges walk up to the stage and announce the second and third place winners. I reach into my pocket to grab a little bag of ash from George’s urn. I wanted him to come with me, just in case I needed a hug. I held him close and closed my eyes. The judges say my name. I won! My pies got first place! I could not believe it.

I walk up to the stage and get up to the microphone. I received my blue ribbon and Judge Cindy asked me what my secret was. With a big grin, I grabbed the microphone and said that my secret ingredient was George. The love we had for each other sweetened those pies like no other. The audience cheered for me. I bowed. I pulled out the little baggy of George from my pocket and said that this was the last I had left of him. He made my life sweet, so it made sense that he would make the pies sweet too.

Judge's Comments

I thought it was a lovely, and sweet, story about a woman finding inspiration in her lost husband's love. But the ending certainly took a turn! I couldn't help but think beyond that last moment when the main character showed off what was left of George's remains - the horror and sickness among the crowd. Really well done.

First Place
Poetry
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“Collateral”
by Fiona MacFadyen

I took you like a pill.
Didn’t even need water to wash you down.
As soon as you touched my tongue, the damage began.
The cheating, the lies, and the abuse.
You just couldn’t wait.
But I stayed.
I stayed hoping you would just love me.
Love me more than I hate myself.
Then, I stayed longer because I thought that was your way of showing love.
But I was wrong.
The hatred you had wasn’t for me.
It was for yourself,
And I was just collateral damage.

Judge's Comments

This short, yet impactful poem is excellent in its use of simile and metaphor. To “call a thing a thing is” common among most people when communicating today, especially when telling stories. We share our stories, freely, online and on social media; yet, there are still those experiences that cannot be easily explained in simple terms. This is what the poem “Collateral” provides the reader—a complex physical and emotional experience in a language that is personal to the writer, yet accessible to the reader. The opening line: “I took you like a pill” is a clear example of this. Although the initial thought may be that “you” is a person; however, the writer uses “you” instead of “calling a thing a thing”: “As soon as you touched my tongue, the damage was done”. The writer then writes: “I stayed hoping you would love me”. This language connects the writer’s experience with a common feeling (desire) for love; something universal that most people want. The writer closes with:

The hatred you had wasn’t for
me. It was for yourself.
And I was just collateral damage.

In the end, this is a solid poem about denial, resistance, and acceptance. No matter the actual experience the narrator has, he/she uses accessible language that immediately draws in the reader. What is shared here is not the actual experience, but the common “feelings” that we all share in spite of our individual experiences.

Second Place
Poetry
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“Run, Hide, Fight”
by D’Machia Milom

Run from America
Hide from the Shooters
Fight the Government
Losing count
Thinking of all the rounds
They fire
Into the classrooms
Kids not knowing
Their typical Monday will be filled with doom
So many lives lost by senseless shooters
I can name a few
Nikolas Cruz
Seung-Hui Cho
Adam Lanza
Schools telling you to
Run from Cruz
Hide from Cho
Fight Lanza
How?
When the sounds of bullets are flying
Hearts are racing
Schools used to be a safe haven
Now doors must be locked
Windows must be bullet proof
Students must become soldiers
And the government acts aloof
Turning on the news to hear what's new?
Another shooting on the news
But let me ask you,
Is that really new?
Is it becoming a norm for schools to be attacked
Our youth to be slaughtered in schools
Taught to
Run
Hide
Fight
How?
How do we run from bullets that are faster than us?
How can we hide in a classroom with no room?
but a desk
to hide under
as they wonder
How do we fight?
When the shooter has the gun

And students hearts are racing
because they know the shooter is about to
come.
to their class next as they listen to their peers being shot.
Run Hide and Fight?
I'm sick of watching the innocent
Die.
While the government feeds us lies
And we fall for the illusion
That everything will be alright
Shooters in the halls of our schools
Gunshots heard around the world
Every other month
More prayers
More protest
More kids laid to rest
Reminiscing on the days when your biggest fears about going to school was a test.

Judge's Comments

This is a powerful socio-political and cultural poem. The writer clearly expresses the pain, loss, and anguish that we all have experienced as Americans in relation to gun violence in schools. The writer's use of clear and direct language illuminates this violence in schools:

When the sounds of bullets are flying
Hearts are racing
Schools used to be a safe haven
Now doors must be locked
Windows must be bullet
proof Students must become
soldiers

This language also adds to the poem's narrative style and helps advance the writer's theme of frustration with the government and its inability to "act" and help end gun violence in schools: "And the government acts aloof". Overall, this is a solid piece of literature that expresses the current socio-political, and cultural climate in America in relation to gun violence in our schools.

Third Place
Poetry
2023 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“Fright Night”
by Rick Bilodeau

Fright Night

This night was to be exceptional in many a way.

To students and parents both, but it seems destiny would sway.

A single person took the school by storm,
is it enough for gun control reform.

Yes, it takes just one to bring a campus to its knees,
a shooters deaf ears to his victim's pleas.

Response was quick, emt's we're there,
while choppers circled thru the air.

The deed was done, ending campus fun,
left in his wake, trauma had just begun.

Campus will never be the same,
till congress gets in the game. A bill passed there,
sullen victory cries filled the air.

Judge's Comments

“Fright Night” is an interesting poem that deals with gun violence. The writer does not speak of the grotesque aspect of these shootings. Nor does the writer display graphic scenes of violence. The writer speaks as “the observer, the witness” to these violent acts –almost in awe: “A single person took the school by storm”. The writer then goes on to write: “Yes, it takes just one to bring a campus to its knees.” Here, the writer processes his/her emotions to understand how it takes “just one” person to do such a violent act. The rhyme scheme also adds to the innocent nature of students: “The deed was done, ending campus fun”. There is also a sense of romanticism in the closing line as the writer sees, then internalizes these school shootings and what needs to be done about them: “till Congress gets in the game. A Bill passed there, sullen victory cries filled the air.” Here, there is optimism and hope that things will change, but the memories will last forever in our “sullen cries.”