

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2024**

2024 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

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“The Perpetual Stranger” by Emily Karpinski

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POETRY

"A Hymn of Light and Shadow" by Julian Barnes

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""My Garden" by Dillon Madden

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Gogebic Community College

"Looking Back" by Evelyn Kellogg

Faculty Sponsor: Annie Schnarr

Lansing Community College

First Place
Creative Non-Fiction
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“The Perpetual Stranger”
by Emily Karpinski

An early, brisk morning begins as I soak in this empty house full of people intoxicated on their frenzied buzz. The bouquet of coffee and Old Spice wafts by, while strangers in cigarette-infused clothing infringe on my personal space. Nagging, visceral pain I've acclimated to grabs my attention. Grubby and dry from handling dusty relics, I wash my hands for the tenth time.

I walk by a small flock of chattering women; gripped by their conversation, I retreat to the corner. "How could they let him live like this?!" one sanctimoniously exclaims. "Look at this place! Holes in walls, tom up floors! What kind of child allows a parent to live in squalor?!" My heart, aching, sinks into self-condemnation. Hearing remnants of the conversation, I head to the bathroom, a private space to lick my resuscitated wounds. My brain, although adept at rewiring such comments, succumbs, yet again.

Their judgments are no worse than mine; in fact, I'll add to their fodder. Before today, degradation worsened. Plaster lath covered by duct taped plastic and deteriorated lead paint graced the walls and ceilings. Unfinished drywall so old the paper had rolled off exposing sheet rock. Exposed electrical wires dangled like decorations. Tin foil balls plugged kitchen wall holes above the counter, symbolically deterring mice. I envision my father swiping his hands together in a dusting off motion, saying, "That'll fix 'em, those little rascals!" There was a common theme throughout the house, ransomed nostalgia. Old electronics waiting for a fix. Stacks of unopened mail left to procrastination. Yellowed paper notes with algebraic engineering formulas and stock market gibberish. He never finished anything.

We did our best to keep my father safe. Nailed down linoleum in walkways where it had curled from dirt and decay. We urged Dad to let us install a ramp, creating a safer exit for appointments. He was six feet; I couldn't pick him up if he fell while exiting the steep backdoor steps. He adamantly exclaimed, "I don't want a ramp! Look at those blueprints! If you're going to install something, I want it to match my plan." No negotiations. Moving forward, we chose from the blueprints, added railings and a roof over the deck; it had only two steps, spaced out, instead of three. We circumvented his demands by making a temporary, removable ramp with two by fours and plywood. Diplomacy at its best!

I marshal my emotions to endure relinquishing my father's treasured assets as the Big Bear Auctioneer rambles on. Recollecting Dad's words, "That will be worth something someday" or "I'm gonna fix that!" Yet, here it sits, collecting dust and grime, for us to deal with.

One woman from the flock, a neighbor, found me and said "I told Mary, she's unaware of what you had to deal with, they should not judge. He was stubborn and wanted to live this way." Deb's affirmation, a tiny blessing, propels me forth to finish the business of death.

My father, to me, a perpetual stranger, was stubborn to his detriment. His stature: tall, hair like black walnut, eyes deep brown. At forty something, after the divorce, he grew a full beard. He possessed quiet countenance, yet, raged against minor infractions, leaving us in his emotional wake.

I remember dinners at the table as unpleasant. Dad became an etiquette officer, yelling, "Elbows off the table!" among other commands. I watched, wide eyed, as he became enraged toward us. With furrowed brow and roaring, his hands shook intensely while his head quaked in unison. His restraint, unable to contain the fury within, warned of explosion. My belly, curdled in stress, couldn't accept food; yet I remained until my plate was clean. I learned to keep distant, stay quietly out of the way, and watch for signs of volatility.

My brother and our dog bore the brunt of the abuse. I hated watching, feeling helpless, I couldn't stop it. I remember once, my brother was beating me. Dad grabbed him while he spun around like a top. As my brother resisted, Dad's anger flared. He escaped outside and commenced running around the house, Dad in hot pursuit. I bounced between windows,

watching; secretly hoping my brother got away despite the pain he'd caused. This time he escaped. Dad soon tired and let him go. My brother cunningly stayed outside, waiting for the situation to decompress.

Our German Shepherd, Bruno, was not so cunning. On one occasion he invaded the trash; we came home to find it strewn across the kitchen floor. The rage ensued. Frantically, we tried to distract Dad, our efforts thwarted; we steered clear, avoiding the same demise. A few howling kicks, rumple of chairs, then our sweet pup went tumbling down the basement steps. Afterwards, Dad went quiet. When clear, I inched down the creepy steps to investigate, hoping he was alive. He was. I brought his bone and softly pet while checking him over.

Other moments were light. Tickle fights ensued with copious laughter; I could scarcely breathe. These singular moments were happy. We would lie in wait for Dad to cross the living room threshold. Jumping from either side, wrapping ourselves around his legs, hanging on for dear life as he lugged us through the room making ogre-like monster sounds.

I loved his shoes. Brown leather oxfords for work and meetings. I loved clomping through the house in those shoes. Standing on his feet while he wore them, moving back and forth as if to dance.

Once, he gave us cardboard boxes, scissors, and a black marker. We made cars and houses from them. My brother and I pushed each other around in our box cars. Sometimes we raced, using our arms to propel ourselves along. My cardboard house had windows that flapped open with paper towel curtains. A television drawn into the corner. The round kitchen table and chair set under the wall cabinet. On the opposite side of the box, I drew a bed with fluffy pillows and a chest of drawers. Flowers in vases graced the table and chest. I loved picking flowers to bring to Dad, hoping for his smile. Homey elements drawn on box walls set the scene for my escape room.

My father owned eight wooded acres, one house, and several outbuildings. When my parents divorced, he stayed, we left. His dream of our homestead, big plans on paper, never materialized. My father's home and hope of a happy family future ceased to exist.

Dad smoked copiously. I hated the cigarette stench. He spent precious time and money drinking. Weekend visits involved going to a girlfriend's house or Timbers Saloon. He kept us busy with kiddy cocktails and quarters for Ms. Packman while he bellied up to the bar, conversing with strangers appearing as friends. He found his women in these establishments; in fact, most associates were bar flies or tenders. At age eight, my instinct forced me to choose the lesser of two evils: Mom or Dad. I ceased Dad visits. I am thankful no one forced me to continue.

Hoarded thoughts and habits rendered him undependable, consistently resulting in disappointment. Hence, I created walls protecting my heart, resembling my cardboard house. Until that day in September. The phone rang, it was Dad. "Emily, I need you to come stay with me." Odd, I thought, since I'd not slept in that house for over thirty years. I asked why. He said, "I don't feel well." I inquired further, "A friend is here, she won't leave me alone. Can you stay the night?" Something was wrong, but information was insufficient. I questioned further to ascertain whether to take him to the hospital or call an ambulance. From that point on, I scaled my heart walls, leaving an escape rope handy. Events and people quickly ensued, which I had zero control over yet one-hundred percent responsibility for. The world he created: friends, foes, situations--! was instantly forced to mitigate.

Throughout the years, I reached out to my father, hoping for change, finding little. I knew this day would come, it appeared too soon for preparation. I arrived at his house, he opened the door, I saw him, yellow. Pancreatic cancer, I suspected, eventually diagnosed. Over the next five-and-a-half months I became instant care giver, financial and health manager, errand runner, maid, dial-a-ride, safety inspector, detective, etc. Additionally, one last hurrah dealing with two women who'd latched onto him, hoping for gain. These women, being my age, disgusted me. I handled the situation with as much tact as possible. Eventually, my presence, weakened their resolve, discovering Dad was not bequeathing to them the house, land, or treasure hidden somewhere in the walls.

Over the next five months, I struggled to help him accept reality. His doctor complicated matters, misleading and feeding hope for triumph with chemotherapy. Actively fighting cancer meant he could not benefit from Hospice. I needed Hospice assistance, yet it was his life, his decision.

I remember the last night, before being admitted to the ER, he said, "Emily, I have much to tell you."

I asked, "What is it, Dad? I can stay."

He replied, "No, I'll tell you tomorrow, when you come back."

Never pushing Dad verbally or otherwise, "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, we'll talk then." That opportunity, like all others passed, unfulfilled.

My father had chemo till his last week of life; it tore his intestines apart. The ICU doctor told us he was "bleeding out" and "it's a terribly painful way to die." They had to administer Morphine. He was to be put to sleep, like a beloved pet. If not, I gathered, it would be torturous to allow natural death. Less than twenty-four hours before he died, lying in the hospital bed writhing in excruciating pain, he admitted defeat to cancer and accepted Hospice.

He looked up at me and said with wide, fearful eyes, "You kids have a big job ahead of you!"

I knew what he meant. "I know dad, don't worry, we got it."

My father, two people in one broken being, I honored by assisting though death without forcing him or breaking my principles. Yet, the experience ripped open my cauterized heart, replacing it with darkened loneliness. And one month later, while dealing with massive estate details; I was diagnosed with cancer. Exceedingly overwhelmed, I had no choice but to move forward.

I remember some positive moments I hold in my heart. In fact, to get through each day, I actively looked for the slightest positive occurrence to cherish. A sunny day, the mild winter, a good cup of coffee. One memory I hung on the walls of my heart occurred the week before Dad passed. He sat on the edge of his bed and said, "Emily." He paused; head bowed, white hair and beard tinged yellow with nicotine, his frame, a shell of what it had been, "Thank you so much for everything." His quivering hand settled on his forehead while his head hung, "You are such a blessing to me." I never heard words like that from him. I treasure them.

Regardless of his sins, faults, mistakes, I loved him, understood him, felt kinship in my DNA. I would not accommodate wrong actions and could not fix him, just support, and love him within reason. Most people in our social circle never fully understood the challenge of belonging to this sort of person. Watching them judge him; hearing their harsh words paint him as the worst of villains further crushed my heart. I favored my father's side more than my mother's. Realizing his wrong actions, yet understanding him, created a muddled sense of self within. Needing him desperately, unable to have him; learning to grow without the foundational connection of a Father left me fragmented.

Fragmented, like this house I stand in today. All pieces and parts, torn open to fix what's broken, left unfinished, unprotected; so that creatures and decay enter, taking what they want, leaving the rest to crumble.

Judge's Comments

Rich in detail and complexity of subject. This honest account of a fraught parent-child relationship beautifully illustrates how lifelong human connections are a muddled mess of pain and joy, far from black and white.

**Second Place
Creative Non-Fiction
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**“The Unimaginable Kindness of an Improbable Soldier”
by Meneo Aird**

When the tornado tore through New Orleans East in February 2017, it left behind a trail of apocalyptic destruction. I had lived through numerous hurricanes, but I had never witnessed such a catastrophic event. The disaster struck almost without warning; I had finished guiding a camper into a site only moments before the black funnel appeared. As I scrambled to the office for shelter, I saw the roof of a neighboring business fly overhead. Miraculously, I reached the safety of the office bathroom within seconds of landfall. Mother Nature’s fury only lasted 20 minutes, but that was enough to ruin the lives of those along its 10-mile path. Once the storm finally passed, all that remained of the East was mangled lumber and brick where homes once stood. Toppled electrical poles with their charged lines laid in the path of helpless first responders. The cries for help from miles around were all that could be heard in the eerily still air.

The RV Park I managed was the first touchdown location of the twister. I rode out the storm with Yoko, the owner, and Ben, the other manager, in a suffocatingly small bathroom. Ben was a bumbling drunk, who naturally responded by downing a handle of whisky and sitting idly while others scrambled to find safe harbor. Yoko, on the other hand, was fearless as always. She did not want to stay inside during the onslaught. She insisted she was of more use out there fighting the storm, as if she could single-handedly shock the tornado into submission. Her supposed time in the Korean Army had turned her into a “Hardened soldier, always ready for anything.”

In October 2016, I arrived at 3 Oaks and a Pine in New Orleans with a plan to stay for only a few months. I was still employed as a Park Manager for Vermont State Parks, a seasonal job that gave us winters off, so I had to return before spring. I chose New Orleans because I had spent a year working in disaster recovery in Louisiana and Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. That experience left me with a fervent desire to return to enjoy the city where I had previously experienced so much horror and heartbreak. Shortly before my break started, I contacted RV Parks along the Gulf Coast to see if they needed help. I like to think it was kismet that Three Oaks and Pine was the first place to show interest, but the truth is, Yoko and her daughter were stuck with the stumblebum Ben and needed someone less inebriated and more capable. It would be a lie if I told you that Yoko was amiable when we first met, but I understood her apprehension. I was a stranger to her; she did not yet understand why someone with my skills and qualifications would want to work at an RV Park in New Orleans East in exchange for only rent.

Yoko’s real name is Chong, and while she is a Korean immigrant, the rest of her story is a mixture of whimsy, grandeur, delusion, and, most importantly, grit. When I met Yoko, she claimed to be only 50 years old, which was a blatant lie because her eldest daughter was 42. It was also never clear when she immigrated, but her daughters say it was in the mid-1970s. She and her family had lived in Los Angeles, California for twenty years before landing in New Orleans. While in Los Angeles, her husband purchased a small apartment complex. After his passing, the building became Yoko’s property. I can only assume this is how she began amassing her staggering wealth. Although, if you were to ask her, she would tell you she does not have two pennies to rub together. The only funds she claims to receive are her husband’s death benefits and her wartime injury payments from the Korean Army. Yet, somehow, this self-proclaimed indigent Korean woman created an empire across multiple states.

In the late 80s, Yoko and her two daughters moved to New Orleans. Their reason for moving was never shared with me, so I can only assume it is another family secret they keep locked away. Whatever the circumstance, once in New Orleans it did not take Yoko long to unleash her entrepreneurial spirit. In 1990 her first venture was purchasing a barren lot that sat atop an old landfill. The land sat empty for twenty years until she created Three Oaks and a Pine RV Park. Shortly after establishing the park, she purchased She She’s, a notoriously dangerous and dismal strip club deep in the East. The club was a well-known drug and prostitution hub that ran rampant due to the police’s fear of interacting with heavily armed gang members and drug dealers. Yoko’s dream was to turn the club around and make it a more reputable establishment, and she achieved success in this. The club became safer, gained a better reputation, and brought in big-name celebrities such as Lil Wayne and Samuel L. Jackson, and it was the set for one of the TNT network’s most popular series *Claws*.

A large part of Yoko’s success with the club came from her particularity in hiring. I had only been working at the RV Park for about 3 weeks, but I had gained Yoko’s trust to the point that she began paying me. Nevertheless, I was surprised when she asked me to bartend at the club. I felt honored by the gesture and

accepted without hesitation. Yoko was at the club every night during the first month I worked there. She knew how my presence could be received; I was the only white person working in an all-Black strip club. Although I never received any hate, only the occasional and expected “Hey white boy,” Yoko’s matronly hawkishness drew my adoration.

Yoko and I would work late into the night at the club and somehow, she always arrived at the RV Park every day before the birds chirped; I often wondered when or if Yoko slept. I enjoyed being around her boundless energy, her vibrant and kindhearted nature made it easy to look past the painted mystère. You would never guess it, but she is a jokester who loves pulling pranks on unsuspecting victims. One of her favorite pastimes was calling the park office pretending to be a camper complaining about a snake or other vermin in the shower.

“Thank you for calling Three Oaks and a Pine. This is Meneo, how can I help you?” In her thick Korean accent pretending to be a man, “I camp on #6. Big snake in bathroom! It not mine!” She would then watch the security cameras from her house in amusement as I begrudgingly went to retrieve yet another rubber snake she left in the shower. After the first call I knew it was her, but I played along every time because I knew it brought her joy. She would always come in the next day and ask with a fish-eating grin how my night was.

In the two years I worked for Yoko, not once did she come close to pronouncing my name correctly, the best she could muster was “Mono.” It never bothered me though because she constantly showed her appreciation; I could count the number of times I made dinner for myself on one hand. Despite her diminutive stature, she carried unmatched ferocity for the people and things she cared about. One of the things I most admire about Yoko is her work and love of animal rescue. She is a staunch advocate of animal rights and tends to take in any dog off the street. Her sprawling mansion is merely an animal haven. She even had a pool installed solely for her dogs to have a place of reprieve in the torturous heat of New Orleans summers. Watching her selflessly support local rescue organizations with generous donations and her desire to contribute to a neglected community revealed a side of Yoko that went beyond mere business acumen.

A month before the storm I told Yoko I was considering leaving New Orleans and she was devastated. In the most vulnerable state I had ever seen her in, she begged and pleaded for me to stay. She said she considered me family and family does not leave each other. Then a single tear ran down her face; it would have been more, but she was addicted to Botox. The day before the tornado, I had finished packing up and was eager to hit the road. Little did I know that the cyclone tempest would soon make landfall. I can still feel the trauma of watching that hellish whirlwind sweep away both my car and camper. The only things left to my name were my dogs and a toothbrush. I realized I was stranded, left with no choice but to stay; I felt beaten and fell into a deep depression.

I remained in shambles until the day Yoko announced she was taking me shopping to replace the things I lost. We spent most of the day at clothing and pet stores, where she spent at least \$1000. On the way back to the park, she said we had one more stop to make. I was utterly perplexed when we pulled into a car dealership, surely there was nothing wrong with her brand-new BMW. However, it quickly became apparent that we were not there for her. That sweet angel of a woman had arranged five vehicles for me to choose from! I could not find any words, “What, are you serious?” was all I could stammer repeatedly. I drove my new car back to Three Oaks and a Pine that day and there we stayed. That is, until May 2018, when I received a dream job offer from Oregon State Parks. This was an opportunity I could not miss, but I dreaded having to tell Yoko that I was leaving. Once again, she aggressively petitioned for me to stay, going as far as offering to give the park to me in three years. As tempting as that offer was, I had reached my breaking point with the oppressive heat, storms, and crime that define New Orleans East.

Leaving Yoko and the park was one of the toughest decisions of my life. She had done so much for me; she showed so much care and kindness that not staying felt wrong. I knew it was best for me and my dogs, but it was still heart-wrenching. On the day of my setting-out, Yoko handed me an envelope with \$500 and a note that said “Not for you. Dogs only.” That was the last time I saw or spoke to Yoko. I tried calling her a few times over the years; however, she changes her phone number frequently. Thus, our time together now lives in my head and heart. Yoko is a true labyrinth, and I am forever grateful to have experienced her and all her loving madness.

Judge's Comments

This vivid account of adventure and friendship reflects the deep imprint some people leave on us, even in a short time. It captured my attention from the first sentence. Yoko’s larger-than-life presence and personality leap off the page.

Third Place
Creative Non-Fiction
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition

“My Father’s Love”
by Alana DeMaggio

Did you know that scars can still hurt long after the flesh and skin have been mended?
It has something to do with nerve endings getting trapped in the scar tissue.
This is to say, some wounds never fully heal.

The Greek word for wound is *trauma*.
I once read a book about the way trauma reshapes your brain.
This is to say, there are some things you can never get over.

I am four years old and sitting in the backseat of my dad’s Ford Aerostar while he scrapes ice off the windshield. It is much older than I am, with side steps so rusted I have to be lifted up and put into my car seat. The heater hasn’t worked in years but I don’t feel cold. I am bundled in a coat and snow pants and a hat and a scarf and mittens and my father’s love. When he clears my window, he presses his face up against it, wrinkling his nose and sticking his tongue out. I tap on the glass, sticking my tongue out in response. He slides into the driver’s seat and turns the key, the car coming to life with a stuttering roar. Classic rock plays over the rumble of the engine and the crunching of the January snow beneath the tires. The backseat of the van is equipped with a panel of buttons, a dangerous thing for a little girl like me to have access to. I slip off my mitten and push a button with a chubby finger. The radio station switches from classical to country to gospel.

“Hey! Who’s doing that?” He asks, looking at me through the rearview mirror, his eyebrows wiggling. I giggle as I cycle through pop and NPR and radio static.

I am four years old and I know my father loves me because I love him.

“Have you ever eaten dinner at a restaurant alone before?” He asks me. His blue eyes are oceans of sadness.

“No,” I reply.

“It doesn’t feel good.”

I poke at my pasta trying to imagine my father sitting alone, sipping from his lemonade and eating his baked ziti. He wants my pity but I don’t have any to give him. There’s a sharp pain in my side as the bitterness I’m harboring begins to leak into my bloodstream.

“I wouldn’t mind,” I lie. “I like to be alone with my thoughts.”

He doesn’t know how to respond, so our conversation falls silent.

“How do you feel about all this?” he questions. By “all this” he means divorcing my mom and briefly playing house with a new family before returning like a scolded puppy, tail tucked between his legs. This dinner is supposed to fix things between us. I don’t know if bottomless breadsticks and crappy Italian food could fix anything.

I scoff, the bitterness seeping into my mouth.

“I hate how we never talk about how weird this all is. I mean, you and mom aren’t even together anymore and we’re all still living in the same house—”

“It’s not weird,” he cuts me off, adding fuel to the fire that’s just sparked.

“Yes, it is weird. I know everyone thinks so. *I’m* just the only person to bring it up. It makes me feel like... like a bitch.” I snap back. I’ve decided that I’m the kind of daughter who swears at her parents now. It’s one of the little rebellions that makes me feel like I have some control over my life.

“Well, yeah. Sometimes you can be a bitch,” he says matter-of-factly, like it’s one of my defining

characteristics.

A few months ago when he was on the phone with my grandparents, and I was perched at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping. He told them about how my mom made him put all his belongings in trash bags when he left and how humiliating it was.

“She’s just being such a bitch about the whole thing.” He spat, dripping in disdain and a wounded ego.

“She’s smart, funny, and a raging bitch just like her mother,” I can imagine him saying, and I hold my breath to prevent myself from making a scene in this Olive Garden.

I drop my fork on my plate so hard it chips.

“I think I’m ready to go now.”

On my grandmother's porch,
We talk under a setting sun
August evenings are cold
in Michigan

I don’t look at him. We speak
In screams and slammed doors
Things we regret

Later, he’ll tell me he thinks about this moment
But I can’t even remember what I said
I remember

The chatter of my teeth
The shake of my voice
Crickets and mosquitos swallowing
the last of the daylight

Love isn’t supposed to be easy

Am I talking about his relationship?
Or am I talking about ours?
A daughter shouldn’t have to teach
her father how
to love.

Things my father has given me: the need to please, love for music/museums/old churches/Mexican food, relationship issues, trust issues, my temper, my little brother, a fear of abandonment/commitment/never being enough/being too much, a happy childhood, a shellfish allergy, my nose, bedtime stories, the ability to take a joke/brush it off/not take it so seriously, skepticism, heartbreak, headaches, my wit, a gold ring, a sharp tongue, and things to write about.

My father has never apologized to me. Maybe he doesn’t know how. I don’t think anyone has ever taught him.

On nights when I can’t sleep, I imagine my father as a little boy with big front teeth and even bigger glasses. I hold his little hand in mine and tell him I’m sorry.

“For what?” he asks me.

“I just am.”

He doesn't say anything but I think he understands. I'm sorry for everything that's happened. For the things that will, and for the things that won't. I'm sorry that life doesn't always go as planned. That some things never go back to the way there were. And I forgive you. He squeezes my hand and wipes his nose on the sleeve of his sweater. I know he's sorry too.

My father loves me because he tells me so.

My father loves me when he kisses me on the cheek and says he's missed me.

I know my father loves me because we don't bring up the things that make us upset.

Instead, we talk about the weather

the Lions game

and the time I threw up in the airport and everybody saw.

When he looks at me, he sees himself.

My father loves me because I love him.

Judge's Comments

A creative tapestry of writing, lovely arrangement. I felt the writer's deep hurts, their openness to healing, and their generosity of spirit.

**First Place
Fiction
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**"To See"
by Ayla Polfus**

Helping my dad put up plastic tarps on the windows was a tradition. It got cold during winter, especially by Lake Superior, isolated and devoid of neighbors who chose to stay during the white maw of December whiteouts. My caring parents wanted to keep my tender-hearted body warm and our propane bill down to a minimum of 1,000 dollars (chances were exponentially low with my habit of turning the heated flooring on full blast against their wishes).

And yet, every year, another tradition began, just for me.

I stretched tall, holding the tarp still to avoid being scolded for fidgeting. "Shit. Stop moving, pull it straight," he'd snap, hands smeared with red sticky iron squeezing the stapler. I would straighten my back like a soldier at attention, leaning heavily against the project. Young green eyes stared forward, watching the blurry, heavy plastic sheeting covering the sparkling white outside, muting the sharp angles of snow-covered pines to a blurry mass.

It's too blurry, like when I closed my right eye and only saw fuzzy shapes and colors, something I neglected to tell my parents about until I was 13.

I hated it; I hated that damn plastic sheet. So, I did what any kid would do.

I poked holes while they slept and while I couldn't. I could never sleep.

I scratched, scratched, scratched until my finger broke through, the plastic warping around one stubby, bitten finger. The cold air rushed in from plastic perforation, burning my perfect right eye as I once more looked out across the snow-laden lake, ice sparkling clean and clear. I could vaguely see the lump of viscera my father smeared across that frozen slate earlier, feeding the ravenous wolves and eagles meat, sinew, and fat from more unfortunate winter-starved hunted prey. When the wolves came, I'd watch from afar, hunched over my mother's antique credenza, binoculars over mismatched eyes, left eye closed so I could see better.

And the next day, I would be scolded. "That sheeting was keeping us warm," my mother would say as she Gorilla-Taped the hole shut, blocking me from the cold, blocking me from the polar winds.

But that wouldn't stop me; it could never stop me from seeking the chaos of nature just outside my backdoor.

Each morning, Mom and Dad would wake to more holes, and I would plead not guilty. The dog did it. The plastic just did that.

Poke, poke, poke, poke when I couldn't sleep, yet even the cabin settled at night with cracking pine. So, I settled in, poking holes in plastic sheeting. I'd find a way to watch, ever tempted to let the cold chill in and numb me, just to see if there was something more I was missing out on.

But there was nothing out of the ordinary: just clear nights and full moons—my father's smeared viscera.

Wolves running in packs to decimate the already decimated.

In my adult life, heavy plastic sheeting is harder to poke holes through. My conscientious wallet and manic purchases make it hard to buy necessities that aren't really necessities. Menards sells Polar Plastics 20' x 100' 8-mil Clear Poly Plastic Sheeting *XL* for \$557.56. Or at least that's what the internet says. But it's been storming for a while, and I need this. Or so my partner says. Propane bills are no joke.

Damn, when did covering winter views get so expensive?

"Let me do it for you," my father offers, soft-spoken with open, clean palms facing up. "I have a stapler. We can put it up together on my day off."

"Nah," I replied, shrugging tensed, raised shoulders, "I got help at home. Thanks, though."

I do it myself when nobody is home. When I can watch the blizzarding world outside my relic of a 70's apartment. The trees shiver and shake with flurried chaos as I stand at the large window facing the highway, plastic crinkling against my fingertips, staple gun in my other hand, and glasses perched on my nose.

I have to do this. I have to cover the storm's unrelenting wind for the propane bill and my 16-year-old cat.

Back straight, plastic curled over my stiff form; I began stapling, shutting out that continuous storm beating against un-updated storm windows.

A hiss, like a friend trying to get you to look at something particularly interesting from the corner of my room, catches my attention halfway through. I whirl on my heel and look, nearly smacking myself with the roll I held against the window. Nothing. Nothing in that corner. Still empty with unappealing wallpaper.

Yet, a large part of me wants to cover the walls in the empty corner of my living room with plastic—to line it and cover that ugly, ugly wallpaper with expensive sheeting, blurring it so I don't have to see it. But I know that won't keep the cold out. It does nothing except create less mess come springtime.

No. We keep stapling. Block the white-out from settling in my bones again. Block out this storm that feels like it's been going on for years since the smear across the ice. Maybe there really isn't anything to see anymore. Maybe they disappeared with the move; there were no wolves and eagles on the highway—just chaos and loud traffic.

So, I staple my window frame, punch in holes I'll apologize to my landlord for, and watch as it goes taut, shutting out the cold and numbness until all I feel is the heating register at my feet. Something about it doesn't feel right. This is the right prescription for my window (or so they say, of course); I bothered an overworked employee to make sure of that. Fifteen tries last time exhausted me and made me awfully irritable, but I was trying to give it another shot.

Adjusting oversized glasses, dull green eyes stared at the blurry white sheet before me. The plastic breathed, crinkling as the wind seeped through the cracks of the large window. It was just... blurry; there was nothing there.

It was uncomfortable, but it needed to be there for my propane bill and geriatric cat.

A large part of me agrees with keeping out the cold. No one wants frostbitten-bitten fingers, purple and lacking oxygen because the blood went elsewhere. But another part of me finds solace in the empty, white depth that beats against my windows—the one constant in my life, it seems. Even though there's no viscera in my backyard anymore, the urge to poke is there.

A couple of nights later, it's still blizzarding. Still rattling the storm windows and making the tarp pant, sucking in and out.

My finger itches tonight, carrying a 150 XL white round pinched between shaking fingers. It's late, and that white-gray light you see only at 3 AM during winter is illuminating my dark home. The tarp is barely making a difference. Somehow, the chill was still getting in despite my buying that ridiculously expensive Polar Plastic *XL*. I stood there, wrapped in an unwashed blanket, swaddled around my form like my mother wrapped me up when I got home from fishing with Dad. But it was barely a shield, the chill freezing my bare feet, making them go white and purple against cool vinyl.

It's not helping. This plastic isn't helping. It never helps; it only makes me feel uncomfortable. I don't know what's going on—

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Stretching the plastic across my stubby-bitten finger, I pushed the 150 through, causing a rush of cold wind to hit my skin. The white round skittered across the windowsill.

There, in the dead of night, I see blinding whiteness, an endless expanse of nothing. There is nothing to see except snow flurries and a few headlights passing. Scared souls braving the winter for something more at 3 AM.

No viscera, no wolves with entrails in sloppy mouths; something that was a distant memory I called home.

A chill fills my living room, and I sit and watch through the little hole, letting it seep through my body enough to numb me. I don't need this fleece anymore; I'm fine. I dropped the façade I called a blanket to the floor and began poking, tearing down the now flimsy barrier little by little.

I'm not thinking of my cat or my propane bill anymore. I can just go to that overworked employee again and order another plastic sheeting, hoping for a clearer, better one.

Another hiss paused my itchy finger, drawing my attention once more. That familiar friend who also favors the cold crooked a crimson tacky finger at the pile of sinew in the corner of the room. No wolves, no ice. Just me.

Judge's Comments

The author took something pretty regular - covering old windows in the winter to keep out the cold - and turned it into a strange story about sight and memory. The main character never wanted to keep out the cold or what they could see outside, blurry as it may be. The cold was comfort. The strangeness with the wolves and eagles was "home." Very well written story, told in a way that made me want there to me more, especially with the fascinating and creepy ending.

**Second Place
Fiction
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

"Blu Stocking: A Hero is Born"
by Kevina Clear

It's only December 1st, and already I feel the December doldrums creeping in like an icy draft. Winter break is weeks away. The sink is full of dirty dishes, piles of unfolded laundry cover the sofa, and a stack of homework waits to be graded.

I lift my arms to the heavens—well, to the ceiling. "I need an adventure!"

The ceiling doesn't answer. *Fine*, I think. *I'll just make my own adventure.*

Glancing around the room, my gaze falls on a pair of TARDIS-blue knee socks. I pull them on, run to the kitchen, grab a spatula, and start dancing around the living room like a lunatic.

"Here comes Blu Stocking!" I jump onto the coffee table. "She raises down-trodden minds, sparks their imagination and helps them soar to new heights!"

I leap off the coffee table and, tripping over the laundry basket, land ingloriously on my side.

"Ooof," I groan, then erupt into giggles.

A thought bursts into my mind like an eight-year-old with a sugar high: What if I could be this superhero? I could take books to the underprivileged, helping them to rise beyond the confines of their upbringing.

An excited flutter starts in my chest. This is what I was just talking about with my class—third grade, so I really do know about eight-year-olds with sugar highs—how education can change lives. One book can make all the difference. I could be that superhero. I could change lives.

But first, I'll need a costume.

In the following days, when I'm not teaching or otherwise being a normal, functioning adult, I work on creating the clothes that will change me into a hero. After a week, I'm ready for my first mission.

I zip up the spandex suit, tie the royal blue mask around my head, pull up my blue stockings, and step in front of the mirror, my eyes squeezed shut. The moment of truth.

I open my eyes. It's perfect! I love it, from the indigo streaks in my hair, to the book emblazoned on my chest, to the blue stockings, and everything in between. In it, I am transformed—no longer Ivy Barrows, elementary school teacher, but Blu Stocking, superhero, ready to change the world one book at a time.

I sling my arsenal—a shopping bag filled with my favorite books—over my shoulder, open the apartment door, and stick my head through the doorway. Secrecy is key. If anyone sees me like this, they'll think I'm crazy... and they might not be wrong.

I tiptoe across the faded teal carpet, down the stairs, and out the building's front door. Snow is gently falling, coating my Prius like powdered sugar on a donut. I pull the key fob from the zippered pocket in my hero suit and unlock the door.

Big flakes of snow hit my windshield as I drive through the shopping district to get to my destination: Violet Jackson's home. She's one of my favorite students, with bright blue eyes and a brighter imagination, brown hair that still shows hints of baby-blondness, and a smile that spreads to everyone around her.

She lives in a trailer on a tiny plot, half of it surrounded by piles of trash, the other half taken up by a big trampoline. I park the car out of sight from her front door, grab my arsenal, and, glancing around, creep up to the front step. A sharp wind blows, slicing through my suit, giving me plenty of incentive for

speed. I set the bag outside the door, ring the doorbell, and duck behind an old playset to watch. Shivering, I question my choice of attire. Superheroes must not work much in the cold. Spandex is not ideal for winter weather.

Violet's mom comes to the door, squints out into the night, then looks down and sees the bag. She picks it up, brushes off the accumulated snow, lifts the tag that reads *For Violet*, and takes the bag inside. The mental picture of Violet's curiosity in opening the bag, the elation shining in her blue eyes when she sees the books, chases the chill from my body, warming me from the inside out.

I run back to my car and strike a dramatic pose. "This is just the first of many victories for Blu Stocking. She will never stop until the great foe, ignorance, is vanquished!"

The next day in class, Violet bursts into the classroom. "Miss Barrows!" Her eyes glow, just how I imagined.

A smile stretches across my face. "What is it, Violet?"

She bounces on her toes, unable to suppress her delight. "I think Santa came early! Last night, someone left a bag full of books on my doorstep."

I feign amazement. "Really?"

"Yeah, and I'm so excited! You know how you said a book can change someone's life? I'm going to give them to my neighbors."

For a moment, I'm too stunned to think. In all the times I rehearsed this moment, I'd never imagined this. I picked out those books especially for her, and she's just giving them away.

As soon as I think that, a wave of guilt washes over me. Of course she's sharing them. That's who she is. And I love her for it.

I wrap my arms around her and squeeze her tight. "I'm so proud of you." And so ashamed of myself.

I thought I was the great benefactor, extending the scepter of learning to disadvantaged Violet. Now I see that she's the one teaching me, showing how to give unselfishly.

Then, a thought tiptoes into my mind, like an 8-year-old trying to steal a cookie: *Maybe I helped shape her into that person.* Maybe I don't need to be Blu Stocking to change the world. Ivy Barrows, elementary school teacher, is already doing that, one child at a time.

I'm not hanging up the hero suit yet, though. Many adventures still await Blu Stocking, and she's going to find every last one.

Judge's Comments

I don't think we always understand the power of teachers and books when we're young. This author, in one short story, proved that teachers, librarians, and the books themselves really are heroes - whether they wear costumes or not.

**Third Place
Fiction
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition**

**"Sweet Pine Haze"
by Nicole Hunt**

Sweet pine haze billows from the open door of my grandfather's shop. The blade of his table saw sears against knotted lumber, echoing through the forest. With fingertips in my ears, I step over the threshold in my neon sundress. *A cactus flower in desert sawdust.*

A scrap of wood plinks to the floor. Grandpa's callused finger flips the switch on the machine, it's whining ceases.

From a stereo tucked in the corner, a voice sings, "*It must have been cold there in my shadow.*"

Grandpa pulls a tape measure from his apron, quick hands extend yellow down freshly sawn lumber.

"Measure twice, cut once," he eyes me over metal-framed glasses.

"What are you making?"

Tangy dust swirls in a breeze from the open door behind me. He reaches for the next piece of wood, lining up the blade with his pencil mark.

"I'm making us a table." He places his hands on his hips, his chin tucked to his chest. "That'll be neat, won't it."

"Yeah." A smile dimples my cheeks.

Grandma's meatloaf and mashed potato supper that evening carry Grandpa into the last hours of daylight. I retrace his footsteps back to the shop, where a rock rolls in my stomach each time I think of going home the next morning.

"Guess we ought to get some shuteye." The sun sets behind my drooping back as he shuts out the light.

Moths flutter around our heads as he closes and locks the shop door. Under the motion-sensor light, a gallery of painted wings stares back at us.

Days pass under the green canopy of paper birch and sticky pine where Grandpa's clever hands work, while I check off daydream school days until my return to the tall trees and grassy meadows where my grandparents welcome me with smiles and warm hugs. The cocoon of concrete flooring and block walls, bought just months ago, had been transformed into their cream-carpeted and golden-trimmed second home.

A new light fixture beams over the finished dining room table where I'd previously rolled somersaults. A clear coat, thick and sheen like glass, protecting the wheat-colored pine beneath.

I slide onto the bench, cool under the back of my thighs. I trace my hand over the smooth surface of the table where epoxy rises over a prickly pear cactus my grandfather has frozen in time. Around the cactus are acorns and pine needles resting in a diamond shaped crevice.

"Your grandmother and I picked these from out back." His bandaged finger taps over the cactus. "That gol' darn thing has thorns you can't see," Tilting his head back, he examined the tip of his finger.

I brought my eyes level with the table, "You put sand in it?"

"Well, we tried. It turned black when I poured the epoxy over it. I had a devil of a time digging it out." He put his arm around me. "That's sandpaper you see in there. Had you fooled, didn't I?" He nudged my arm softly with his elbow.

I couldn't recall having seen anything so beautiful in my life. I stared at the table, the permanent diorama my grandfather had built. My carpenter, artist grandfather.

Through sandy summers, the table carried the weight of our elbows throughout silverware-clinking meals, absorbing our huddled whispers. Watching as our chins grew further from its top, our knees bumping its base. Always there, waiting.

Until now.

The sun has betrayed me during my goodbye visit to the family cottage, or home, as we'd come to call it. Through pine window shutters, dull gray looms in the afternoon sky, echoing the emptiness that made me blink back tears when I walked through the door.

Every furnishing has been removed. Grandpa's recliner, Grandma's dishes. Beds. Lamps.

Gone.

I am the last remnant of my family's time here.

I flip the switch on the wall. Light tinges the hollow space where Grandpa's handcrafted table had been. Where sunburned shoulders rubbed, and sandy feet dangled. Where dominos plinked on lazy afternoons. Where dim light flickered over my blue ink stream on hushed summer nights. The mildew tainted carpet mocks the yellow bulb as it searches for the golden surface that for so long reflected its light.

Someone should tell it we're not coming back.

I close my eyes, turning back five years to the day my grandfather was by my side in my van, the sun on the windshield as we headed home from our spring visit to the cottage.

He had reached from the passenger seat, turning up the radio. "Do you know this song?"

Bette Midler's voice poured from the speakers, "*I can fly higher than an eagle, for you are the wind beneath my wings.*"

I nodded, "I like this song."

"I played this song for your grandmother." He stared through the windshield. "We've had a good life. I have her to thank for it."

Grandma, never the star of the show. Always behind the scenes.

"She's pretty perfect." I grin. I tucked away the words I feared would sound childish if spoken aloud.

I don't believe in angels, but if they are real, she will grow wings.

But we're not in the van anymore.

And our pretty, perfect angel has been gone for four years, stolen on a harsh winter night. The threads of Grandpa's recliner have worn as he waits, the table with its shriveled, black cactus now by his side.

The cottage, a task on a list, has been sold. The closing date, next week.

I open my eyes.

If I called him, he would say, *only the rocks live forever*. These words from James Michener he has etched in me.

They are hopeless words, but they anchor us.

My pulse throbs in my ears as I exit over the threshold, closing the door behind me. I ache with loss. *Thorns I can't see.*

But *I* am not lost.

And we'll live forever in the sweet pine haze.

Judge's Comments

I loved how this author used their words to evoke memories. I could smell the pine. I could feel the comfort of home cooking. This was just a great story about how our senses evoke memories, even painful ones.

First Place
Poetry
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition

"A Hymn of Light and Shadow"
by Julian Barnes

In the heart of the twilight where shadows play,
I stand between worlds, neither night nor day.
An ember, a flicker, a whisper of fire,
Caught in a tempest of quiet desire.
In these still waters of my mind,
The blood of the meek, left far behind—
They say they shall inherit the world in a week,
But what remains for the strong, the silent, the bleak?
A single second of clarity,
To wash my hands of this sordid tragedy.
How will I make it through my darkest days,
Without you beside me to light my way?
You were the spark in a moonless night,
A guide when my vision fell to fright.
But now the path is cold, bare, and long,
An empty echo of a forgotten song.
Light breaks, then fades, a cruel joke it seems,
Glittering illusions that slip from dreams.
With every star that rises, another falls,
Leaving only shadows on empty walls.
I hold the memory of your innocent laugh,
A life disregarded, a broken path.
The echoes linger, both kind and cruel,
A fractured dance, the wise and the fool.
In the silence, the darkness knows my name,
It speaks of sin, of sorrow, of blame.
Yet even here, in the midnight's womb,
A whisper of dawn cuts through the gloom.
So here I stand, on this trembling line,
Between light's promise and shadow's design.
What's left but to walk, one step at a time,
Through the ebb and flow of death and rhyme?
When all is dim, yet hope remains,
In whispers soft as autumn rains.
For in the dark, the soul learns to see—
A hymn of light and shadow... an ode to me.

Judge's Comments

Romantic, with elements of Gothic literature. Great use of language and tone. Great use of imagery as well. This poem is reminiscent of Romantic poetry from the 18th Century, in its style and tone. The writer's use of language, light and darkness, informs the mood and style of the poem. The writer employs nature and juxtaposes it with life, experience, and growth. The writer says: "In the silence/ the darkness knows my name/ It speaks of sin, of sorrow, of blame./ Yet even here, in the midnight's womb/ A whisper of dawn cuts through the gloom." Here we see a sense of vulnerability in the "darkness", because even in the darkness, the narrator is exposed. The darkness knows all, yet this moment is transitional and speaks of growth in the "midnight's womb."

Second Place
Poetry
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition

"My Garden"
by Dillon Madden

I found a weed in my garden
I've let it stay for quite some time
My friends have told me to pick it
But it's been there for quite some time

Every time I gaze upon it
It prays not to be picked
It's reasons that it was the first plant in this garden
So it should Be Praised
For it is the father of my garden
But it brought another weed
more convincing than the last
So I let them stay

They still haunt me
The two weeds in my garden
A friend had told me that I should pick them
At least relocate them if I'm that attached

It took me a while to come to my senses
But finally
I dirtied My knees and picked those weeds
My garden is now flourishing
And I'm happier than ever
My garden has never been so colorful
So grand

But weeds grow back
One day they will be plucked again

Judge's Comments

Simple, yet affective language. Allegorical in its content and structure. The garden can be considered a symbol of life. Gardens are usually full of beautiful plants and flowers. However, the narrator here, focuses on a single "weed" in the garden that continues to grow and will continue to grow, even if the narrator "plucks it" from the ground. The narrator says: "I found a weed in my garden/I've let it stay for quite some time/My friends have told me to pick it/But it's been there for quite some time". The writer is not speaking of a "garden" in a literal sense but uses the garden to speak of life and all its beauty, and how no matter how beautiful life is, there is always something bad or ugly that can occur and can take our focus off of the bigger picture. The narrator says: "It took me a while to come to my senses/ But finally/ I dirtied My knees and picked those weeds". Here, the narrator accepts the realities of this world, the good and the bad, and rids the garden of the weed, knowing one day it will return.

Third Place
Poetry
2024 LAND Creative Writing Competition

"Looking Back"
by Evelyn Kellogg

I always find myself glancing over my shoulder
Trying to grab a moment
That's already escaped from my grasp
I'm always looking back
I watch the cars on the other side of the highway
Always craning my neck around to watch them
Disappear through the back window
I chase after memories like one chases after
The lingering aftertaste of a rip berry
But the nostalgia stings
It's like the anticipation of a sweet raspberry
Only to be met with disappointment
When you find that the berry is over ripe
I'm always looking back
I took one last look at my childhood house
As the car pulled away
And all the houses after it
Leaning my head as far as I could out the window
So that my final glance would be
Once the car rounded a bend
And not because I looked away
I looked back on graduation day
I watched all of the peers I barely knew
Embrace tightly one last time
We could all feel the pressure of the future
Of something new and different and terrifying
I took a long look back that day
I'm still looking back
I don't think I remember
How to look forward

Judge's Comments

Reflective tone. Romantic. Sentimental. In this poem, the narrator seems to reminisce about events that have shaped his or her life. There is a desire to move forward (in life), but the past keeps haunting the narrator. The poem begins with "I always find myself glancing over my shoulder/ Trying to grab a moment/ That's already escaped from my grasp/ I'm always looking back". Looking back on one's life can be a sign of fear, even guilt or regret. However, the narrator has been so impacted by his or her past that he or she cannot seem to move forward in life. The narrator says near the end of the poem that: "I took a long look back that day/ I'm still looking back/ I don't think I remember/ How to look forward." Sometimes, as human beings, we can be so consumed by our past that it is hard to "be present" and "live in the now" or even move forward.