

# THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2021 ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER



## BRIANNA XIE

BEST ESSAY Grades 10-12

### Open the Front Door

*I sway with the wind. My eyes are closed as I lean back into the tree that hides me from the sky. I breathe in fresh air and think of nothing but the present.*

My favorite tree came to the forefront of my life when I tried to find solace in a place void of technology and Zoom classes. I go visit the tree in the evening between four and five when the sky is still bright but not blinding like it is at noon. It sits by itself on a small slope in the middle of a green field, and its trunk snakes into three slimmer branches only two feet above the ground: perfect for any neighborhood kid to hoist themselves up into the leaves. I never had a favorite tree until recently, but I wish that I had found one sooner. Quarantine has spurred me to reconnect with the natural world. When I sit in this tree, I ponder my relationship with the

land. Because I no longer have the opportunity to flow freely between my home and my community, I seek comfort from a more primitive, ancient friend of humanity—nature. The living things in New Mexico, that I once overlooked, revealed themselves with new meaning when I took care to observe them.

My disrupted schedule allowed me to rediscover New Mexico with awe for its natural legacy. Has the Mesa always been this colorful? Have the Petroglyphs always been so mysterious? Has the air ever felt so fresh? The world was gleaming and bright, and I felt alive in it. It inspired me to write, to capture the *querencia* that I felt towards the land that nurtured me. I wrote poems, mainly centered around the plains near Highway 14 because I thought of it as a reflection of my own life in Bernalillo and Albuquerque. Sagebrush and juniper are hardy and resilient, just like my immigrant parents who were able to thrive and make a foreign land their home. I am the Sandia Mountains: my aspirations reach high into the sky, but I have never forgotten my roots, my foundation—New Mexico. My poems remind me constantly of where I was born, where I was raised, and what I should be thankful for. The land is my kin and staying at home has deepened my understanding and appreciation for the New Mexico that lives within me.

My father has found his *querencia* as a planter. He works a typical office job, with most of his time spent between the confinement of a corporate building and his home office. With the pandemic, however, his everyday cycle was interrupted, allowing him to pick up gardening. Last summer, my father grew a small patch of chile peppers in our backyard. Every day, after tending to his plants, he would come back inside, his eyes gleaming with joy.

“The peppers have grown again,” he would announce, “and I was the one who planted them!”

Slow it may be now, but life cannot remain like this forever. The world will recover from the pandemic, and our usual routines will reestablish and speed up once more. My father will not have much time to plant, and I will not be able to write as frequently anymore. Nevertheless, I am glad that my father and I have taken this time to grow our appreciation for New Mexico as part of our identities. Both of us, in the process of doing something creative and inspired by nature, have gained a sense of admiration, pride, and protectiveness towards the land. I care deeply about our planet’s future because I hope that younger generations, like me, can experience and find their own *querencias*. The first step to finding a *querencia* is to engage in an act of creation, like Leopold suggested. When we create, we also learn how to preserve and value what inspires us. I hope that everyone can experience the beauty of our natural world, and the best way to start is as simple as opening the front door and stepping outside.