



The English Department at Western Kentucky University is pleased to announce the 2023-2024 Literature Essay Contest. Students should visit [here](#) to complete an application and submit a 500-750-word piece (MLA style; pdf format) based on the prompt below. The English Department will invite finalists, their teachers, and family to campus for a reception and ceremony on April 20<sup>th</sup> where they will be recognized. The winners will receive cash prizes: First Place: \$150; Second Place: \$100; Third Place: \$50.

**Application and Essays are due March 23, 2024.**

The following poem, “Cyrus and The Snakes,” is written by U.S. Poet Laureate, Ada Limón from her most recent book, *The Hurting Kind* (2022). Read the poem carefully and craft a 500 – 750 word essay of literary analysis.

**Prompt:** Limón’s poem focuses on a pair of siblings (a brother and sister) that have differing relationships with nature throughout the poem. How does the speaker connect her brother’s youthful experiences to his adult understanding of the relationship of nature and curiosity? Support your reason by using textual evidence to analyze the poem’s form—its sequence of images and episodes, its sounds, its tone, etc.

## CYRUS & THE SNAKES

My brother holds a snake by its head. The whole  
length of the snake is the length

of my brother’s body. The snake’s head  
is held safely, securely, as if my brother

is showing it something in the distant high grass.  
I don’t know why he wants to hold them,

Their strong bodies wrapping themselves around  
the warmth of his arm. Constricting and made

Of circles and momentum; slippery coolness smooth  
against the ground. Still, this image of him,

Holding a snake as it snakes as snakes  
do, both a noun and a verb and a story

that doesn’t end well. Once, we stole an egg  
from the backyard chicken coop

and cracked it just to see what was inside: a whole  
unhatched chick. Where we

expected yolk and mucus was an unfeathered  
and unfurled sweetness. We stared at the thing,

dead now and unshelled by curiosity and terrible youth.  
My brother pretended not to care so much,

while I cried, though only a little. Still, we buried it  
in the brush, by the creeping thistle that tore up

our arms with their speared leaves, barbed  
at the ends like weapons struck in the rattlesnake grass.

But I knew, I knew that he'd cry if he was alone,  
if he wasn't a boy in the summer heat being a boy

in the summer heat. Years later, back from Mexico  
or South America, he'd admit he was tired

of history, of always discovering the ruin by ruining  
it, wrecking a forest for a temple, a temple

that should simply be left a temple. He wanted it  
all to stay as it was, even if it went undiscovered.

I want to honor a man who wants to hold a wild thing,  
only for a second, long enough to admire it fully,

and then wants to watch it safely return to its life,  
bends to be sure the grass closes up behind it.