



Los Angeles Times

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To the Judges:

As the disaster of California's drought story unfolded, journalists set out to find the story. News writers captured cities' efforts at rationing. Science writers explained shifting weather patterns. Business writers added up the monetary losses.

Los Angeles Times staff writer Diana Marcum took a drive.

Marcum wandered down rural roads with numbers for names — Avenue 19, Avenue 19 ½, Avenue 20 — to meet the families of California's Central Valley. In towns such as Huron, Stratford and Terra Bella — mostly a blur from the interstate — livelihoods were evaporating, being reduced to dust.

But, as Marcum writes, these are places “where trouble hits first and money doesn't last.”

She brought this epic event to life in a series of remarkable portraits, both subtle and stunning, that are a modern retelling of the stories we often associate with the chroniclers of California's past. John Steinbeck and Dorothea Lange are in good company.

Here, under cloudless skies, town wells have cracked. Pipes spit mud and yellow water. Taps go dry. People joke that they grow dirt.

“We're looking at a reverse Dust Bowl,” one neighbor tells another.

Marcum paints pictures of a never-easy life made worse, capturing workers in the fields, in their homes and on Main Street. Pistachio grower Fred Lujan lovingly gives names to his trees — his babies — and then finds his life upended when the local irrigation district seals off his water meter. Fieldworker Francisco Galvez prepares his wife and children for the move to Texas where there'll be more work. Grocery store owner Mahmod Alrihimi measures his town's decline by the number of IOUs he's collecting.

Her stories prove that the best feature writing values the most ordinary moments for their points of revelation, and her work is evidence of the rewards of slow and patient reporting. In her hands, the story of the drought is as dramatic as the ground sinking over a depleted water table. It is as poignant as the death of a beloved rose.

When Fred Lujan starts to cry, Marcum hears his wife confide, “He's not normally like this. This isn't him.” When summer temperatures hit 106, she joins Donna Johnson delivering water bottles to nearly 1,000 residents who struggle to pay for water with Social Security checks and baby-sitting money.

For a lyrical, searing portrait of these Californians and their tenacity, The Times would like to nominate Diana Marcum for a Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing.

Sincerely,