

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2010**

2010 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

"She Tells Me Stories of the Wartime"

Abby Van Dusen

Mentor: Holly Wren Spaulding

Northwestern Michigan College

"Alice"

Katy Haas

Mentor: Jeff Vande Zande

Delta College

"North"

Kathryn Peterson

Mentor: Apryl Mateas

Gogebic Community College

Essay

"Explosive Realizations"

Joshua Whicker

Mentor: Andrew Colenbrander

Delta College

"Visiting Dachau"

Taylor VanTol

Mentor: Ron Brown

Delta College

"In the Moment"

Kelly Crittenden

Mentor: Greta Skogseth

Montcalm Community College

Fiction

"The Toast"

John B. Hartranft

Mentor: Heather S. Sisto

Mott Community College

"The Things I Waited For"

Joshua Williams

Mentor: Gretchen Cline

Muskegon Community College

"Breakdown"

Ken Porter

Mentor: Gretchen Cline

Muskegon Community College

2010 LAND Creative Writing Judges

Poetry

Nancy Eimers
Poet and Professor
English Department (Creative Writing)
Western Michigan University

Fiction

Thisbe Nissen
Novelist and Assistant Professor
English Department (Creative Writing)
Western Michigan University

Essay

Jay Baron Nicorvo
Poet and Essayist
Instructor at Western Michigan University
Former Membership Director for the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses

First Place Poetry
2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

She Tells Me Stories of the Wartime
Abby Van Dusen

When I gave her the celery root she looked at me
and put her hand over her heart.

They used to survive on celery and potatoes,
and her father kept a crock of sauerkraut
in the basement.

She served him horsemeat once because there wasn't a better choice.

After dinner she showed me the recipe for the raderkuchen,
the one I'd been asking about.

You fry the twisted dough
and when the cookies have cooled
sprinkle the tops with pudertzucker.

Sometimes when I ask questions
there is a space

and then she answers in German.

Judge's Comments

I'm taken not merely by what is included here but by what is left out. The poem is so cleanly made and so attentive to the particulars of a remembered conversation: gestures, objects, what was said and what was not. The smallest particulars tell us something about the world the woman in the poem is remembering but can't express, and the silence that falls before her final answer, given in another language, tells us even more, and resonates enormously.

Second Place Poetry
2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Alice
Katy Haas

The taste of shadowed forests
and dirt fills my mouth,
washed down with tap water
from my great-grandma's sink.

When the world starts to spin,
I make believe I'm taller
than rotting garage roofs
and my world is only dark
magic and silhouettes.

The white rabbit,
whose house held fungal
snacks to make me shrink
vulnerable and young
watches me with wide eyes,
probing my pale wrists
with rusty scissors
and he asks why I'm alive.

But you, in my decaying childhood
behind the looking glass,
ask what's wrong,
pupils the size of the sky,
and I can only shake my head,
words dead at the back of my throat.

In the morning we wake,
eyes swollen and throats sore,
and when I touch my tongue
to the cracks between my teeth,
hungry for more tree-root taste,
there's just the sour sting of regret.

Judge's Comments

This mysterious poem wavers between the actual and the surreal, between directness and a sort of metaphorical code. The poet does an effective job of rendering the "silhouettes" that stand in for things we can no longer see or even remember clearly from childhood. Instead of straightforward narrative there is an intense imagery that manages to convey the power and taste and texture of a strong emotion that can't be shaken off.

Third Place Poetry
2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

North
Kathryn Peterson

The mangle of fall
bares the bones of the earth
to stone and stick.
Autumn reduces her jeweled inventory to evergreens
and a few rogue tamaracks.
A serpentine of nondescript hills
circle like fortress walls
to protect life, gone underground.
The wolf's nose is a compass pointing north;
chill air guides him home.

Judge's Comments

I admire the way this writer accomplishes a carefully managed spareness to create a powerful moment. The diction is carefully chosen and the images are quietly precise. The effect is a somber, unsettling poem that ends, paradoxically, with the word "home."

First Place Fiction
2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Toast
John B. Hartranft

He hadn't understood that giving a toast was part of the job. She had grown beautiful, much prettier than he'd expected, with her mother's mouth and eyes and her grandmother's bearing. She had his hair. He sat quietly at the end of the head table, eating at a pace calculated to fill time and discourage small talk.

When the microphone came to him, he received it as a new father sometimes holds an unplanned newborn, with a mix of fear and indifference, suppressing a desire to set it carefully on the table. He slid the switch and gently blew across the mesh cap. Then he stood exactly where he'd been sitting and turned mechanically to look at his hopeful daughter and her suspicious new husband.

"I guess everybody knows that I didn't figure on being here, right here, today." He looked at her, then at the edge of his dessert plate, at the dead silent audience of people he hadn't seen in years, then back to his daughter. A furrow of worry had crept onto her face. From somewhere, he smiled back at her. A real smile, like the one that had won him her mother, a long time ago. "But I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be." Her face relaxed a little, and her eyes widened. Now she looked like her mother, and his smile opened up, his eyes swathed in wrinkles, his best teeth shining in the bright light.

"Sue," he began. 'I prefer Susan,' she told him at least three times last night. I won't tell you what to say, but please call me Susan, it meant. He'd forgotten already. "Susan." Susan ducked her head a little and looked up at him, past her perfect eyebrows and through those lashes, with a sweet smile that broke his heart a little. "Susan," he repeated, quietly this time, "and Jim, too." At least he didn't go by James, he had to give him credit for that. 'Jim' was all Carl knew about this guy, but it was a start.

"I'm not as Irish as people think I am, just my grandpa on Dad's side. Everything else, well, it just happened. The Irish are OK by me." Susan's eyes dropped, and he realized he had begun to wander. 'Don't wander,' he thought, 'don't do that this time.' He gathered himself. "But St. Patrick had a beautiful blessing for times like this, and I know it by heart."

He'd rattled this off in so many bars and crashed so many wedding receptions that he knew it word for word, and they tumbled out like children after school, hurrying for home. "It goes this way: May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be at your back, may the sun always shine down on you, may the rain fall soft and easy on your fields and..." He stopped, unable to speak without breaking. His fist suddenly ached from holding the microphone. She was staring straight at him, ordering him to continue. "Until we meet again," he said evenly, "may you be safe and sound in God's right hand." That wasn't quite right, he knew, but it was close and better than close enough.

He drew a breath. The audience had relaxed and a few sounds drifted up to the front. 'So far, so good,' he thought, 'but this is what I need to say. If they knew what I know, they'd say it too. They're too fine and proper. All married once, maybe twice at most. This is what I came to say. I'm right about this, and Sue needs to know it.' The wedding planner took a step toward him and he waved her away.

"But the road, sweetheart, it's not like that." Instantly the audience snapped to attention and glasses found their place on the tabletops. "I don't really understand the part about roads rising up to meet you, I guess that's meant to mean he hopes they're all smooth and clear sailing. They're not, they just aren't. Still, you can't get anywhere unless you take to the road sometime." With his head frozen in place, he looked Susan in the eye. 'I'm sorry', his eyes said to her. 'I'm so sorry I took that road when I did. It wasn't fair. I'm a shit now and I was a shit then. Roads do that to some people, and I'm one of that sorry lot. But I know about roads, so listen to me now. This is my gift to you today. I love you.' She passed an infinitesimal nod back to him. He had something to say to her at last. She had waited all her life to know what it was.

"I hope that you, you and Jim, take that road someday. Go somewhere beautiful and fine, somewhere you've always wanted to go, somewhere you can hardly bring yourself to leave, even when it's time to." 'Somewhere you belong', he thought. He wondered what a place like that would be like. 'She's due for a better place than this,' he thought. "And there's a road that will take you there. There's a road that will bring you back, too. Go, go together, but come back someday," he stared at his shoes now, "and come back to the people who know you and love you, who will welcome you home." 'Come back to me,' he thought. 'I have more to say. I won't say anything bad about your mother. I won't try to explain.' "And they will. That's what a road can do." 'Look at me,' he thought. 'It brought me back.'

"The wind, now. I know about wind, too. Even St. Patrick couldn't get the wind to go any one direction. It goes every which way. I know how that is." He smiled at Susan, a wide, happy smile as he remembered being back from the sea, walking across the dark corner of the parking lot at her school to the gap in the fence to watch her cheer at the games. The way the wind whipped the flags and blew the flimsy passes out of the hands of the football players, little guys like him who tried and failed and tried again. She never knew. "The wind will blow, you can count on that." His face grew serious, and her face disappeared in darkness. He shut his eyes and continued. "When it does, the two of you need to put a hand each on the tiller and the other around each other and hold tight. Don't let go for nothing, don't let go for a second. Hold on, hold your course." His voice grew tight and fear showed. The quiet in the room deepened. "You'll be better than the wind. Together, better. It'll be OK." He'd said that before, and OK turned out to be something he didn't understand and could never accept, but he couldn't tell her that now. He straightened up. "That kind of wind will pass, it always does, and when you're on the other side of it the sky is so beautiful. It's so beautiful." He paused to breathe. 'I never got to show you that. I hope you see it someday. There's nothing else like it.' He thought about his new son-in-law and wondered if he'd ever so much as stepped on a boat. He was lost now, but could not stop.

"And the stars at sea, wait 'til you see the stars." He drew another long breath, and the room of people waited for him in silence.

"Let's see." He was running down, and the audience looked at their plates and at each other in turn, wondering. "St. Patrick would wish sunshine on you all the time." He smiled, grateful for the chance to tell a joke. "That must be because he was a priest." He waited for the laugh, but the room gave none. "Not married, you know." The room hummed a little, but that was all. He soldiered on. "Well, it's like this, baby daughter. It's the night, the dark, sacred night, that makes the daylight beautiful. I've been to Alaska, and it's no good to have it be all day or all night, believe me." He looked up at Susan again, whose face had a new softness, whose eyes were moist. Her shoulders were down and her left hand lay cradled in Jim's right. "You'll need both to be happy. St. Patrick missed that part, but it's true. I swear it's true."

He wanted this to be over now, but it was not done. He went on. "And the rain. Well, it won't always rain soft on your field, I can promise you that. You can hope it will, but it won't. And when it rains so hard you can hardly talk, when it pours like there's no end to it, then I wish for you a dry roof and a warm floor and a place..." He couldn't help himself and he turned to Susan, who had begun to cry. He stood with her bundled tight in her blanket, held in his arms on the front porch as the rain pounded on the street and sheeted down the windows in the deafening thunderclaps and past the cracking streaks of raw energy leaping from cloud to cloud and down to the ground. He swallowed. "A place to stand to watch the angels cry and electricity dance." They'd done that again and again, before the trouble began.

He was tired and could not remember what was left to say. He tried to imagine himself at Roy's Roadhouse, or any of a thousand other bars. 'What came last?' he wondered. He looked around the room and his table, looking for a clue. Something comes at the end, he knew, but it was gone, as he had been. He swallowed again and wished he had a drink. He thought of Roy's again, and thought about the cowboy pictures inside. He straightened up suddenly. "'Til we meet again," he said.

He could finish it now. With a steady voice, he faced them both and raised his champagne glass full of tonic water. "Susan, and Jim, may you live in God's shadow, stand on His shoulders, swim in His waters and dance to His music. May you love each other always, always, through the good and the bad, when you're healthy and when you're not. May you wake up every morning and reach for each other. May you always." 'Don't be like me', he thought. 'Do better than I did. Write home if you have to, but not like me. You can do this, I know you can.' "To love, kids. To you, to each other. To your life together. Amen."

The crowd cheered, ready for a drink, happy to arrive at the end. They were relieved for Susan, relieved that he made it back and relieved he made it through the toast. He pretended to drink, too, and the microphone disappeared from his hand. Someone tugged gently on his jacket and guided him down to his chair. Someone else, Jim's father he supposed, began to speak. When he looked up Susan was looking at him, glancing back at the speaker. She smiled and gave a wink. Her mother used to do that.

Judge's Comments

In very few words, "The Toast" brings the reader an entire life. An estranged father delivers a sometimes eloquent, sometimes bumbling speech at his daughter's wedding, and in the interstices of that toast we are allowed into the speaker's thoughts and memories. And we come, in a very short time, to understand a good deal about this man, who he's been and what he's become. Carefully observant, tonally nuanced, and emotionally moving, this piece does what good fiction ought: immerse the reader in a world on the page, and take us on a journey through that created land. Cheers to "The Toast," which achieves this so beautifully.

Second Place Fiction

2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

The Things I Waited
Joshua Williams

Our road is a tight rope, long and yellow striped. It splits the world in two. And when we're bored, we try walking down the middle, waiting for the next car to come blow us over. It's a contest to see who's bravest, and Casey double dog dares me to stand in front of the next car we see. Unless you're chicken he says, and I'm no chicken.

So I stand there, walking down the yellow line. It doesn't take long for a rusty pickup to come my way. I can hear it rattle and shake down the road. I count One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi. At four my hands start sweating and I try rubbing them off on my pants. Five Mississippi. Six Mississippi. I ain't moving. I'd rather die than be called a chicken. Seven Mississippi.

Just as I think I'm about to be knocked over like a bowling pin, I hear a screech and a thud and a "Hey kid, get the hell out of the road!" So I do. I run over to the other side of the road. It's not my side. It's the side with the spongy flat grass and velvety flowers. Where the trees aren't meant for climbing, but for looking. Where they eat fruity pebbles, and they watch cartoons, and they have cold lunch, and their bike brakes work, and their hair is always cut, and their clothes always fit, and they never, ever move away.

When the truck drives by, I'll run back to my side, where everything is splotchy and safe. It'll only be a second, but a second is long enough to pretend.

Sometimes you just can't feel your toes in your shoes. That's when you know it's the coldest, and you have to do something or else you'll freeze. We blow rings of smoke in the air. That's what we do. Warm, moist rings of smoke. Floating higher and higher. We swallow all our breath until it's warm like, until our cheeks are about to explode, and then we let it go. Sometimes in tiny puffs, or in little streams, or even in one big gush. But mostly just in rings.

They don't make us warm. They just makes us forget that we're not. But then afterwards, you're always forced to take another gulp. It stings your throat and leaves icicles down there. It's hard forgetting that. So we stand and shake and wait for the yellow bus to come take us away.

One day though, it doesn't come. It's so cold that even our rings of smoke freeze in the air. We shove our hands in our pockets, because our fingers won't move. It's then that Casey pulls something out in one of his hands. He stole it from his sister. It's white and mysterious and dangerous.

He wants to blow real smoke rings now. He's been practicing he says. It doesn't take much. A flick and a switch. And then all of a sudden the warmest thing outside is hanging out of his mouth. He looks like a real professional. He closes his eyes trying to hold it all back. And then.

Puff. His rings are dark and swirling in the air. Puff. They're eating away at mine. Puff. I can't feel my toes. Puff. I want to go home.

Tick tock. Two o'clock. That's when the bars close. My brother and sister are fast asleep. I put them to bed long ago. On the stove is left over Mac 'n cheese. It's spoiled and soggy now. I'm trying to ignore the noodle that fell between the fridge and the stove. I tried clawing it out, but my fingers wouldn't squeeze far enough back. It'll gather dust now until it rolls away.

I sleep on the couch, because it's closest to the door. When I hear a noise outside, I close my eyes. Like a blind mouse, she'll sneak through the front door. I've picked everything up, but she still stumbles and tumbles in the dark. Even when it's clean, there's not much room to walk. She won't make any noise though, because she's a true lady and even if she trips, it will be quiet and soft. That's how I know if there's someone with her, because they all crash, while she floats. No one is with her tonight.

That's how the night ends. She kisses my brother and sister and then comes back for me. I know she's coming and I bury my face in the cushion. I don't want to smell it. Not tonight. I'd rather smell this old cushion. And so she comes and stops and doesn't know what to do. There is no kiss to give. Instead, all she can do is tuck me in and walk away, while I pretend to sleep.

But you don't know this. I'm always awake at two o'clock when you come home.

Judge's Comments

"The Things I Waited For" is a character portrait in triptych: three vignettes illuminate a narrator whose young life is defined by a breathless-and sometimes dangerous-expectancy. Our narrator does not live in the world where "they eat fruity pebbles, and they watch cartoons, and they have cold lunch, and their bike brakes work, and their hair is always cut, and their clothes always fit," but on the other side of the proverbial and actual road, where the leftover mac 'n' cheese on the stove is spoiled and soggy and you have to try to ignore the noodle that falls between the fridge and the stove. You can only wait for it to "gather dust now until it rolls away." "The Things I Waited For" shows the kind of attention to evocative detail that is the mark of an intuitive and very promising writer.

Third Place Fiction

2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Breakdown
Ken Porter

The slate gray sky bled sunlight through the autumn leaves of an old oak tree as Fred Wood and John Mayfall sat underneath, on opposite sides, sweating in their tuxedos. Beside the road, Fred's Volvo smoldered under its hood in the strange October heat, making a deep whine like an angst-ridden teenager.

"She's probably having a panic attack," John said, "her mom always gets her all riled up about stuff like this. Anyway, the tow truck said it'd be here as soon as it could. Did you hear me? Fred?"

"I can't believe this," Fred said.

"It's not your fault," John said, "it just happened."

"I know it's not my damn fault! Of all the damn times you had to -"

"I said I was sorry, what else am I supposed to say?"

"Sorry doesn't mean anything. Not a God damn thing."

A warm breeze swept through the tall, browning grass, breaking an eternal silence. Fred jumped to his feet and stormed over to the Volvo. She was battered, weathered, and still smoking. He had been with her for so long, loved her more with every passing year. The more miles she got, the more life breathed into her. He had first seen her when he was in college, in a parking lot outside the dorms. At that moment, he knew he had to have her.

"I can't believe you touched her," Fred burnt his fingers as he popped the hood. "Damn it! Do you fuck up everything on purpose? Or is it some kind of game for you?"

John sat still under the tree, fidgeting and playing with his bowtie. Fred surveyed the Volvo's damage. The engine block was split by a crack, which penetrated deep within her. She was broken. One set of strange hands and she'd completely come apart, unclean and untrustworthy. He'd ignored the warning signs. Now it was his wedding day, and something had to be done.

"I should've told you about it sooner," John hopped to his feet, "I told you because I can't live with it anymore."

"I can't live with it either," Fred said.

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know," Fred ran his hand through his damp hair.

"Yeah you do."

"I don't!" Fred slammed the hood down. "I don't know what I'm gonna do!"

"Just don't call it off, please . . . I was drunk, that's all it was."

"I didn't say I was gonna call it off."

"You were thinking it."

"Oh, big lesson in thinking from Captain Good Decisions over here!"

"At least I admitted I screwed up!"

Fred threw his arms in the air. "So now it's my fault?"

"Shit," John said, "it's not your fault. You know it's not."

"You want it to be," Fred said, "you want it to be all on me so you don't have to feel guilty."

The car made a clanking, sputtering noise. Fred kicked it.

"Shut up!" he kicked it again. "Just shut the hell up!"

John tore off his jacket, whipping it to the pavement.

"Hit me," he said.

"For Christ's sake," Fred said.

"It'll make you feel better, just do it, I won't fight back."

"Why did you touch her? Why did you have to ruin all of this? Now we're stuck here."

"I'll hold my arms behind my back, won't be able to block even if I want to."

"She used to be so perfect . . . you had to break her."

"Are you going to fucking hit me or what?"

Fred threw his foot into John's chest, sending him into tree and to the ground. John climbed to his feet, a footprint stained on his shirt.

"What the hell?" John asked.

"I don't feel any better," Fred said.

"I thought you were going punch me!"

Fred shook his head. "We should call the church, tell them . . . something."

"You said you didn't want to call them."

"I don't want to talk to them. I don't want to talk to anybody anymore. Where the hell is that truck?" Fred stood in the middle of the road. To the left, a storm was gathering, lightning cracking in the distance. The ceremony and reception were inside, where people would be dry and happy, but the rain would still be falling down. It'd still be there, lingering above him. To the right, far beyond the trees and buildings, he could see the bell tower of the university where he met her.

"He's late," Fred said. "What the hell am I going to do?"

"He told us he was going to be," John said. "Look, just let me talk to Mary Ann, I'll work it out."

"You'd like that," Fred clenched his fists, "I'm sure you'd love to be alone with her, just the two of you, plenty of booze at the reception hall to make another mistake."

John opened his mouth to speak, but his words were masked by the honking horn of the tow truck. He dusted off his jacket, pulling it back on. Fred straightened his tie. The tow truck skidded to a halt in front of the car, backing up to angle the rig, it was setup with one long bar and a smaller three quarters of the way up, like an automotive crucifix. The driver stepped down from the cab onto the pavement, surveying the damage. He wore a black set of overalls with a white collar, and carried a clipboard with a book of auto parts for Volvo cars.

"Sorry it took so long, guys," the driver said, "had a family thing I had to take care of."

"Don't we all," Fred said.

"Getting hitched?" he asked.

"Looks that way."

"Let's see what I can do about it." The driver lifted the loose hood, examining the crack in the engine block.

"This is worse than you told me," he said, "couldn't tell from the outside how bad it is, but then again, you never can tell until it smacks you in the face."

Fred and John exchanged glances.

"Funny how that happens," Fred said.

"Can you fix it?" John asked.

"Well, you can fix just about anything," the driver said, flipping through the book, "the question is whether or not you want to fix it."

"How do you figure?" Fred asked.

"The engine's done, that's a fact," the driver said, "but it can be swapped out. Is this old girl worth doing a complete overhaul? Knowing she's in such bad shape, is it too much for you?"

Fred stood in front of the car and looked left, he looked right, and down at the hood.

"What do you think?" Fred asked the driver.

"Well, I'm a man of tradition myself," the driver said, "like to pick something and stick with it. But for you, I could see getting out before it's too late. Sticking with something like that is going to hurt you down the road."

Fred pushed the hood down.

"Do you do trade-ins?" Fred asked.

"Sure do," the driver said, "I can take you back to the lot and pick out a beauty after the wedding."

"Let's go," Fred said.

"Finally," John said, "let's get to the church already, they've got to be going bat shit insane."

"To the lot," Fred said, "let's go to the lot. See some of these other cars you're talking about."

"Fred," John tugged on his arm, "you're getting married."

Fred pulled away.

"You got anything a bit newer?" Fred asked, "maybe something in a cobalt blue?"

"Course I do," the driver hooked the car to the truck, "always another car on the lot, right?"

Fred climbed into the truck, crossing his arms as he turned away from the darkening storm. The driver patted John on the back on his way to the truck.

"Plenty of room to ride up there with us," the driver said.

"Go ahead," John said, "I'm walking, I've got to go the other way."

"Are you sure?"

"It's my fault, I shouldn't have waited."

"Not everyone's that great with cars."

"Right," John let his head hang low, "the car."

Judge's Comments

Like Hemingway's famous "Hills Like White Elephants," "Breakdown" is written predominantly in dialogue. Fred Wood and John Mayfall contend with the broken-down car in which they're supposed to be driving toward Fred's wedding, but are they talking about Fred's old Volvo, with which John may have tinkered, or Fred's fiancée, with whom John may have dallied? The soothsayer-of-a-tow-truck-driver serves to pose the ultimate question: fix the old clunker or trade her in?

First Place Essay

2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Explosive Realizations
Joshua Whicker

War is a life changing event. In the midst of our high ideals and lofty dreams we forget that every day, people around the world kill and die for what we take for granted. While we are deciding where to eat dinner, someone is carrying buckets of water home from the Euphrates River, while dodging bullets, because they don't have running water or indoor plumbing. As we speed down the freeway in our cars with radios blaring, we don't care that on the other side of the world people are killed for their personal life choices. My time in the deserts of the Anbar province showed me how precious time and the things we take for granted as Americans really are.

It was Christmas time in 2006 and I had just gotten back from the national training center in Death Valley, California. I was 19 and decidedly unimpressed with the idea of going to Iraq. When you join the Army Reserve, even in wartime, denial sets in immediately. Even the remote possibility that you will be sent to war is explained away by what amounts to very creative reasoning. I had been in the Army for two years and the possibility of deployment was more real every day. Rumors were that I would be sent Ramadi, Iraq within the next six months. On May 22, 2007, I was given orders to deploy in support of Operation Iraq Freedom.

On July 7, 2007 my platoon and I led a five vehicle convoy down route Mobile on our way to complete the clearance run of routes Golden, Pirates and Pacers. Clearance runs were designed to clear important routes of improvised explosive devices (ied's), enemy activity and any obstacle that might hinder mobility on or around that specific area. Due to the amount and frequency of enemy activity, our route was considered the most hostile at that time.

Turning off of Mobile, on to Golden, there was a small gas station on the right. The gas stations there were more like mud huts with, usually, a younger boy standing outside with several five gallon containers of gasoline. There were always lines of cars and a lot of civilian activity in this area which caused us to be especially vigilant when passing through. This was the third time we had been on a mission at all and the second time we had gone down this particular route.

The morning was a sweltering 142 degrees. We were all running on Red Bull and very little sleep, concentrating as hard as we could. As hot as it was outside, it was even hotter inside the two inch thick steel walls of the vehicles we operated. Sweat poured from under my helmet and soaked by clothing beneath my body armor, only emphasizing the futility of the air conditioner's efforts. The three hours we had been on mission thus far had been blessedly uneventful.

About two miles down Golden, there was an Iraqi Police checkpoint. These were Iraqi citizens who were trained by the U.S. Military to be policemen. They were trustworthy only most of the time. Their main job in this area was to check vehicle passengers going up and down the route for anything suspicious. They would check the names of everyone in the vehicle against a known terrorist list which included aliases as well as check the vehicle itself for any concealed weapons and bomb making materials. Some Iraqis only joined the IPs to get a weapon. Once they had the weapon they would desert, sell the machine gun and then reenlist in a different area in order to repeat the process. Some had been known to sell information to unfriendlies as well as prepare bomb holed for ied makers.

We had passed the checkpoint and were about two kilometers away when the bomb went off. It was about 500 pounds of home made explosive hidden under the road in a culvert. The massive cloud of dirt and debris created by the explosion obscured my view of the truck in front of me. All I could see was a solid sheet of sand for what seemed like minutes. The roaring report of the detonation punched through my thoughts of despair and amazement like they were glass. I was instantly brought out of the slow motion frame by frame my mind, to this day, imposes. When the dust settled, the vehicle balanced on its back tires for a split second. It came crashing back to the earth as the front axle partially disconnected. The three men in the truck narrowly escaped death that day. A large piece of asphalt struck the gunner in the hand, bruising it badly, and all three of the men suffered level two concussions.

The rest of us immediately went into action. We extracted the men from the vehicle, inspected the blast hole and hooked their truck up to the wrecker in a matter of minutes. We radioed command and asked for guidance. I was told we were no longer mission capable and to head back to Camp Ramadi to refit and recover. After a last look around the area we got in line, now with one less operational gun truck, and headed back toward base seeking a safe refuge. 150 meters back down the road the second bomb exploded taunting us with its exhalation. It completely destroyed the gun truck now in lead and gave the men inside a rattle.

I convulsed mentally as I considered the menagerie of possibilities about to unfold. For the second time that day, the vehicle immediately in front of me was destroyed by a bomb. I was in a daze and thoughts of hopelessness crept in with the smell of sulfur and hot metal. Were we going to be ambushed? Where was the enemy? Were we ever going to make it back to base? My hopes of sanctuary now as consumed as the explosive itself, I clenched my teeth and prepared for whatever may come.

The two explosions left us with one working gun truck, two disabled vehicles and only one wrecker. Leaving the second disabled truck there was not an option. The cost of the truck alone, not to mention the valuable intelligence it would provide to the enemy, prevented us from going so. That meant there was only one option; my truck was going to tow it.

My truck weighed 45 tons, was 16 feet tall and had no mounted weapon. Instead of a machine gun, we were outfitted with a 35 foot hydraulic arm to investigate and disarm ied's with. Because my truck was the only one big enough to haul it, save the wrecker, I

hooked the truck up to ours using a tow bar and chains. With a clouded and angry mind, I assisted in the investigation of the immediate area. Our search made brief by lack of able manpower, we again began the long trek home.

On the way back to base we passed the IP checkpoint again. The checkpoint and the surrounding village were deserted. Any hopes or thoughts of questioning the IP's or the townspeople were dashed as we were not in the situation nor did we have the able man power to investigate any further.

After this mission we were detailed to a different set of routes, which was standard operating procedure, and never returned to that part of route Golden. We never got to investigate further and never found answers to any of our questions.

When we got back to base, the injured men went to see the doctor and the rest of us debriefed the captain. Afterwards, we went to the dining facility and suffered through a long drawn out meal with an accompanying thoughtful silence. The fact that even though the day had gone horribly and three men were injured did not keep me from realizing it could have been much worse. Before going to bed that night I called home and talked to my family. I didn't tell them what happened but simply had normal conversations. I didn't want them to know how much danger I was in or how terrifying the entire experience really was. As I told them how much I loved them and couldn't wait to come home I promised myself that I would never look at life the same way again. We had only been in Iraq for three weeks.

Even though I have witnessed many explosions and caused a few, this day always stands out in my mind. It was the first time any of us had experienced anything like it and we considered it a rite of passage. Everyone injured recovered just fine and were back on mission two weeks later. No one suffered from any lasting damage, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, but instead walked away from that experience with a new appreciation for life and the small things in it. Every day I remained in Iraq I renewed my vow. Appreciating my life moment by moment helped me come to terms with the reality that I was in.

I often reflect on my experiences in Iraq and this day in particular. As I ride in that truck again, in my mind's eye, I am reminded of why I made that promise to myself. I think that, perhaps, the highest ideal and loftiest dream is to appreciate what we have and to savor every moment of living we are able to experience. Though I may never forget the sounds of the explosions or the menacing storms of debris, they will always whisper "live consciously" into my mind.

Judge's Comments

To artfully, honestly render the wartime experience has been an aim of Western writers since Homer first gave us *The Iliad*, and the author of "Explosive Realizations," despite the intimidatingly long line of war stories well told, succeeds in capturing the drama, the

newness and the timelessness of our current wars waged in the Middle East without glorifying them. Iraq, he reminds us, is a place where "someone is carrying buckets of water home from the Euphrates River, while dodging bullets, because they don't have running water or indoor plumbing." Conscious observations like this one abound in "Explosive Realizations," and to "live consciously" in a mind-numbing world -- a world that includes wars that are both mindless and mindful, often from one moment to the next -- is the realization, alluded to in the title, that the narrator comes to. It is a realization not easily translated into narrative prose, and yet the author has not only done masterfully so, he's gone one step further: he writes with conscience.

Second Place Essay

2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Visiting Dachau
Taylor VanTol

Every so often, we are faced with an experience so touching that it takes our heart into its poor, trembling hands, and crushes it to pieces. I met with this particular sentiment three summers ago when I toured Dachau concentration camp.

I had been learning about the horrors of World War II all my life; we touched on it briefly in grade school, did an entire unit on it in the eighth grade, and delved deeper yet during my sophomore year of high school, where we read detailed articles and watched Schindler's List. But nothing could have prepared me for the things I saw and felt upon visiting the location of it all. It was like placing foot into the scene of a nightmare, something that wasn't meant to exist.

The tour was part of our itinerary. Months earlier, I had been nominated by my vocal instructor to travel Europe as part of a choir. We would perform in six different countries, Britain, France, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. As Germany was last in line, I had already been exposed to a great deal of European culture. I'd seen Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, le Chateau de Chillon - everything was so vividly picturesque, so charming. I couldn't help but contemplate the beauty of the Austrian Alps, and the freshness of the mountain air, as I endured the grueling ten-hour bus ride to our final stop. Though I was well aware of the seriousness involved, it took everything I had to keep from bouncing out of my seat; this was yet another adventure to describe to my jealous friends, and I couldn't wait to arrive.

Stepping off the bus onto the colorless gravel, my enthusiasm left me. It was replaced by an overpowering anxiety, a sort of nervousness. I began asking myself, Is this place I want to see? Of course, I couldn't turn back. But the atmosphere alone was making me uneasy; people had suffered here, had died here. Those in our group commenced to file through the iron gates of the front entrance, and I followed, timidly, all too aware of the fact that hundreds of thousands of prisoners had done the same many years before - under very different circumstances. I tried to imagine what they might have been thinking, but realized I could not. No prior experience of mine would allow me such empathy. I waived this aside, and began to examine my surroundings.

We were standing in a large, empty square. The ashen gravel had followed us in - it was all we could see for three-hundred yards in any direction, with the exception of a large building directly to our right. This building looked to be more modern, or else recently restored, and we soon discovered that it was the central museum of Dachau. In the distance, engulfing the vacant square, were many smaller buildings, appearing much older than the refurbished museum. I guessed at what they were, but was in no hurry to verify my assumption. A wide path, its end place unknown, cut between them down the middle; it

intersected the far border of the square, and was outlined by countless poplar trees. The wind blew mildly, coursing the columns of viridian leaves. I shuddered.

We were permitted by our directors to explore as we liked, providing we met back in the square after two hours. I resolved to start with the museum. Inside, all the history of Dachau and its role in the Holocaust came luridly to life. Gruesome photographs lined the walls depicting various methods of torture and piles of emaciated bodies. Others were more personal, though just as horrific; these portrayed a grief-ridden child, or the weary countenance of a dying woman. One particular picture showed the tormented expression of a male prisoner as he endured some type of "medical experiment." The agony in his face turned my stomach, and I tried my hardest to fight back the tears that would come anyway. Little by little, I made my way through the building, studying sculptures and blueprints and video displays. On one wall I found magnified sheet music for a song written during confinement, entitled Dachaulied - the Dachau Song. It was an hour before I made my way out of the museum, and I had been affected more deeply in that time than I had been my entire life. My cheeks were not yet dry, and my stomach was in knots - but I would soon leave here, I would return home. Some of these people had never seen home again.

I knew it was high time that I make my way across the square to the small, dilapidated structures on the other side. I did so, and on approaching found that my speculation had been correct: these were the barracks, the former quarters of Dachau inmates. They once housed a population of exiles, and all of the misery, loneliness, and disease which accompanied them. I composed by emotions, and proceeded to walk through one of the doors. What I had been expecting, I can't recall; in any case, it was not what I saw inside the building. In fact, I didn't see much of anything. There were only a few rows of "beds," crafted like shelves, situated on a wooden floor, illuminated hazily by four dusty windows. It was nearly peaceful and yet, there had been relentless, excruciating pain here. There had been death here. How had the anguish faded away so soon? Why did I feel at ease? I stepped out, still contemplating.

Some of my friends called to me. They were heading down the mysterious pathway through the middle of the barracks, and wanted me to join. We followed the path for ten minutes before coming to the end, which was less of an end than another beginning: we met with three smaller pathways, all branching in different directions. The sign for the left-most path indicated that it would lead to the crematoriums, and, while the notion was unsettling, we agreed that these would be worth seeing.

We learned that we would have to go through the gas chamber in order to view the crematorium. I felt, initially, that this would not be a problem for me - I had spent the past hour and a half familiarizing myself with the grisly details of this place. I entered the first part of the building, wherein the prisoners would have undressed. Crossing this room, I came to a darkened doorway, and I stopped. I couldn't make myself more any further. It was as if I had come face to face with an impassable wall, an invisible boundary marked only by shadows.

I stood in the entry to the shower room, the gas chamber. A friend of mine came up behind me, urging me to go forward, but I was afraid, and I told him so. I was afraid of the overwhelming air of suffering. This was nothing like the barracks; I could feel death here. He assured me that it would be alright and, taking me by the arm, led me swiftly through the dark room. I struggled to ignore the eeriness, the pulsing in my chest. Once I was through, though I felt safe again, the tension lingered. I didn't want to say anything; it would have felt wrong to talk, to laugh, after what I had just encountered. I've never believed in ghosts, but there was a haunting there, one that sent chills to my every nerve. It remained in me as we made our way back to the square, back to our directors and the bus. It's with me now as I write this.

I developed a new perspective that day. The terrible event that I had seen dissected in textbooks, embellished on television, became for me an unforgettable reality. Those prisoners and their stories left with me on the bus ride to our hotel, to the airport, on the plan back to Michigan. They were no longer "people," but acquaintances, friends, the names and faces. I may never be able to empathize with them, for I have never, and will never, endure the things that they endured; but surely, I have gained a deeper understanding of their afflictions and, with it, greater compassion.

Judge's Comments

"Visiting Dachau" does for the reader what was done to the writer, takes her on a vivid tour of the Nazi concentration camp, and, vicariously, the reader is likewise overwhelmed by the severity, the tragedy, of the scene. But there are contrasts at work that make for a freeing feeling while reading. One is the beautiful prose -- thoughtful, artful -- that this writer evokes in order to bring the death camp "luridly to life." Another is the painstaking attention to narrative and how best to tell a heartfelt story. The last, and most important, is the perspective of the narrator: humble and horrified yet composed and courageous enough to not only bear witness but to document that witnessing and in a way that does some immeasurable justice to the memory of the millions lost.

Third Place Essay

2010 LAND Creative Writing Competition

In the Moment
Kelly Crittenden

I walk. A dusting of snow shimmers on the ground, on the brittle leaves crackling with each footstep. Somewhere in the West, in a grey-blue sky tinged with faded pink, the sun disappears below the horizon. The vehicles sit coldly in a row next to the straight wooden fence, one side of the pasture fencing that fades in geometrical crisscrosses to the property line. The Oak and Maple trees stand tall and sturdy; handfuls of remaining leaves cling to their branches. I watch my breath as it curls upward and quickly disappears. The sky overhead is just dark enough to reveal faint flickers of starlight. The big, brown barn looms ahead of me; snow glitters in the yellow light from its windows and the colorful Christmas lights decorating the main entrance. I pause briefly at the door.

The warm air of the barn envelops me, and I breathe deeply of the faint smells of hay and leather. The wide aisle spans the length of the barn before me, and people hurry here and there, some carrying saddles, some with horses' heavy winter blankets over their shoulders, some hauling water buckets, some leading horses to their stalls, some brushing the fuzzy winter coats of the horses quietly standing cross-tied in the aisle. Dust hangs in the air. I hear a horse's whinny, the clip clop of hooves on concrete, the many exchanges of conversations. I rub my hands quickly together. It is a moment I love: to feel, but momentarily resist, the sort of magnetism drawing me into the flurry of activity; to be almost, but not quite, swept up in the hustle and bustle of the barn. Tonight it is a blast of cold air upon my back, as the barn door opens and slams shut behind me, that jolts me from surreal milliseconds. I hear a quiet voice say, "Excuse me," and I step aside as a small girl moves past me. I catch a glimpse of anticipation in her bright eyes and hardly notice her wheelchair.

I follow. I recognize the girl navigating down the aisle ahead of me. Jenna comes to Equest Center for Therapeutic Riding every week on the night I volunteer. She is one of about one hundred and fifty children and adults with disabilities who gain physical, mental, and emotional benefits from weekly therapeutic horseback riding lessons at Equest. Equest is a member center of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), which promotes and supports therapeutic riding and facilitates and licenses therapeutic riding centers throughout the United States and Canada. Currently there are nearly eight hundred centers serving more than forty-two thousand individuals with various types and degrees of disabilities. I say hellos to the volunteers and scratch horses' noses as I walk toward the gate to the indoor arena at the end of the aisle.

The arena is my favorite place. Warm air from the heaters in the rafters blows into the large ring. The paneled exterior walls are cluttered with mirrors, a miniature basketball hoop, and colorful, laminated objects stuck onto Velcro strips. Two barrels in the middle of the arena divide its length in thirds, and, about five yards from one long side, five orange

cones squat in a line. In the corner to my left, the mounting block waits patiently for more riders to climb its three steps. A lesson is just finishing: one of the two instructors calls out the direction to line up, the volunteers lead their riders' horses toward where I stand at the front of the arena, and the instructors one-by-one help the riders dismount. One boy about ten years old, Aaron, shuffles past his horse Dakota's face, pauses, slowly reaches his small hand up to rub the white star on her forehead, and then leans to kiss her nose. I smile. It is a moment I love: to see happiness. I watch Aaron as he leaves the arena, and then I again notice Jenna.

She is no longer in her wheelchair. She sits on her horse, Painter, waiting as an instructor adjusts her feet in the stirrups. I watch as if I do not watch her every week. I watch as if I do not see every rider overcome some obstacle - whether physical, mental, or emotional - in climbing the steps of the mounting block and riding horseback. I watch as if I never have. Her legs hang limply, but she sits up tall, balancing in the saddle, her hands in little fists around the reins. Her face is emotionless in timid concentration, but I know, as she senses the first movement in Painter's muscles as he takes his first step away from the mounting block, that she feels the same flutter of excitement, the same inner smile, the same inexpressible happiness of horseback riding that I know so well. She is on top of the world. "Kelly, can you sidewalk," interrupts the instructor's voice, and I see her motioning me, as usual, toward Jenna.

Jenna peeks down at me as I walk beside her right leg, and I say hi. She quickly looks away, her face unchanged; I smile to myself and look ahead. After we make several laps around the arena, the instructor hands Jenna a laminated pumpkin and tells her to put it somewhere on the wall. Jenna grasps the pumpkin, I see her heels bounce ever so lightly as she clicks her tongue, and we walk to the pumpkin patch on the wall that she points out. "Good job, Jen," I say, as she leans to stick the object to the Velcro strip. She sits up, glances somewhat suspiciously at my hand patting her knee, and looks at my face, her blue eyes looking straight into mine. She smiles, and I smile back. It is a moment I love: to see confidence in the face of a tiny girl grinning down at you. We weave through cones, and then Jenna shoots some hoops.

After Jenna's lesson finishes, I work in the barn during the next half hour. I check the lesson schedule, and then lead Challenger from his stall to the aisle, clipping crossties to his halter. I bring his grooming bucket from the feed room, where each horse's totes are stacked on shelves, and start brushing his thick, white winter coat with the rubber curry comb. Next, I brush off the dirt that has come to the surface using his body brush, and then I use a soft brush on his face and legs. One by one, I pick out his hooves. As I walk to the tack room, I once again look at the schedule to see what saddle he needs. In the tack room, all the bridles are hanging in two rows along one wall, and the saddles are numbered and stored on saddle racks. I find the number ten saddle and grab several different length girths and a black saddle pad; Challenger does not need a bridle for this lesson, because his rider is not independent. I walk down the aisle to where Challenger stands, patiently eyeing the organized chaos around him. I flip the saddle pad onto his back and place the saddle on it, and then decide on a girth and tighten it slowly. Even so, Challenger jerks his head around.

"You're fine, silly," I tell him matter-of-factly, rolling my eyes; this is one of his individual quirks, and, as with those of other horses, volunteers learn to not make it a big issue.

I glance at the clock: ten minutes to the start of the next lesson. A younger volunteer who I have seen only a few times is trying to adjust a surcingle - a leather strap with handles that is used in place of a saddle - on the horse she is getting ready. Many riders, especially those with physical disabilities or severe mental handicaps, use a surcingle, which allows them to more closely feel the motion of the horse and also have something to hold on to for balance. I walk up to her and ask if she wants some help. She quickly agrees. It is a moment I love: to have the opportunity to do what I love to help others, and also to use my knowledge to help younger or less experienced volunteers as they, too, help others. I hear the horses from the previous lesson clip clopping down the back aisle, and the instructors shout from the arena, "Horses can come out!" I unclip the cross ties and lead Challenger into the arena, and three other volunteers do the same with the other horses being used in this lesson. I know who is on the schedule to ride Challenger. Her name is Jill, and she has not gotten on a horse in months. The horse she used to ride spooked during a lesson; it was not a dangerous spook, and Jill, like usual, had two sidewalkers to help her stay centered on her horse, but, in a rare freakish split second, Jill fell. Every week, I lead Challenger up to the mounting block; every week, I watch Jill come into the arena and shrink back in fear.

Jill walks into the ring. She walks with her head tilted up, her eyes staring absently, and constantly shifts her weight back and forth from foot to foot, her upper body rotating from side to side, right, left, right, left, right, left. I wonder if she is thinking something. I wonder if she knows what thoughts are. Jill's caretaker guides her to the mounting block, where an instructor takes her hand and helps her up the steps. "Can we have Challenger, please," comes the characteristic request. I look at Challenger - he has been starting to partially nap beside me - and lead him to the mounting block, guiding him as close as possible. I keep Challenger still, but take a quick glance at Jill: right, left, right, left. The instructor is calmly, slowly encouraging her to get on her white horse. Suddenly, urgently, the instructor says, "Walk on!" Intuitively, I know why, and I walk forward, hoping Jill's sidewalkers are paying attention. After a few steps, amidst quiet cheers and triumphant smiles, I once again glance back: Jill sits straight in the saddle, and, though her eyes are still distant, I think she somehow senses that the cheers are for her. There is a tightening in my throat, my eyes sting, and I smile. It is a moment I love: to see courage. Sometimes insecurities consume us, shortcomings immobilize us, and fears overcome us, - if we let them. Or we stand to our feet, stand even if everyone is watching, stand strong with a courage we did not know we had, stand despite the risks. We stand and smile. We smile, and we think, as we are reminded time and time again, how much we love this moment: to triumph. I imagine Jill smiling.

Judge's Comments

The generosity of spirit inherent in "In the Moment" is outshined only by the sparkling quality of the prose. This lightness -- of art, of attitude -- helps evoke the caring, careful scene at Equest Center for Therapeutic Riding, where volunteers who've attained a high

level of equestrian confidence and mastery convey those skills to "children and adults with disabilities who gain physical, mental, and emotional benefits from weekly therapeutic horseback riding lessons." In the attentive hands of the author, the characters here who come vividly to life -- some two-legged, some four-legged and some, sadly, who've lost the use of legs -- do so with a grace that is both beautifully life-affirming and boldly death-defying.