

**Liberal Arts Network for Development
Creative Writing Journal
2012**

2012 LAND Creative Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

“Drowning”

Author: Lisa Ulman

Mentor: Dennis Hinrichsen

Lansing Community College

“Red-Eyed Flight Arrival: Soldier in a
Flag-Draped Casket, Dover Air Force Base,
Delaware, 2005”

Author: Margaret Anderson

Mentor: Teresa Scollen

Northwestern Michigan College

“Old Ol' English”

Author: Kwame James

Mentor: Gretchen Kline

Muskegon Community College

Fiction

“Unclean Fish”

Author: Kaitlyn Linsley

Mentor: Dennis Hinrichsen

Lansing Community College

“Rite of Passage”

Author: Corey Maxedon

Mentor: Janice Zerfa

Lake Michigan Community College

“A Change of View”

Author: Abby Jo Tongue

Mentor: John Pahl

Northwestern Michigan College

Essay

“Some Secrets Must Be Kept”

Author: Stacey Glass

Mentor: Todd McCann

Bay De Noc College

“Waiting for the Lights: Sauk Theatre”

Author: Makayla Eppel

Mentor: Kathy Burk

Jackson Community College

“This Land Was Made For You and Me”

Author: Jenna Lynn Hunt

Mentor: Carol Finke

Kirtland Community College

2010 LAND Creative Writing Judges

Poetry

Jay Nicorvo

Western Michigan University

Fiction

Dustin Hoffman

Western Michigan University

Essay

Marin Heinritz

Kalamazoo College

First Place Poetry
2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Drowning
Dennis Hinrichsen

Leaving a wedding in Texas, headed home,
My father drove through the night.
His motivation not one of thrift or efficiency,
He was on trial and
Forbidden to leave Michigan.

His face glowed green in the light of the dash.
"Did you hear about that guy in Detroit?"
I heard him ask my mother.
She struggled awake and shook her head.
"He drove his van off the pier with his whole family inside."

As good as dead to me, I haven't
Seen my father in twenty years.
But as I drive through the moonlit countryside,
My own dash glowing orange before me,
I gasp for breath at the memory of that night.

The quiet roar of the engine in my ear,
My heart and mind racing as I
Lay on the floor of the van, air conditioning
Swirling around me and wishing
We'd already crossed the Mississippi.

Second Place Poetry
2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Red-Eyed Flight Arrival: Soldier in a Flag-Draped Casket, Dover Air Force Base, Delaware,
2005

Margaret Anderson

Did you wish on a star that was far above
hell storms of thirsty bombs and bullets gripping near

that you would come home to Tennessee
to the twinkle of your toddler's eyes

instead of

the brass of the polygon
tipped general's rank

glimmering in the dawned tears
of those near?

The bugler blows and taps---blows and taps-blows and taps
death of the day

as the sun explodes above
the silver wings at dover
reveille plays.

Third Place Poetry
2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Old Ol' English
Kwame James

'Tis due to love of the old bard, Shakespeare,
or else the Bible, as reduced by James --
perhaps the quill of Donne (of course, Marvell)
addeth a scratch or two to the refrain --
that English, infamously bastard tongue,
itself resoundeth in mine ear most pure
when passed, as through the loins of time's long trials,
in semblance of the forms its fathers bore.
Though, as an ever-weaving tapestry,
the braided beanstalk of its fam'ly tree
incorporates, these days, an industry
of revolutions in publicity,
it twines into the sky around a core
of texts and tricks we'll play forevermore.

First Place Fiction

2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Unclean Fish
Kaitlyn Linsley

The stained-glass Gethsemane, the resurrection scene glowing from the morning sun: I always preferred to sit with my parents on Sundays for the adult mass service, between those two neon windows.

But like I said, Father: I was hungry. I would always forget to eat breakfast before mass. (Is this the kind of thing you meant by asking for "my story"?). So most of the time I just went to the Sunday school class with the other kids my age, because there would always be a snack time-usually graham crackers and grape juice, sort of like a full serving's worth of communion. (Even after my First Holy Communion, I wasn't satisfied with the Eucharist; felt like it didn't give a long enough time to stimulate me). During that snack break, I would dunk my cracker (bite by bite) into the staining juice. For me, the process of eating has always brought a certain degree of focus. So that when we sat around the table for lunch after mass, I could listen intently to any of my mother's passing thoughts on the service. I would dip my crusted bread into the minestrone (I never wanted anything as it was, unadorned). And at the time, this ritual helped me to focus on the process of eating and on whatever my thoughts while I chewed, while I fed this deep desire in me to coat things before I considered them.

And it's no wonder that I'm the weight that I am. And it doesn't help that my work doesn't involve a lot of movement. . . Yeah, I'm an arborist, so no hard labor or anything: I roam around trees to spray some with the necessary pesticides, to X off others in neon spray-paint (the ones to be downed), that sort of thing. So it was actually with a landscaping friend of mine that this weekend's food poisoning episode began.

*

And I promise this will help explain what brought me here yesterday, like you were asking, to a church for the first time in 26 years. No, Father, I actually haven't observed Lent since high school. So that's why the food poisoning this weekend-from my single day of incidental observance-was so - I don't know. Because Thursday afternoon, when this friend and I were at the buffet place on Ash street . . . well, Father, since I have not been a practicing Catholic in so long, I had forgotten that it was the last day of Lent-which meant they put out the last of their fish for their Lent special. Normally I always go for the taco meat (and if I were married, I'm sure my wife would warn me against it), but this time I figured I should take advantage of the cleaner meat while it was there the last day.

So I started with the two smallest tilapia fillets to the side of their designated metal dish on the buffet island. They were heavily crusted with oregano bread crumbs. My first bite, though, was more focused on how different the pale, flaking flesh inside tasted-so different from what I remembered, Father. I couldn't even split my attention with this friend-of-mine's talk about his new favorite pest deterrent. So before we left, I went back to the tub

of tilapia. Immediately I noticed a new single fillet in the back corner that, for whatever reason, had not been buttered or crusted. I delicately grabbed it with the tongs and dropped it onto three layers of those thin, brown napkins from the metal canister, wrapping that up to place into my cup holder as I drove out.

*

I was up until 2:00 A.M. that night finishing preparations for the next day's presentation on pesticide application. When I went to leave at 6:00 A.M., Father-a six-hour drive to the conference in Ada where I'd be the afternoon presenter-I was so caught up in boxing up the necessary disks and handouts together that I didn't think about breakfast. So once I merged onto the highway, I remembered about the fish I had forgotten to take inside to refrigerate. So I started eating it from the napkins like a hot pocket, you know-not even thinking about how warm it would have gotten in my sunbathing truck the other day-because I assumed the fish was fully cooked and everything.

*

Well, after two hours my stomach felt completely sideways. I couldn't wait for the next rest stop 12 miles down, so I pulled off to the side-barely any drivers around at this point (you know about that stretch between here and Ada)-and I took the supplies out of that box I had packed. I stumbled into the green woods with box in hand, thinking that it would be something to empty my stomach into. But when I got a little more than 30 feet in, I realized how ridiculous the box was because there was open ground everywhere. And in fact I had stopped at the base of the largest tree within sight, an oak in a bunch of maples. And it was just like some instances where I've had to exterminate: a hole was dug at its base.

I bent down to tap my knuckles against the roots, above the hole there. The sound was empty; the critter had moved on. I kneeled over the hole, my head meeting it square; I saw nothing but immeasurable black. And I think my body recognized it could purge at this point because my stomach immediately began to contract. After thirty seconds or so, everything began to pour out in spurts. The bottom of the hole slowly lightened until I realized that it wasn't one of the bowl-shaped holes I'm used to but rather deeper: a tunnel. My vomit was dripping down a tunnel that curved forward-the end of which I could not see-toward the base, the mouth of that tree.

Suddenly I was overcome by this odd sensation that the tunnel was a duplicate of my own throat, which was now burning as if I had swallowed the dirt. And as the taste still painted my throat, I imagined the taste from the perspective of the tunnel's throat-the oak's throat-being fed my filth. And I could hear the blood pumping past my ears at the thought of this, and - I don't know why, Father, but I then took that box, quickly ripped the four flaps off of the sides, and slapped them over the hole in two pairs of Xs, which looked like a sort of star. And as I made my way back to the truck, I tried not to look back toward the star. I called to cancel my presentation, and then I remembered it was Good Friday.

*

Over the next two days I ate nothing. Well, I was done with the vomiting by the end of that first day and could have started eating again, but food just lost its appeal. I drank lots of water. And I realized that the longer I went without the food, the more accustomed I became to not eating. So it was by the time it got dark on Good Friday that I started thinking about Jesus as he was between the crucifixion and the resurrection-I mean, that he

obviously wasn't eating anything during that time. And there was the long fasting in the desert, yes, but it was just this idea that – I don't know – that during the 3-day period he was becoming either less dead or more alive?

And even after he rose from the dead, he didn't physically need the food, right? Yeah, because I remembered this idea that when he asked the disciples for food and they gave him fish, he was just proving that he was just as real as before, just as alive-more alive, yes. And, Father, this was all kind of hitting me, like – well, I was sitting there with this new thought that maybe the fish had purged me in a way that I wouldn't really need food. That I would eat just to prove to everyone that I was more alive.

*

So that's what brought me here yesterday for the Easter Sunday potluck. To prove something, I thought (to whom, I'm not sure). And now you know why I was pausing in front of the fish when you came to welcome me and introduce yourself. And I really appreciate that you offered to talk today, Father, to hear my story. But I'm realizing that I have not as much something to prove as I just have something on my mind.

You see, I've never been one to think beyond the chewing; I always thought I just needed to constantly chew. But that tilapia fillet stopped my chewing, Father. It taught me to thirst: to focus on the tightness in my throat-the kind that surfaces when we have been shamed, our habits found out as not providing us what we thought they could. And you know I'm not here for a formal confession, Father, but I do think the shame played a small part in what brought me. I mean, the fact that I've never really had any major convictions; I've just never watched myself closely enough to recognize when I've done something wrong. But I do have smaller realizations now and then, like at the tree: because when I began to vomit, it felt like . . . sort of like I was poisoning the tree with what poisoned me? (And what all in this world have I marked with the worst of me?) But then I realized that at least the oak I found was in a private place, and that it was already in a polluted world while standing tall. So no matter when I had needed to empty my stomach or what I needed to empty it of, the tree would stand the same when I had gone.

And then the poisoning was a blessing, in my case, wasn't it? But I know that if I were to intentionally try to get food poisoning now-to make the conditions for another awakening-type experience-it would be cheating. It has to be decided for me: it has to be decided when I am ripe for cleansing. And I can wait for that. I can wait because being fed just isn't being cleansed; so I will continue feeding myself, but only so as to say that I am awake and waiting for the unclean fish.

Because growing up, I always saw Christ as the clean fish, you know-that he was supposed to offer this constant stream of sustenance, comfort. But now, Father, I'm not so sure that I had it right. Because what I've needed is what happened to me this weekend: the way my method of eating-of thinking, of paying attention-was disrupted, turned around. It's about those contractions I had, isn't it? Not the chewing, but the way I felt as though my body were being squeezed like grape skins for wine, a flaking flesh: as though, Father, my body . . . a flux, a transformation . . . were joining Christ's in the process of the Eucharist.

So it got me thinking about that place where the contractions occurred. And I was wondering, Father, whether you could be for me like that oak I stumbled upon, reeling me in by my stumbling? Whether, even before that, the church could be the woods along my way. And whether, Father, the initial reeling – the one that worked from the inside – whether that was and could be Jesus Christ. Whether I could find in him my unclean fish.

Second Place Fiction

2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Rite of Passage
Corey Maxedon

The windshield wipers thrummed in unison, keeping time for the symphony that nature was busy conducting outside. The thunder boomed like artillery. The lightning flashed like fire. The rain fell on the roof of the car like the sound of thousands of brass casings falling on cement. The battle in the sky raged all around the car yet the world seemed oblivious—save for the boy in the back seat. The boy listened, and heard. The boy watched and saw.

His mother sat behind the wheel in silence, seemingly oblivious to the world around her. The passenger seat sat empty, and while the boy could have chosen to sit there he preferred the back seat. The front seat, though it sat empty, was his father's seat. He had sat there naught but an hour ago on their ride to the airport, and though only one hour had gone by the world already seemed a darker place.

As the boy sat watching and listening he thought of the words that his father had spoken to him before getting on the plane.

"Remember it's not that I want to go, I have to do. It's my duty," said his father, "you have to be the man of the house while I'm gone. I'll be back soon enough, a year isn't so long is it? Be brave son." Then, with a sad smile, he hugged his son shouldered his rucksack, and boarded the plane with the rest of the passengers.

The boy had wanted to yell out to his father, to ask him what it meant to be a man. To ask him how he could be a man when he was only ten, and had never felt brave in his life. But all he could do was smile the same sad smile, and wave goodbye to his father.

Suddenly the car hit a pot-hole in the road, and the boy's mind was brought back to the present once more. Finally the boy spoke.

"Mom," he asked, "How does someone become a man?"

The mother looked back at her son's reflection through the rear-view-mirror, and looked at him as though she had never seen him before in her life. Studying all the details, as if she were an artist memorizing him in his red baseball cap, blue and yellow striped t-shirt, and torn jeans, with his small frame, blonde hair, and sky blue eyes so she could paint him later. After a pause she turned her eyes back to the road.

"What is it sweetie?" She asked through a strained smile.

"Well," began the boy slowly, "I was wondering what makes someone a man. I mean I know you have to be older to drive, but how old do you have to be to be a man? Does it just happen one day?"

"Well dear the government thinks you need to be 18 to do something's, and 21 to do other things, but people used to become a man when they felt they were ready." She said sounding obviously relieved that he hadn't asked a more difficult, or worrisome, question. "A long time ago the Indian tribes that lived near us believed that someone had to undergo a rite of passage to prove that they were a man."

"But... what did they do to prove that they were men? Did they have to do all their chores?" The boy replied, starting to think of the mountain of dishes that awaited them upon their arrival home.

"Not exactly." Replied the mother. "Most of the time they had to take a trip deep into the forest, and build a fire there while keeping watch. Waiting to have a vision, or a dream that would come to them and tell them that they were a man. Afterwards they would return to their village as men."

"Oh," replied the boy.

The mother soon returned to her driving pleased with herself that she had told a good story that, with any luck, had taken the boy's mind to a world of adventure and fun- as opposed to the dark and gloomy one in which they lived.

The boy returned to looking out the window and thought about what his mother had said. He had hoped that he would just grow up one day and be a man, if all he had to do was wait he wouldn't have to worry about being a man while his father was gone. After all, who could fault him for not being 18 when his father returned. But if there was a way to become a man sooner, he felt that he had to try to live up to his father's expectations. If he could become a man by going through a "rite of passage" then he felt he owed it to his father to try.

Soon they arrive home, and the boy's mother went into the kitchen to start a stew for dinner, and the boy went to his room. A short while later he wandered into the kitchen to make a sandwich, but his mother offered to make it for him. As he sat on a chair in the table he listened, and heard. He watched, and saw. He saw the redness of his mothers eyes. He heard the television in the background talking about a surge of some kind, and once more his thoughts drifted towards what his father and mother had said to him about being a man.

When his sandwich was made he thanked his mother and returned with it once more to his room. The rain had stopped, the sky had cleared, yet the vibrant colors of his room still seemed as dull as they had in the gloom of the storm. Yet when he looked out his window at the forest in his backyard, he saw the bright green colors of spring. It took all of his strength and determination to get his backpack from the hall closet, and to begin packing for his

journey. He put warm blankets in the large pouch, matches from his father's grill in the front small pouch, and carefully wrapped the sandwich his mother made for him in the small side compartment.

His preparation complete he listened, and heard. He watched and saw. He heard his mother cry herself to sleep. He saw the sun set in his corner of the world, and watched the shadows make their stealthy approach across the sky that heralded the coming darkness. He heard the hall clock chime midnight, the sound carrying through the stillness of the night. He saw the path that was laid before him. With slow, deliberate steps, forward he walked towards the back door and with all that he was, and all that he hoped to be he turned the knob, and stepped out into the darkness.

The night was cool, and a gust of wind lazily blew a leaf past the boy's feet. The dew glistened on the grass and shined like silver in the light of the half moon. With steadfast resolution the boy continued to walk towards the tree-line and soon found himself at the entrance to the forest. He had never been this close to it without his father with him, and he had never been here this late at night. He froze, terrified of what might happen if he went back or if he continued on. He wanted to go back, to sleep in his own bed, to be warm, to be safe once more. But his father's words rang in his mind, "I don't want to go, I have to go. It's my duty." and with that memory the boy pushed forward into the forest.

The path that was easy to find at its start began to grow faint. The light of the moon was dimmer here, and the trail grew darker. As the boy pushed on he felt more lost. He knew his answers were here somewhere, but what seemed to be a single minded task grew more complex- it split and divided and became more difficult to see. In no time at all the boy was lost and as realization of this dawned on him he started to panic.

Quickly and wildly now he ran blindly through the forest. He took the left fork in the path, then the right, then down a center trail, and so on until finally he fell exhausted in a clearing deep within the forest. The moon had set now, the only light came from the millions of stars that looked like little droplets of silver on a midnight-blue canvas. Here in this hallowed spot all the trails in the forest ended, yet here they also began.

The boy listened, and the boy heard. He heard the world around him. He heard the sound of the forest and listened to it as it spoke. Though it couldn't speak through words, it spoke through its existence. The trails that started off clear and easy to follow grew fainter and split. Just like one option leads to another, just your original purpose becomes fainter and harder to follow. How it's easy to panic when you become lost, and to push blindly ahead without thinking. How when you reach the end of your journey you realize that it's only just begun, just as in the clearing the paths not only end, but begin again.

The boy watched, and the boy saw. He watched the night's sky high above him. Onward it stretched into infinity. Seeing the stars raised an infinite amount of questions within the boy's mind, yet the stars revealed no answers to them. However that in itself was an answer in its own way. He saw the light return to the sky, and the sun rising in its magnificent glory in the east, and saw the shadows of fear and doubt melt away before the light.

Finally he understood. There was no way for him to be a man, because no one ever truly is. Though the path may be rough, the night may long, and in the end you may end up right back where you started, you have to try to be a man. It's not that we want to go on this journey, but we have to. It's our duty.

Once again the forest seemed to speak to him. The tall pines swayed in the wind as though shaking their trunks in the affirmative. The wind kept blowing, stronger and louder. It felt like fingers reaching through his hair ruffling it in the gentle way that his father used to...

Suddenly, he was back in the terminal. His father was kneeling next to him, but seemed larger than life in his camouflage fatigues. He was running his hand through the boy hair and ruffling it gently.

"So do you think you can do that for me sport? Be the man of the house while I'm gone?" Asked the boy's father with a gentle smile.

The boy looked up at his father, now certain of himself and with the answer that his mind had given him. "No Dad," he said, "I'm not sure that I can, But I'll try."

The father looked at him slightly startled at the profoundness of his son's statement, but then laughed and said, "Son, I think that's the best answer you could have given me. Remember that I'm proud of you, and I'll be home before you know it."

Third Place Fiction

2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

A Change of View
John Pahl

The smell of dank, musty, rotting leaves filled my nostrils. I flicked on my blinker and turned off the soggy, leaf-covered street into Evalynne's driveway. The pavement was wet, but there was not a leaf in sight-not on her driveway, nor on the recently-clipped, plush green lawn. I gave my horn a little tap, turned off the radio, and ran my fingers through my greying hair. A minute later, Evalynne was squeezing out the burgundy doors between two huge planters full of vibrant red mums, trying to keep her Chihuahuas from escaping. She clicked down the brick walkway and around the back of the car, throwing open the rusty passenger door. She paused while I hurriedly scooped my pile of papers off of the passenger seat and tossed them into the back, then slid in.

"You're wearing that?" I exclaimed as she wiggled out of her lavender rain-coat. She sported a white, starched, lacy blouse and pressed kakis. An elaborate silver necklace with glass hand-blown beads dangled around her neck, and two matching baubles danced on their chains below her earlobes, directly below her unnaturally brown hair. "Now's the time to change into something a little more casual if you want. I'll wait here for you."

"Oh, I'll be fine," she airily replied, flipping down the sunshade and raising one thin, perfectly arched eyebrow as she critically inspected the faint wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

"Okay," I reluctantly replied as I backed down the driveway and turned back onto the street, silently comparing my faded jeans and old t-shirt with her outfit.

As we splashed by majestic Victorian houses, Evalynne prattled on and on about how she was looking forward to this opportunity to "give back to the community, to help some poor, destitute people, and to give a little of my precious time in helping the less fortunate." She leaned against the raindrop-streaked window, her violet, manicured nails carelessly tapping a rhythm on the armrest.

We pulled into the parking lot of the one-story brown building that served as the local homeless shelter, and dashed to the door under my umbrella. Evalynne's heels echoed down the dim hallways, and her eyes darted around, catching the cobwebs and dust-bunnies in the corners. We followed the black plastic signs to the kitchen, where we were enthusiastically greeted by an elderly woman and the smell of baked beans.

"Hello hello! I'm March," the woman cried, "It is so wonderful to see you!" She tackled Evalynne in an enthusiastic hug, and Evalynne looked at me like a frog squeezed in the hand of a child, eyes popping, mouth gaping. March flew about the small, orange-tiled

kitchen, handing us hair-nets and aprons. I joined her in unloading the dishwasher while Evalynne preoccupied herself with fitting her ringed-fingers into the latex gloves.

March put us to work, stirring beans, opening tubs of coleslaw and cans of corn, and boiling hot-dogs. She nodded happily as Evalynne repeated her story about being "thrilled to death" to be serving the "poor, starving souls some nourishment."

Evalynne was assigned to slice the pies that had been donated by the women of the Saving Redeemer congregation down the street. Her gloved-hand slipped around on the knife handle as she tried to cut perfectly straight lines to form perfectly even slices. I glanced over at her just as her knife slipped, causing her to cut the banana cream pie in two very uneven halves. She uttered a short, unladylike word, then quickly glanced up at March with the look of a puppy that has just been found with a half-eaten sock. March was busily humming around the kitchen, oblivious. I pretended not to notice and brought my gaze back to my beans.

The people began to trickle in, singly at first, then in groups. Most of them seemed to know each other, and shouted across the room in loud, booming voices:

"Joe, long time no see! How's the missus doin'?"

"Rita, what about a date tonight?"

"Phil, did I see you working construction on Tuesday?"

Loud, boisterous laughter erupted in spurts, and I grinned.

March seemed to know everyone, and they certainly knew her. The men swept off their hats and mumbled, "Afternoon, March." At this, the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes would deepen, and she'd stop whatever she was doing to toss back a cheery, "Hello stranger, good to have you back." I glanced over at Evalynne. Whispy hairs from around her face had loosened themselves from her stylish, hairdo and were radiating from her head in all directions. She tried to push them into place with the wrist of her greasy hand, but they bounced back as fast as she could groom them down.

We lined up the dishes of beans, canned-corn, coleslaw, and hotdogs on the counter, and took our positions. I smiled and greeted the people who passed by- Cheerful men who winked "Thank you ma'am," ladies with matted hair who kept their heads ducked and scuttled by, small children who poked each other with dirty little fingers and came back for thirds. Evalynne scooped corn with the enthusiasm of a robot. A bushy-bearded man who smelled of cigarette and urine leaned over the counter towards her and revealed a mouthful of rotting teeth in his best attempt at a charming smile. "Hey there, yer new 'round these parts, ain't ya? I kin show you 'round after lunch if you'd like t'see the place," he slurred, and departed with a devilish wink. I laughed out loud, but she just clenched her teeth, her cheeks flushing crimson, and dished out more corn.

The crowd had gone, and the leftovers had been doled out. "Now it's clean-up time! Bathrooms first." March looked at Evalynne, and held the scrub-brush out to her as if it were the final seal on their friendship. "Miss Evalynne, may I ask you to do the toilets?" Evalynne pursed her ruby-red lips; her arm stayed stiff at her side. March stood, the smile frozen on her face, her arm awkwardly extended. Evalynne glanced at me, then snatched the scrub-brush out of March's hand and clicked briskly into the bathroom. March and I stood stunned for a moment, our mouths agape. "Well well," March said, shaking herself. "What are we waiting for? We have floors to mop!"

In the car, I tried to make conversation, but Evalynne's answers were short and curt, and eventually we lapsed into silence. She sat vacantly staring out the window, and I noticed several new stains on her wrinkled, white blouse. The rain had stopped, and we sailed through puddles that were gleaming gold with the last of the afternoon sun. I stopped the car in her driveway, and she shook her head, as if surprised that we were already here. After a large forced smile and a quick thank-you, she ducked out of the car and marched briskly up her front-walk, past her large, manicured shrubs, garden fountain, and expensive rosebushes. As I drove away, I caught a glimpse of her in my rearview mirror, standing, hands on hips, in front of her three story brick house, looking at it as if she had never seen it before.

I felt sorry for her.

First Place Essay

2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Some Secrets Must Be Kept
Stacey Glass

I was suffocating. Generally, I'm not a fan of keeping secrets. In this case I made an exception. In my eyes it's not just avoiding the truth, it's a lie. I knew I would be miserable if I stayed and talked about it with my husband Jim or if he found out I was leaving. I was sure he would find out somehow.

My husband Jim was born and raised in Texas. He is 6 foot and 280 pounds. He has huge shoulders and arms from growing up on his families' cattle ranch. He grew up riding roping horses, as well as roping cattle for the family slaughterhouse and meat market. He was a hard man. He spoke with a southern drawl and he had lost some of it from living in the North but I could always tell when he spoke to his father that southern accent came back with a vengeance.

It all started February fourteenth Monday morning at six o'clock when my husband left for work. I was tired from working horses the evening before so I decided to stay in the house. I turned on my coffeemaker and let the dogs outside. I made some Donut Shoppe Decaf in my Keurig coffeemaker, poured in some sugar and Morning Glory half n half. I gazed into my favorite dark blue Starry Night coffee cup as the half and half swirled at the top of the coffee. I breathed in deep welcoming the richness of the coffee bean as it filled my nostrils. I picked up my spoon and stirred in circles making a clinking sound against the cup. I let the dogs in when they barked at the door and shut it fast because it was snowing. I walked into the living room, the floor cold on my feet, to check my blogs and surf on the computer while I drank my coffee. I normally sit down at my grandmothers' desk to surf from the home computer but instead decided to sit in the big squishy brown chaise lounge chair and use my husband's MacBook Pro. I opened up the blog I read daily. For some reason Yuku, the blog server, was down. So I started browsing history to find something to do while I sipped my coffee. I opened up yahoo and my husband's email came up. Before I closed it I looked at the inbox. I remember holding my breath because to look at his email was something I wasn't allowed to do. It was snooping. All it did was cause us to fight. Sometimes the fighting led to him intimidating me and throwing whatever item he could get his hands on. I couldn't resist opening up his inbox. So, holding my breath, I saw twenty or more email replies to craigslist. It seemed odd because the replies were reading "personals". I opened the first one knowing already what it was. My husband was looking for random hookups with strangers. It wasn't the first time. I knew it wouldn't be the last time either. Promises, after all were meant to be broken right? "I promise I won't do it again", "I swear I will keep my promise this time" and "It's your fault, you had a hysterectomy and couldn't have sex, so I had to go elsewhere". These were all things I had heard before. So I read the emails. There were twenty eight replies to him from postings he made about where to meet and what they were going to do, all too different women. Then I came to a different sort of email. It was addressed to Krista a woman Jim worked with. I wondered why he would

write an email to a woman he worked with from yahoo mail because he had a company email he used for work. I looked up at the name on the account I had open and it read RJ McLannihan, which is my husband's fast draw cowboy shooting name. I opened the email. I was shocked to find a two page love letter he wrote anonymously to this woman. I was even more shocked as I read the email. When he was describing how much he loved her and wanted to be with her as well as what he wanted to do with her. Vomit crept up into the back of my throat. I swallowed hard. I checked the date, when it was written, and when he had sent it. It said November twelfth. My birthday. Well Happy fucking Birthday to me! It was sent three times. I remember my husband told me some time back that he could beat the filter system at his works email server. I asked him why he would want to know how to do that and he didn't have an answer. I picked up my blue Starry Night cup, breathed deeply and exhaled long. I started to think back to my birthday.

I remembered on my birthday we were sitting watching Criminal Minds in the evening. Jim was writing on his laptop which wasn't uncommon if he had a lot of work to do. I looked over at him and he had this funny smile on his face.

So I asked him, "What are you doing?"

"I'm writing." He replied.

I said, "What are you writing?"

He said, "A novel."

"Can I read it?" I asked with interest.

He replied, "No."

I remember being slightly irritated because he was being secretive but I understood because when I write I don't want someone to read it until it's finished. Now I know that he was writing a secret admirer letter to a woman he worked with on my birthday, right in front of me.

I reached up and closed the MacBook. Its case was silver aluminum and cold to the touch. I'm not sure how long I sat there staring at that cold shiny silver laptop cover holding my coffee cup. By the time I took a drink, my coffee was as frigid as winter and the half n half was starting to separate at the top.

I got up and decided I wasn't going to mention all the things I found on his laptop to him because it wouldn't change anything. He would continue to cheat and lie even though he had promised so many times he would stop. Suddenly, I heard the dogs barking and looked to see who was there. It was Jim. He was home from work. I realized a whole day had passed by as I sat and stared at that freezing cold aluminum laptop cover.

It was so fresh on my mind when he walked in the door I asked without thinking, "Are you having an affair with Krista?"

His face went flour white and he said, "No. Why would you ask me such a question?"

I said, "I found and read the email you wrote to her."

Fire flashed in his eyes. I had or rather he had started a war. He walked over to his laptop and started erasing things and closing out emails. He said irritatingly, "I'll fix it so you never snoop again. It's your fault. All you ever want to do is fight. Everything in this MacBook is mine and you have no business looking at it."

I said "Oh, by the way, I also read all the craigslist personal ads you posted along with all the replies from various whores in Duluth and all the cities you travel to."

He got up from the chair grabbed the remote and threw it across the room. My little Brussels griffon and Boston terrier both ran upstairs trembling. They knew there was going to be some fighting. More like immature intimidation on his part and me just sitting quietly asking questions.

I said, "Why would you do this to us again? I thought you promised not to lie and cheat anymore."

He yelled, "All this is your fault, not mine. If you weren't such a cunt I wouldn't have to be with other women."

I turned around and started to walk toward the kitchen and suddenly felt a huge blow to the middle of my back. I made a huh sound as the air was forced out of my lungs. My knees buckled and I fell to the hardwood floor. I put my hands out in front of me to catch myself and managed to land on all fours. I gasped for breath. Sucking the air in fast, I made a heaving sound. I couldn't catch my breath and continued to try to get in the air but my throat wouldn't open up. I was having a panic attack. I kept gasping for air and none would come in. I looked out the window and wished I was invisible as I kept trying to get the air in. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and hit the last number dialed, my mom and dad's house. My mother answered the phone and I managed to say "mom" in between gasps. She was 300 miles away and kept asking "Are you ok? What's wrong? What happened?" I couldn't answer and Jim was in the background mumbling he didn't do it on purpose. He was sorry. It's your fault. You made me do it. He made no effort to help calm me down as he sat there in the computer chair with an angry look on his face. I kept repeating over and over in my head. "I'm ok, I'm ok, I'm ok" All at once air came in easier and I could breathe. I finally calmed down enough to tell my mother I fell and it knocked the wind out of me. I couldn't tell her the truth because I was afraid of him. Afraid of what he might do next. I told her I was fine and we hung up. I looked down at the floor and saw an unopened liter size Aquafina water bottle near my hand.

Slowly I got up, uneasy at first but able to stand with my hand on the fireplace mantle helping to steady me. I stood there for a moment gathering my thoughts. I said "Let's just forget it. It happened last year anyway." He agreed and I was glad for it.

I went upstairs to check on the dogs and take a shower. They both were still trembling when I topped the stairs and looked in our bedroom at them on the bed. I paused a moment and looked at them huddled together both their bodies shaking uncontrollably with fear. In that instant I knew I had to leave. I had to keep it a secret from my husband because if he found out, I would stay or be made to stay. I got in the shower, where I normally cried so he couldn't hear me but there were no more tears left. I turned the water toward HOT and stepped in the shower. I stood under the nozzle letting the water run down my body, washing my pain, fear and sadness down the drain. After my shower, I descended the stairs. I put the dogs out and made light conversation. I was pleasant through the evening. I made dinner. I went down to the barn, fed and watered horses. I was pretending everything was fine. If he could lie, so could I. It proved to be difficult for me. It went against how I was raised but I knew I had to keep this secret.

Tuesday morning I called my parents to tell them what happened and what I had decided to do. They wanted me home and I wanted to be there. I also called to arrange for my quarter horse mares to be transported back to the Upper Peninsula. My escape was set for Friday morning, only three more days. I called an attorney, went in right away and filed for divorce. I felt such relief when I signed my name to the divorce summons. Big rusted oar boat anchors floated up off my shoulders into the sky. I was going home!

I walked out of my attorney's office smiling. I was overcome with joy but at the same time scared he would find out before I could escape. I told myself I could keep this secret. Just keep busy, avoid conversation and spend a lot of my time with the horses when he was home. I packed my things in secret when he was at work.

Wednesday and Thursday passed by slowly for me. I kept busy with packing, sorting and getting horses ready. Thursday evening dragged on because I knew my father and my friend Patti (my horse transportation) were staying in a hotel 15 miles from my house. They had to come to the hotel the night before because it was a 6 hour drive for them and they needed to be close for their early loading. Patti was waiting for me to signal by phone Friday morning, telling them it was time to come get me.

Thursday night I couldn't fall asleep. I stared at the ceiling all night long. I wondered if my husband knew anything. Did he suspect I was leaving? Did I slip and mention anything? Was he going to go to work? Was he leaving early? If he left for work how would I know he wouldn't come home? Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, his alarm clock went off. He got up, clicked his alarm clock off and went to take a shower.

I got up and took one step at a time down the stairs. I had to use the handrail because my legs were like rubber. I was scared. My whole body wanted to tremble but I wouldn't let it. I made myself solid as steel. I managed to make it down to the kitchen and stood still at the island. I looked across the island and saw the painting my mother gave us for our wedding

present. It was a John Heath original painting of Green Garden Lutheran Church where our whole family went on Sundays. My mother and father were married in that church and are still married 50 years later. John Heath was a longtime friend of the family and a renowned wildlife artist. He was the only Grandfather I ever knew. He used to get me set up with paints in his art studio giving me lessons on depth, color and perception. My mind started racing. Am I making a mistake? Should I give him another chance? I married him for good times and bad. Was this just a bad time? I took a deep breath and let it flow out of me slowly. I heard creeks and thumps upstairs and I looked up toward the ceiling. He was getting dressed and walking down the stairs. I turned toward the door opened it and winter blasted me in the face. The dogs ran down the porch and jumped off into the wet snow. I couldn't look at him. He would know. I lingered on the deck while the dogs were going potty in the yard. The snow was covered in little yellow blotches from the dog urine. I looked down at the horses in their winter paddock. Soon they would be on a trailer heading for Michigan. I turned to go in with the dogs. It was chilly and I wanted to go in but he was in there. I made myself put one foot in front of the other and let the dogs in the house as well as myself.

I turned on my Keurig and waited for the ready to brew signal. He came in the kitchen. Said good morning to the dogs and then to me. I answer "morning" and started making a cup of coffee. He put on his jacket and boots, grabbed his laptop bag gave me a kiss and he said "love you". I echoed the same and he went out the door. I watched and held my breath as he backed, turned and then drove down our 900 foot driveway. I watched as the red tail lights reflected in the bright white of the snow.

As soon as I couldn't see the tail lights anymore I called Patty and told her Jim was gone to work. She said her and Dad were on their way. I called the sheriff and asked for a deputy to be present while we packed up to leave. They were sending out Officer Smith and he would be there within 40 minutes. I was trying to time Patty and my dad with the Officer so it all went smoothly.

I ran up the stairs, got dressed, threw all my clothes into travel bags and rushed down the stairs. I ran back up and got all my jewelry boxes, important insurance papers, and my pillow. Back down the stairs I went with those things and back up again to get my big oak floor standing studio easel. That was heavy so I walked it down the stairs. I went back up again to get all my oil paints, brushes and painting things. Down again. I went one more time up the stairs to take all my paintings off the walls. Those I carried carefully. Now for loading all of this in my F150 four door. I loaded those things. Came back in the house and stripped all the walls of my paintings on the main floor being careful not to dent the canvases. I gathered all the dog's things I would need, the medicine, papers, food, blankets, bowls, leashes, tie outs, grooming tools and shampoos. I loaded the truck to the ceiling.

When I came back into the house my heart was racing. I grabbed a cold liter of Aquafina out of the fridge. I wondered if that was the bottle he used with all his power to hit me dead center in the middle of the back with. How ironic I used this same fluid that caused harm to hydrate and calm down my system. Again, I found myself breathing deeply and exhaling slowly to try and focus.

I heard the dogs barking at the window and new someone was at the house. For one instant I thought it was Jim. I raced to the window to see who it was. I was elated when I saw the patrol car. I went out to greet him and he parked out of the way as close to the chicken yard as possible. I came back in the house and went over all the things I had packed in my head. Did I forget anything? No I didn't think so.

The dogs started barking again, so I looked out the front window. Patti's truck and horse trailer were slowly making their way up the driveway. She backed up to the barn and I met them half way between the barn and the house. Patti looked at me, and then hugged me tight. She asked me if I was alright. I said yes. Dad hugged me next. His long strong arms enveloped me. I leaned into his chest and he said "Everything is going to be ok now." I realized I was crying because the tears were frozen beads on my face and they were pulling at my skin. I wiped my face with the sleeve of my sweatshirt. I should have grabbed my black arctic Carhartt barn jacket but was so excited to see them I ran out of the house without thinking.

I told them everything was ready and packed. I just needed my purse and to get the dogs in the truck so we could go down to the barn and load horses. I ran in the house and looked around at its emptiness. All the life was leaving it. It was a skeleton, with hollow eyes and no warmth to its bones. I put on my jacket, grabbed my purse, picked up the dogs and locked the door. I put them in the front seat on a big fluffy brown blanket and hopped into the truck.

I drove down to the barn and opened the big sliding doors. The smell of warm horses, sweet feed and manure made me smile. We loaded the trailer with all my horse equipment. All of my saddles, bridles, pads, grain, hay, spurs, bits, leather goods and leads. I carried two bags of pine shavings into the back of the trailer and spread them around so the horses would have some cushion. Everything was loaded except for the horses.

I went to Katie's stall first. I looked through the stall bars at her big beautiful brown eyes. I smiled and said "Hey big girl were going home." I slid open the stall door and she took a step towards me. I adjusted her Big D purple winter blanket, led her out of the stall and into the trailer. I hooked her inside. I went back to the barn to get Lex. She nodded at me through the bars telling me she was ready to go. I clicked the lead below her halter and led her into the trailer and snapped her to the manger. Mercy was anxiously waiting for me to come get her. She was weaving back in forth in front of the stall bars nickering softly. I loaded her quickly and shut the back door to the trailer. I took one last look inside the barn, shut off the lights and slid the big barn doors closed.

I jumped in with Patti and Dad drove my truck with the dogs. As I we headed down the driveway. I looked at the snow piled up against the pasture posts. Snow clung to the top of the electric wire like spaghetti noodles cling to the strainer. We turned left out of the driveway. I took one last look behind me watching my farm get smaller and smaller in the mirror. I felt myself growing taller with each mile.

Second Place Essay

2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

Waiting for the Lights: Sauk Theatre
Makayla Eppel

I get out of my car and walk toward the theatre door. I look up and see the marquis shining in the sunlight, and I realize that I have come home. The Sauk Theatre in Jonesville is far from extravagant. It is a small brick theatre with dark green awning topped with a marquis announcing its newest production. Outside, a bronze statue stands strikingly off to the side, surrounded by an array of cheery flowers. Many pass by it on US-12 without realizing its existence. It is not large or showy, belying the magic it holds inside. The theatre, to a passerby, is just a building with peeling paint and old bricks. However, the second a show begins, it comes to life. The theatre itself may be just a building, but the memories, laughter, love and warmth which fills its every corner makes it home.

I open the door and enter the lobby. Memories flood into my mind. I pause in the lobby and reflect on how it all began. I started at the Sauk when I was only seven-shy, and scared of trying something so unfamiliar. I remember my first audition clearly, it was winter and the theatre was cold. I was shaking from a mixture of nerves and the snow that was melting on my coat. Fiddler on the Roof was the play; it had always been one of my favorites. I remember walking warily up the black steps and up to the stage for the very first time. I looked out over the red plush seats-everything looked different from up there, it was a view that held endless possibilities that I did not know of yet. I stepped up to the front of the stage and sang my first audition piece, an off-key version of Happy Birthday. The director came up on stage and gently took my hand and led me back to my seat when I was done, re-assuring me that theatre would be fun and not to worry. I made it into Fiddler on the Roof that year, sparking a love of theatre inside of me that can never be squelched. I have performed in nearly twenty productions since then, and I have helped in many more. The bonds I have made are inexplicable. Many of us have grown up together here. Every crevice of this theatre is brimming with beautiful memories waiting to be relived with my dear friends.

Suddenly, I am jolted from my reminiscing by a giant tackle hug from one of my many theatre siblings, accompanied by a loud squeal-I am home. We linger giggling in the lobby-its walls are filled with endless pictures of past shows. Hundreds of people's memories are mingling on the walls. The lobby contains the ticket booth and office, bathrooms off to the side, a couple of old wooden theatre seats and a "Jonesville Monopoly" sign, nothing extravagant. Next to the ticket booth, the Clint Johnson plaque proudly boasts the names of those most dedicated to helping at our theatre-volunteers who spend their days and nights behind the scenes, working hard to ensure that the audience has a magical experience. The lobby's paint is peeling, and it is small, but it has seen the entrance of many hopeful souls looking for a getaway from the hustle and bustle of the outside world.

Finally realizing that we have to get ready, we hustle up to the dressing room. As we run up the stairwell, stumbling over our cast mates who are sitting and talking, we pause and quickly kiss the wall. The drywall is full of bright lipstick kisses and careful signatures-our impressions left forever on the very fabric of our theatre. Already, I can hear the sounds of the dressing room, they are loud and playful. As we open the door, a blast of music and laughter hits our ears. Our voices join the chaos as we begin singing songs from Chicago, Phantom of the Opera, Les Miserables, and Wicked at the top of our lungs as if we were Broadway stars. The dressing room is a cacophony of sounds-singing, laughing, greetings and inside jokes are flying through the air. As I meander over to my costumes, my nose is assaulted by the familiar scent of hairspray as clouds of it form around my friend's steaming curls. Costumes are being flung everywhere as we hurriedly get ready. The counters are prepared for us with a messy arsenal of makeup and hair products. We laugh and reminisce about past shows as we help each other find our missing shoes in a panic, curl each other's hair, fix a stuck zipper in a frustrated frenzy, and enjoy the beautiful chaos of our "before-the-show rituals." Once each of us is ready, and the house is opened, we shut off the music, and leave the raucous dressing room in silence.

The next half-hour is spent quietly lying on our backs on the bare stage, waiting for the curtain to open. It is a wonderful tradition for each of us. The stage is lined with rows of cast and crew nostalgically waiting for the curtain to open once again. Each person is there simply for the love of theatre. The stage is cold as I lower myself to the ground next to my friends and lay down. I stare up at the ceiling, the paint is peeling, the lights are old, but to me, it is beautiful. The dimly lit stage is permeated by the small bright beam of light streaming through a square hole in the curtain. A couple of the smaller children get up and run to the hole, sneaking a peek at their audience-the crowd is growing full. Through the silence, I hear our stage manager whisper: "Five minutes. Places!" We all peel ourselves off of the floor with excited whispers of "break a leg!" and migrate to the dark wings to await the beginning of the show.

Excitement flows through the wings like a wave. The wings are dark and quiet, a perfect contrast to the magic we are about to create. They are full of set pieces and cast members, making them quite cramped. The only light now is the small blue work light hanging on the wall above my head. The opening is getting closer; I can feel the anticipation hanging thickly in the air. The silence is suddenly broken by the overture-the wait is over. A shiver runs down my spine as I take my place on the stage.

The majestic red velvet curtain opens as the music builds. The stage is bathed in a pool of light as we are suddenly revealed to the audience. The red plush seats are full of people-parents, friends, cousins, familiar faces-all watching the magic unfold. It is hard to make out their faces as I blink in the bright lights, but I know they are there. The dust floating in the air makes a hazy glow around each of the stage lights which are becoming warm on my skin. Music streams from the busy stage as we sing and dance. Our audience's laughter and applause joins the music, as these joyous sounds swell and fill the small theatre. A hundred pairs of eyes follow our bright, swirling costumes as we move across the stage. Lines we have rehearsed for months are finally given the chance to be told to a captive audience. The

story is unfolding around us as we are caught up in every exciting and magical moment. We finally get to show strangers our little world that we have created.

With dramatic flair, we grab hands and take our final bows. The curtain closes. The show is finished. The sound of applause hangs in the air as we exit. We run backstage and through the back door. The cool night air hits us as we run spastically through the alley to greet our friends and family, full of pride and energy. We sprint around the corner-a laughing, singing mass of craziness. We are full of after-show hype, a high that will last the rest of the night. Hugs and greetings of "great job!" are showered on each of us. We blissfully revel in the magic that still clings to the surrounding air.

I peel myself away from the boisterous crowd and walk back to the dressing room. I pass through the auditorium, empty once again. The rows of red plush, wood and metal are no longer seats, for they have no one to hold. The stage is once again only a black wooden platform, no one is there to act or sing upon it. The lights are off, no longer bathing anyone in their warm light. The speakers are silent, no longer filling the room with their noise. The heavy red curtain has closed for the night, done performing its duties. The paint on the ceiling continues to peel, the dust continues to gather-the theatre sleeps until the show begins again the next night. The theatre will be filled with magic once again, the seats will be full and the stage will be busy. The theatre will awaken as we enter tomorrow with fresh excitement and another show begins.

Third Place Essay

2012 LAND Creative Writing Competition

This Land Was Made For You and Me
Jenna Lynn Hunt

I still remember the day it happened. My world, in the blink of an eye, had completely changed. I quickly began to question my upbringing. I began to think that my parents had been too lenient teaching me their views of the world. This was the day when I became a racist. I had never dreamt it would happen and have pondered why I was so quick to stereotype this expansive range of people into one small category given the life, up until then, I had known. What I can do is tell you how I made the decision, and how I came to let it go.

The morning was brilliant and sunny. A cloudless blue sky greeted me as I headed out to work that Tuesday morning. I was still reeling from the sudden death and funeral of my grandfather that had taken place the day before. I was grieving and sullen, but the morning was picture perfect. I remember glancing up towards the sun and thanking him for giving me a beautiful day to get back to life. That morning was the first I had smiled in almost a week. If only I had known the horrors this day would bring, I would've stayed home.

This beautiful cloudless morning was that of September 11, 2001. It was on this day I watched terrorists strike fear into the heart of every American. I saw the reports of planes slamming into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and into that lonely stretch of land in Pennsylvania. I watched in horror as people leapt to their deaths from the windows of those buildings that belched fire and acrid smoke and wept as those towers crumbled to the ground so far below. I watched as Osama Bin Laden claimed responsibility for these terror attacks. Through the pain and anguish another emotion flamed; it was like dry tinder against a lit match. This emotion consumed me; it was hatred. This was the day my hatred centered on Muslims.

Like so many people during this time, I was in a state of shock. Reports of previous attacks slowly began to resurface in my mind. There were the prior attacks on the Trade Center, the U.S.S. Cole, and other foreign embassies. Then, there were the repeated stories of suicide bombers in Iraq. At the time, I needed someone to blame for all of the chaos going on around me, and Muslims seemed to fit the bill. I felt this way for what seems, looking back now, like eons.

Throughout my deployment in Cuba, I had the constant reminder of that hatred. My job during this mission was to guard these terrorists. I remember, almost three months into our tour, a new shipment of detainees had arrived. Among them was a seventeen year old boy. While walking up and down the tier one blisteringly hot day, he decided he wanted to tell me why he was sent to this new island prison. He proceeded to brag about the fighting he had been in. He was sixteen then and considered a man in the eyes of his family, and he was to go to war with the rest of his people to kill the infidel. He told me that during one

particular fight he had killed two Army soldiers but had received a gunshot wound in the shoulder. An Army medic had come up to offer him aid, but this holy warrior had no intention of getting help from the infidel. This child fighter disarmed the soldier of his only weapon, a 9mm pistol, and proceeded to shoot him in the face with it. I may not have known these three brave men who died on the battlefield, but they had sworn the same oath I had sworn. They were my brothers. They were my countrymen.

Another time, it was close to their holiday of Ramadan. During this religious time, the detainees refuse to eat during the day. With their fasting, they are supposed to spend the majority of their day in prayer. What they did, during this time in Camp Delta, was riot. I repeatedly had spit, urine, feces, and even blood thrown on me during my shifts. That alone is bad enough, but the standout fact was almost one quarter of the detainees in the camp had some sort of Hepatitis A, B, or C, or another communicable disease. Needless to say, it was a while before I started to question if all Muslims were as ruthless as this or not.

My first question began when I was awaiting my shift in the camp one sweltering morning, and another soldier sat down at the picnic table where I happened to be smoking and reading a book. He lit up his own cigarette and asked me what I thought about the story so far. We began discussing it, in great detail, as he had just finished it. He was just as passionate and excited when describing the story as I was, and the conversation was quite pleasant. About halfway through our conversation, I happened to glance down at this fellow soldier's name tag. It read Mohammad. I asked him what his job was in the camp, and it turns out that he was an interpreter from Egypt, and yes, he was Muslim. I asked him how he could be with so many soldiers and still feel safe. One of our sister units on post at the time was from New York. Surely he felt the hostility. His expression was that of nonchalance. He told me that he had no fear, and that he had Allah on his side. He, like me, was also a soldier in the US Army. He may be of Egyptian descent, but he was just as American as I was. I scoffed at this and he handed me a small book from his pocket. It was an English Koran. I told him I had no interest in reading it, and I tried to give it back, but he persisted that I just look it over and told me I may be surprised with what I read.

Eventually, curiosity got the better of me, and I did look through this religious book. What I saw is that its statements weren't that far off base with my own Bible. Sure, I wouldn't receive forty virgins upon my death, and our proposed prophets were different, but the basic ideals were same. It preached tolerance and good deeds, something I had never heard escape the lips of the men I guarded.

But my perceptions of Muslims changed when I had the privilege to walk the tier of Cell Block D. This cell block was the psychiatric block of the camp. Upon my arrival, I realized something was different here. These detainees were happy. They were all medicated, of course, but they were coherent and civil. A few would even say 'thank you' after you handed them a meal. Out of all the detainees I had come to know, my two favorite were on this block. One was a Muslim from Africa. We called him 'Trip' because of his drug habit before his imprisonment. Even with his anti-psychotic medication, he was nuts, but he was a happy nut. He loved to spout the Koran, but in the form of music. He was also a lover of the drums. When he was on his meds, he was very entertaining. He didn't hate Americans

or wish us ill will. He had just been trying to buy drugs and was arrested and then shipped here. A victim of certain circumstance and then sold for profit, or so he used to say.

The other detainee we called 'Jenkco'. This may have been his real name, but I'm not really sure. He was the poster child for being in 'the wrong place at the wrong time.' He had been doing a job for his brother, driving a car over the Pakistan border to a friend, when he was pulled over by police. Like 'Trip', they had found a rather large quantity of opium hidden in the trunk. He was arrested and had been in prison for almost three years before 9/11. He would frequently speak of the tortures the guards had done to him, and they were horrific. He also told me that even though he had never been to America, he loved it. He said that even though he was here and in prison, he could read, bathe, exercise, and receive medical treatment when he needed it. Aside from missing his wife and children, his life was better in the camp than it was at home, and he could still write and receive letters to and from his family. His positive outlook was infectious.

I found myself questioning my beliefs. Through these detainees and a small number of interpreters, I began to gain an understanding that not all Muslims were terrorists. Like having to relearn punctuation, it took me awhile to completely grasp the concept. Over the years I have been in situations where I have had what arthritis sufferers call 'flair ups'. Then, it isn't Islam's understanding that I come to remember, but the reading of my own Bible and its meanings. I think of, "He who be without sin, cast the first stone," and that saying alone has the ability to diffuse a mentally racist thought.

It used to be that I couldn't see, hear, or talk to or about Muslims without feeling some sort of intense anger. But as the years have passed, my hatred has waned. It's almost nonexistent now. I've come to realize that Muslims are still just people. They bleed as I bleed and love as I love. Even though we believe many different things, we are the same in so many ways. Our country is free. Our founding fathers fought long and hard to make it so. This land was formed on the ideas of people being able to be different, to believe in whatever God they choose. It is a democracy, and Muslims have the God given right to practice their religion even if it isn't something I choose to believe. I haven't completely forgiven the radicals who killed all of those innocent Americans over a decade ago and the extremists who still continue to kill and maim our men and women overseas. Some of those lost and injured during this war on terror are my friends, but I am trying, and sometimes trying is half the battle.