

2017 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Fiction Category

Honorable Mention: “Beauty Born from Destruction” by Derek Hicks

The heat and shining light of the sun cast itself over the barren and debris strewn landscape. What was once a city of millions was now a scrapyard strewn with twisted metal, decayed buildings, and the stench of death. On the sides of the buildings that were left standing, were blackened shadows of those who had once walked the streets of this once lively town. Among the streets were the rusted hulks of automobiles that had once carted people from place to place, but now lay abandoned like everything else. Only the sounds of wind and the grinding metal filled the streets as the ancient structures fell to the foe of time.

The rush of footsteps echoed through the empty streets as a single moving shadow graced those ancient shadows that were locked in place like a carbon photograph. This shadow belonged to a thin young man in tattered rags. He carried a single item close to him as he scurried in the shadows of these ancient monoliths of a bygone era. That item was a single potted plant, its stem green and brimmed with bright colours of purple that looked out of place in the bleak and desolate land that surrounded him, filled with colours of light brown, tan, grey, and rusty red. Three shadows quickly followed behind the man and he quickly moved away from them, but they continued to follow him.

“I have to carry on the flame,” He said as he rushed into one of the skeletal remains of old-world skyscrapers.

He scrambled up the stairs of the ruined office building, past the decaying offices with papers whose meaning had been lost to the constant decay of time. He dashed by the decayed and ancient skeletons whose names and stories were no longer relevant and whose stories could never be recovered. The man continued his attempt to evade his stalkers by hiding behind one of the rusted desks.

“I cannot let the flame die,” He whispered to himself as he stroked the potted flower in his hands.

The shadows of his adversaries moved past him, up further into the building. Curiously, he followed them up the stairwell. When he reached the top, the sun blotted out his vision before his eyes adjusted to the area around him. What he saw was a small community of people inside of this decaying relic of a building. They erected huts and tents around burning barrels of papers in order to maintain their heat. Each of the dwellings were adorned with a tapestry of designs depicting the sun and the people of the community. In the centre of the settlement was an elderly woman, holding hands with her fellow tribesman to welcome back the family who had returned from the outside. The three shadows that were following the man belonged to a mother, father, and child who went into the world and returned. When the villagers saw the man, they greeted him with open arms. Hesitant at first, he approached them.

“Come, my child,” The elderly woman spoke. “Tell us what has brought you here.”

“I..” He stammered. “I bear the flame of all that is lost, the beauty of the world.”

“My child, beauty has not been lost in the world.” She brought him to the edge of the building, showing him the arid and distorted landscape. “Beauty is not what can be held in your hands, but what cannot be held on.”

The land stretched onward from the ruined city and the man gazed outward across it. While the buildings leaned and decayed, people and families lied inside of them. The sun in the sky sparkled off of a nearby body of water and birds flocked in the sky. New communities prospered outside of the ruined city as towns and communities dotted the landscape beyond the rusting monoliths.

“Destruction is the first step to building something new. There cannot be creation if there is no destruction and we celebrate the beauty that the destruction has given us.”

“But what of what we have lost?”

“My child, we have lost so much, but beauty itself cannot be lost.” She gazes and smiles over the children of the village that run and play around the village.

The man paused for a moment and then responded, “What of all the things that used to be?”

“My child, it is not wise to focus on what we have lost, but what we have. The world was broken like a sheet of glass. It will never be what it once was...” She walks to her tent and walks out with a small mural, crafted from several colours of shattered glass that form the shape of a purple potted plant. “We can find a way to put the pieces back together in a way that is beautiful, but different than the way things were.”

The man gazed upon the mosaic and looked across the landscape again. What once was could never be again and focusing on the loss would only lead to sorrow. In the new world, he could only pick up the pieces of glass and attempt to create a mosaic piece. He presented the elderly woman with the flame, the potted plant that had survived in the harshest environments.

“Then please, help me fit this into the mosaic of the new world.”

The plant was placed onto a shrine in the centre of the village. The shrine consisted of the mosaic image and several hand-drawn images crafted from charcoal and coal from the ruins. If beauty and destruction are a part of the world, then beauty is born of destruction. The potted plant released its seeds into the wind and those seeds were carried into the landscape below, spreading the beauty into the world.

JUDGE’S COMMENTS:

This allegorical story effectively creates an imagined future world. Something awful has happened, and the protagonist feels the weight of responsibility as the guardian of a potted plant, a symbol of the beauty that once was possible but now seems doomed. The protagonist’s desire to preserve this symbol never seems seriously challenged. Shadowy figures seem threatening, but in fact they lead the protagonist to a protective surviving community, suggesting that where beauty is valued, hope is not lost.

Dr. Joel R. Brouwer is retired from teaching English and Communication for 47 years, the last 21 on the faculty at Montcalm Community College. During that time, he taught creative writing and mentored numerous aspiring authors. He also coordinated the statewide LAND Creative Writing Contest for many years. For an example of his writing, consult his travel blog, <https://hippieroadtrip.wordpress.com>