

2018 MCC Creative Writing Contest – Results with Judge’s Comments

About Our Judge: Dr. Joel R. Brouwer, our contest judge, 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.

Judge’s note: I was genuinely impressed with the overall quality of entries in all three categories. In fiction and poetry, where there were multiple entries, it was not easy to settle on two winners. All the entries had their strengths and their charms; another judge might well have chosen differently. I congratulate all who entered, and encourage you all to keep developing your creative abilities.

Essay

1st Place: “Enbridge Line 5: the Environmental, Ethical and Economic Effects”

This essay clearly explains three perspectives on the continued operation of the fuel transport pipeline beneath the Straits of Mackinac. The essay doesn’t take a position; rather, it examines the reasons behind the arguments of environmentalists, Native Americans and advocates of economic prosperity. While the essay recounts these arguments accurately and in detail, it focuses on the potential for harm if the pipeline fails. It could be improved by also examining how likely it is that the pipeline will fail. Despite this shortcoming, the essay is well-researched, substantiating its assertions with evidence from reliable sources. It provides a clear overview of the issues involved.

2nd Place: “Climate Change: Don’t Isolate the Fight”

This persuasive essay is competently written. It avoids becoming strident, even though its position is clear – that climate change is an immediate problem threatening humanity. As a short essay on a large topic, it misses the opportunity to be more compelling by presenting its evidence in more than two paragraphs, which could be more persuasively organized around facts and arguments based on those facts.

Poetry

1st Place: “Breath of Wind”

The speaker in this poem ruminates about the experience of walking through a cemetery, though the reader must draw this conclusion from the description of the environment. The experience is a reflective and melancholy one, reinforced by concrete images of wind, snow, moss, gravestones, and other place-making specifics. The poem’s turn from exterior to interior gives rise to speculation about the lives of those buried here, and the meanings made through everyday relationships and activities. The final line encapsulates the meaning of all cemeteries: “Don’t forget me.”

Second Place: “Anxiety”

The form of this poem reinforces its mood. Short lines, centered on the page, suggest constriction and panic. The first three lines recount the physical tension anxiety produces; the following lines show the speaker’s reaction of panic to a situation where public performance is expected. The poem is an effective interior

monologue, re-creating for the reader the immediacy of panic and the uselessness of rational advice. Oddly, the least effective line in the poem is the most analytical and rational: "I think I have anxiety." Rather than declaring the obvious, the poem should trust the reader to understand. The line breaks the mood so effectively created by description of physical and mental symptoms. The poem would be more immediate if its final line was "Worry is who I really am."

Fiction

1st Place: "Some Things are Better Left Untouched"

This story puts readers into a historical moment that we eventually come to recognize, but which is secondary to the development of particular characters and a particular conflict. The author effectively and believably describes the moment when explorers reach a new land, then shifts our attention to an initiation incident in the life of a boy who will be the first to interact with the strangers. Specific language, episodes and descriptions create nuance and texture, keeping readers immersed in the moment and anticipating the outcome.

2nd Place: "Glare"

A first person narrative, such as "Glare," only works when readers live each moment with the narrator, experiencing what the narrator experiences as the narrator experiences it. This requires that essential information be introduced organically, so readers become aware of setting and situation without breaking the flow of the narrator's thoughts. "Glare" handles this problem well, with references to the classroom setting interspersed with snippets of the professor's boring lecture. The opening line, one of those snippets, plants the idea that psychological response plays a role in this story. As the narrator becomes fixated on the glare from a set of keys, contemplating ever more dire solutions, he becomes increasingly unhinged. The use of larger fonts and the word (glare) in parentheses is a risk because it could be seen as a gimmick - but it works, reinforcing our sense of the narrator's losing his grip on reality. The narrator's sudden return to rationality at the end is not entirely convincing, but can be forgiven because the point of the story is to put us into the narrator's head, not to create an entirely realistic plot.