

Judge's Comments - Creative Writing Contest 2022

Poetry

First Place – “Our Lover’s Last Robes”

Theoretically, poems can be about anything. Why, then, are so many about love or death? This poem combines both fascinations, personifying death as a lover. It avoids being mawkish or trite by using a sophisticated formal variation on the sestina, a complicated poetic form using recurring words and regular line lengths. The words that recur here are also rhymes, including one that requires an urban dictionary to define; it hasn't made it to Merriam-Webster. This sensitive use of language, combined with a sure sense of line length, creates a rhythm befitting a lullaby – the lulling song of death.

Second Place – “Here’s the Call”

An anguished cry from the heart is not sufficient to make a good poem. It also requires shaping through form, line length and rhyme that serves to reinforce, not detract from, the message of the poem. This poet uses those techniques effectively to enhance the reader's sense of the despair felt by one who contemplates, then attempts, suicide. It's a difficult poem to read because of the subject matter, and a courageous poem to write and share with a reading audience. The poem stands on its own, without further explanation.

Fiction

First Place – “Stage Fright”

This first-person story puts the reader into the mind of a narrator suffering from stage fright. The beginning of the narrative is a taut, minute-by-minute description of the moments when the narrator moves from her classroom seat to the front of the room. The author effectively employs dialogue to move the narrative forward as the protagonist accepts an offer of help from a classmate. Just when it seems the narrative trajectory is predictable, comes a twist. It takes a moment for the reader to realize what's happened.

Second Place – “Headache”

The setting of this story is a therapy session that the narrator claims she does not want to attend. Through effective, realistic dialogue, interspersed with the narrator's thoughts, we begin to understand the demons that afflict her. The therapist's patience with the protagonist helps the reader as well as the narrator. The story doesn't have a traditional conclusion where conflicts are neatly wrapped up. We readers must reflect the patience of the therapist. The story's not finished.

Creative Non-Fiction

First Place – “Alive”

This personal essay recounts the author's psychological journey through depression and suicidal ideation. The essay vividly describes the patient experience in a psychiatric hospital, demystifying the experience and tacitly refuting many of the distorted images created by movies and tv shows. The main focus, though, is on the author's interior monologue while progressing from despair to healing.

Second Place – “My Good Hair Day”

Visits to Grandpa and Grandma's house are often depicted as Hallmark-movie happy occasions. For this essayist, visits to Grandpa and Grandma's are emotionally more complex. There are donuts and hugs from Grandma, but a grumpy Grandpa puts a six-year-old in a difficult position. She processes her feelings while attempting to understand why Grandpa is a grump. She develops a very mature perspective, making it possible to love Grandpa anyway. Her persistence is heartwarmingly rewarded.