

## 2019 MCC Creative Writing Contest Winners, 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.

### Poetry

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Place – The Doe

This well-crafted poem employs a traditional rhyme scheme and stanza format to depict a scene that is familiar to seasoned deer hunters, though with a twist. The first three stanzas effectively convey the doe's fear in the moment as the unnamed and unseen hunter threatens and then takes her life.

The fourth stanza, though, introduces an unexpected development. Though the doe's "corporeal form" has been vanquished by the hunter, her "spirit runs free." In this transcendent sense, the doe is also a victor.

The final two stanzas extend the doe's victory in another surprising way. Borrowing the Hindu and Buddhist concept of reincarnation, the poem asserts that the doe carries her previous consciousness and experience into her new existence as a bear, where she remembers the hunter and draws on her previous experience as a deer to drive him away. Significantly, she does not exact revenge by killing him; she only protects herself.

This poem meets many criteria that justify choosing it as the first-place poem. It uses line length and rhyme to create rhythm without being forced or overly predictable. Its polished use of language is creative and pleasing (despite the misspelling of "flee"). Finally, it makes a point in a provocative, insightful, subtle manner. All these attributes are blended into a unified, satisfying whole.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Place – Sediment of Life

Echoing the pantheistic and transcendental philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Walt Whitman, this poem asserts that death is not the end of an individual's influence on earth. Rather, that person becomes part of the life force which animates all creation, which Emerson called the Oversoul.

Emerson developed his ideas in an essay. "Sediment of Life" develops the idea in a poem. The requirements are very different. The poem proceeds through particularities, using vivid examples and images rather than the explanations and generalizations of an essay. The poem reinforces these examples and images through a Whitmanesque repetition, with almost half of the lines beginning with "I am...." Coupled with the strong sense of rhythm created through line length and rhyme, the effect of the repetition is almost hypnotic, an appropriate effect for a poem emphasizing the connection between the individual and the universe.

The final stanzas show that this is not simply philosophical abstraction. The poem is addressed to an individual facing loss and is meant as a message of comfort: Even after I am gone, I will be with you.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place/Honorable Mention – The Old Forgotten Door

The language of this poem creates a remote and potentially threatening setting – an abandoned church accessed through a forgotten door. A passing girl hears a voice, inviting her to knock and enter. She knocks. Is she brave? Naïve? Trusting? Whatever her motive, she is rewarded with a light, a cross, and an invitation which ultimately leads to her redemption and renewal.

It's hard to tell an old story in a new way, yet the setting and action in this poem make it fresh. The poem also uses line length and rhyme effectively, though these could be improved through more consistent use of punctuation. Future drafts might also give a bit more personality and back story to the girl, unless the intention is to make her an archetype for people generally. Still, the poem conveys its message effectively.

## **Fiction**

### 1<sup>st</sup> Place – Hysteria

The first paragraph of “Hysteria” conveys all the information the reader needs to know about setting, character, and circumstance. Nova is trapped by circumstance, a citizen of a repressive state in a decaying city. Her description and her reaction to her situation allow the reader to identify and sympathize. The second paragraph fulfills another key obligation of fiction – conflict that drives the action. We learn that Nova’s conflict with her state will be embodied in an android sent to live with her. Those are exactly the factors that compel a reader to keep reading.

After the efficient introduction, the story develops with just the right amount of description interspersed with dialog – an excellent tactic to keep the story from bogging down. The first complication is that the android is humanized, and Nova starts to like him. He asks to be named. He converses pleasantly. As Nova comes to accept him and even rely on him, she’s being lulled into acceptance of the state’s control. The next complication, though, occurs when she wants to see her same-sex lover. She knows the state disapproves of her relationship, so she must escape from Damian. The escape, the meeting with her lover, and the twist that occurs at the story’s end wrap everything up in a satisfying way that’s entirely consistent within the reality established by the story.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> place – Situation Lizard

A first-year college student thinks she has forgotten about a high school love interest, but somehow he keeps intruding on her thoughts and later, seems to run into her far too often for it to be a coincidence.

We have heard this story before, so if it’s to retain a reader’s interest it must be told in a fresh way. “Situation Lizard” meets that demand. The story begins with a lengthy diary entry which provides necessary background and context in a relatively economical way. From there, it moves the story

forward through conversation between girlfriends. Again, this is a staple of romance stories, but the characters are well-drawn and easy to relate to.

Two things make “Situation Lizard” rise above the typical teen romance story. One is the clever hook of the main character and her friend using animal code words to refer to the boys that have captured their interest. The other is that the story is in no hurry to get the main character together with her man. Stories are driven by suspense, so the longer the coincidences and conversations are drawn out, the better – if they are written efficiently and compellingly. “Situation Lizard” is a charming and sweet story that works.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> place/Honorable Mention – Satan’s Passage

An unnamed protagonist finds herself in a strange forest. She does not know how she got there, and she doesn’t know how she’ll get out – until a mysterious set of instructions appears. The instructions are opaque. The decision to follow them requires a leap of faith, but they do seem to apply to her situation and she really does not have alternatives. Meanwhile, the situation appears to be ever more dire. She follows the mysterious instructions. They eventually lead her to a person with the power to help her escape her predicament – if you can call it “escape.”

“Satan’s Passage” is intriguing in several ways. The story would work quite well without the mysterious instructions, but then there would be little to distinguish it from other “meeting with the devil” stories. The mysterious instructions give this story a unique angle and impose a greater burden on the story, that of synchronizing the instructions with the action. Another strength of this story is the way it moves forward through alternating description and dialogue, keeping the reader oriented through the description while keeping us interested through the dialogue.

## **Creative Non-Fiction**

### 1<sup>st</sup> Place – Obituary: Ms. Tooth Fairy

Sooner or later, a parent’s responsibility will include helping a child deal with the loss of a childhood fantasy. The Obituary for Ms. Tooth Fairy deals with this responsibility by adapting the requirements of a familiar form of prose, the obituary, artfully interweaving these requirements with the specific circumstances of one child’s story. The essay traces the child’s experiences with the tooth fairy: the excitement of the first lost tooth, the discovery under the pillow of money that replaced the first and later baby teeth, the beginnings of doubt in the tooth fairy’s existence, and ultimately the loss of innocence as reality replaces fantasy. This is contextualized by the requirements of the obituary form, including an account of the tooth fairy’s origin and accomplishments, her unique qualities in comparison with other fantasy fairies, and the way, though gone, she is fondly remembered. The creative combination of the obituary form with the personal story of a child’s appropriate loss of innocence help this essay rise above the qualities of the other accomplished entries in this category.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Place – My Grandma

Many people have Grandma stories, but not many have stories so richly told of the escapades of such a high-spirited Grandma. This essay paints a vivid picture of a Grandma whose love for her grandchild is palpable as she hosts the child for sleepovers. That love extends to helping the grandchild overcome fears of cemeteries, mausoleums, and trolls. Grandma's methods for de-sensitizing the youngster could seem cruel, except that (as the essay makes clear) she is willing to share the experience rather than inflicting it. This essay shows, through dialogue and description, the ideal relationship between a guardian and a child, with the Grandma encouraging the child to mature while providing love and support. The use of dialogue, interspersed with description, makes the incidents reported in the essay come to life.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place/Honorable Mention – Feeling My Heart Race

"I was the most excited twelve-year-old girl on the planet that August day," claims the narrator of this essay. The claim is hyperbole, but it is a perfect example of the delightful zeal of a twelve-year-old. The breathless tone persists, appropriately, throughout this account of a girl's first experience of a NASCAR race. Though the essay could benefit from reducing the number of adjectives and adverbs by about 1/3, even that stylistic feature is in keeping with the emotional tone of the piece. The tone fits the subject in two ways – first, to mimic a twelve-year-old's exuberance and wonder as she finally experiences something she's been anticipating for years, and second, to mimic the color, chaos, energy and noise of a day at a NASCAR track. The child's sense of wonder at a larger-than-life experience is unmistakable in this well-developed essay.