

Dear Writers:

I was one of the non-fiction judges for the White Bear Center for the Arts, WriteNow! student writing contest. I have entered lots of contests, but won few. I could tell you that you all deserve to win. True, maybe, but meaningless. It is a contest, right? I'm also not going to say how hard it was to choose. It was a pleasure to consider each of your entries, to be ushered into your lives, like a wedding guest who doesn't know the bride.

Readers are a writer's best prize. You all deserve to be read. That I say with confidence. Here are some of the excellent aspects of the work you submitted.

You use gestures to show emotion, "...my hands contained beads of sweat. I attempted to steady them by holding the gift for my foster mother..." You make embarrassing admissions. When your underwear falls out of your pants leg you "nonchalantly slid them toward the long blond ponytail." You find lessons in a poor rally performance. You see pathos that your record-breaking jump may be unrepeatable. You tackle tragic topics, the near death of a pet and notice the simple moments. A solitary oceanside sunrise leads to a greater appreciation for togetherness.

You used subtext. A student burdened by having to attend a family reunion, "Brought the heaviest luggage inside." There were surprising twists. An older sister with hearing loss is bullied by the principal, not other students. You began your stories with vivid scenes; a true/false self-assessment in a therapy office, a grandfather on his deathbed. You employed sophisticated literary devices, using the second person "you" tense to tell the story of an absent parent. You connected your introductions and conclusions. The mac and cheese-eating 9 year-old becomes the glutton-intolerant teen who muses that "what we enjoy the most is also the most dangerous for us." You offered rich sensory details, burnt batter in an otherwise sweet family baking scene. You weren't afraid to write from your most passionate interests: Hagfish slime and mortgage-backed securities. You admitted to multiple embarrassing fails behind the wheel for your driver's license.

My writing life hasn't brought me wealth or fame. The accolades I've garnered have been fleeting and few. Nonetheless, being a writer has been pivotal to me. For those who have been honored this time around, congratulations. Well done. For those who have entered, your turn will come, though I can't guarantee it. If you keep it up though, it won't really matter what anyone else says. One day you'll find yourself decades into a writing life, and you'll know that this practice, begun in your teens, is one of the best things you've ever done. Again, I can't guarantee that, but I'm pretty sure all the same.

Thank you for sharing your stories,

Mary Jane LaVigne