

2026 JUDGES' COMMENTS

1. WILD CARD AWARD

Judge: Steve Sanders, TX

A huge job, but it wasn't the quantity; it was the overall quality of the poetry in this packet which made my job so difficult. I've judged poetry contests for thirty years and this pack of poems is in the top five of all poetry submissions I have ever reviewed. Proofreading poetry is no less important than proofreading a novel or a will before it is published. A few of these poems lost out because of errors in grammar or spelling that diminished the power of the piece.

#1: "Act III" - Coleridge said "Poetry is the best words in the best order." This poem is a glowing example of that quote. Like a stunning short story, every word seems carefully chosen and put into the exactly right spot. I loved this poem.

#2: "In a Mother's Voice She Told Me" - Part of my process includes reading the poetry aloud. As I read this one, my throat constricted and I choked up, my eyes becoming watery. Great poetry should encourage the free expression of emotion. Not only does this one bring out emotion but it brings back memories and may inspire the reader to write as well.

#3: "Wild Asparagus" - Believe it or not, this is not the first poem I have read about cutting wild asparagus. But this is Nostalgia, the magic of something little and the power of shared experience. Lovely.

HM#1: "Death of a Distant Cousin, Three Years Old" - Such a sad but evocative piece! Death is often the subject matter for poetry but this piece approaches it from at least three different angles. Very powerful.

HM#2: "English is Phun" - I love rhyming poetry! This one was so clever and used so many witty examples that I couldn't put it down.

HM#3: "They Started Without Me" - What a gut-punch of a memory! This is a very revealing poem where the poet shed light on a dark part of their experience—unless the poet made it up! And if so, bravo!

2. MATHEW J. LIMBURG CHRIST-CENTERED POETRY Judge: Robert Christmas, UT

#1 "The Other Book" is well-written, authentic voice all the way through.

#2 "On the Reading of Parables" is short but clever. I suggest cutting "At best" from last line.

#3 "Considering Father": straightforward, honest voice, but better if the author would cut Jesus' lines from the end.

HM#1 "For Keeping Me Intact": I especially enjoyed the last line.

HM#2 "Move Along Folks" is okay, but better if the last six lines were deleted.

HM#3 "Song to My Father" suffers from a lack of clarity at times. Consider cutting last 3 lines.

3. DALE H. KOHLER MEMORIAL AWARD

Judge: N. Colwell Snell, UT

There were many fine poems, so I chose the ones that spoke to me.

4. ORVILLE WEBB AWARD

Judge: Brock Dethier, ME

No remarks beyond the usual: images and attention to detail. In my category with the topic “Refuge,” poets who chose familiar refuges—particularly nature—had to work harder to say something fresh.

5. BETTY FOWLER MEMORIAL—You Better Believe It

Judge: Mary Beth Bretzlauf, IL

I’m sure every judge states the category they judged was difficult, but this category, “About the U.S.A.,” is so broad, all the entries exemplified the spectrum of the subject. I had to set aside the emotional sentiment I felt reading all of them and instead focus on the creative descriptions as well as the clever poetic tools used to sharpen the images and emotions they conveyed.

6. ANN C. LARSON MEMORIAL

Judge: Rob Carney, UT

First, thank you to all who entered. Collectively, you gave me hours of good reading. and to the three poets awarded honorable mentions, good for you. I hope it feels nice to be recognized, and that’s what getting an Honorable Mention means.

#1 “Felled”: The poem begins with “If,” then plays historian, going back in time to say, “if only.” It’s a persona poem, and the world needs more persona poems since it shouldn’t just be playwrights and fictions writers who speak in character. There’s some direct address (a strong move) tucked in here. A great metaphor in the second section. Great sound imagery and smell imagery in the fourth section, and that creates the scene indirectly: everything stops for this sad disaster without telling us “everything stopped.” Altogether, “Felled” is a deserving poem, and my congratulations to the writer.

#2 “Wishing” begins with “If,” a word full of possibility. It continues through the end of the intro phrase into a second and third line that hook us. Then it rides on from there to its final word: “content.” And I *am* content because the poem is about wanting to do something, and the writing of it becomes the doing of that thing, which is just to be able to ride a horse one final time. The poem—and this is the great thing about poetry—is that one last ride.

#3 “Hoping to be plucked into heaven”: The voice and emotions of the poem sound and feel authentic: sad (for clear reasons) but also wanting to “startle condors and clouds / as I whoosh into wherever I’m headed.” So, sad but still feisty. It’s all expressed without showiness, and there’s a nice use of internal rhyme and some excellent lines like this one: “I sip from my chipped cup / of memory.” Well done.

HM#1 “Morning with Rain”: To me, everything about this poem is finally lifted into *more* by the ending. That last stanza—although it isn’t lineated like one—is a haiku that spring-coils all of the above into one last image that leaps even though it’s holding still. That’s cool.

7. VERNA HARTSOE CHIONG MEMORIAL

Judge: Lola B. Haskins, FL

Every poem I read touched my heart. If I could have, I would have given the whole group first place. Failing that, I chose six I decided worked best as poems—in terms of imagination and specificity—then read them over and over, ranking them in order of endurance. Keep in mind that

another judge might well have picked differently. Thank you for letting me read your work—I appreciate you.

8. STEVEN LEITCH MEMORIAL AWARD

Judge: Polly Opsahl, MI

I enjoyed reading the poems in this category. Poems selected for top prizes showed inspiration in unique ways. I was able to enter the poems through their descriptive language. Several good poems did not get recognition, but I was only allowed to select 6 poems.

As for improvements, a few poets seem to end their poems with a couple lines to sum up what they were trying to say - a did you get it? Some people call that writing beyond the ending of the poem. A few poems submitted read more like short essays with line breaks.

Punctuation can make the difference whether a poem rises to the top or sinks. In poetry it is completely up to the poet, but it should be consistent throughout a poem when used.

9. PAT BADER'S CELEBRATION OF LIVING

Judge: Patricia Barnes, MI

It was a pleasure to judge a batch of poems for children. I looked for specific poetic elements that children enjoy: rhyme, rhythm, playful language and memorability. Several fine poems were about children but not necessarily for them.

10. NAD RICHARD BROWN MEMORIAL

Judge: Dr. Karen Betstadt, CO

#1 "Prayer for Kent": good use of form to create the insistence of his desperation

#2 "Arizona Road Trip": effective and consistent use of metaphor

#3 "The Calm Before": good description of place and then a punch in leaving at the end

HM#1 "Stakes": effective end rhymes accentuate the experience

HM#2 "Remember Jane": simplicity of form belies and underlines the tragedy/subject of poem

HM#3 "Front Seat to a Storm": nice use of imagery

11. RACHEL OLSEN MEMORIAL

Judge: Diane Glancy, TX

I had a great time reading these poems. First place jumped out from the first. The others followed in their order. I loved the voices that spoke of the land—barns and fence posts—history and language. I found each of the winning poems pulled me into them with surprise and anticipation of what came next.

12. NORMA ASPLUND MEMORIAL

Judge: Bill Abbott, OH

13. WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS AWARD

Judge: Shanan Ballam, ME

There were several strong poems in this category, but they didn't fit the theme of "hope."

14. ODD SQUARE POEM

Judge: Stuart Watkins, AZ

#1 "Ute Woman": If poet gives permission, I'd like to include this poem in a book I am currently creating for publication on Amazon titled *Indigenous Native Americans*. No pay is offered but credit is given to the poet.

#2 "Fast and Furry-ous Mid-Day Break" was such a fun read with a clever ending.

#3 "Sea Stars": Crisp, clean, powerful.

HM#1 "What's In A Name?" was an enjoyable read throughout with a perfect ending.

HM#2 "Still Life": The last two lines grabbed my heart.

HM#3 "Bird Beguiled": Loved this line that tied the whole poem together: "Who can say earth is a hostile home?"

15. ROSALYN OSTLER MEMORIAL AWARD

Judge: Peter Stein, MN

The judging of this contest presented its own tug of war. So many of these poems had individual merits that made them engaging and enjoyable to read. However, quite a few fascinating tales presented as prose poems or straight up storytelling more than as poems. Entries that rose to the top not only were engaging narratives but used sound, cadence, and language to deepen the impact of emotion embedded within the lines.

16. VERA ISADORE PEARCE SPEARS MEMORIAL

Judge: Lee Taylor, UT

#1 "Ballad of Blind Amanda": Excellent poem, choice of words, emotional, sad. As we revere the heroes who built this country, this is part of the story.

#2 "Rushmore": Man of integrity, deserves to be on Mt. Rushmore. Great poem.

#3 "Old Paint" Fine story and poem that builds to nice reveal.

HM#1 "Home On the Range": Feels good—love of the range.

HM#2 "Cat's Meow": Good rhyme, story and surprise reveal.

HM#3 "Gettin' Groceries, Utah 1870": Funny, entertaining, builds to nice reveal.

17. KOLETTE MONTAGUE MEMORIAL AWARD

Judge: Jess Brown, UT

1st "Dementia": Using rope and thread imagery throughout feels so perfect. Where ropes can provide support and safety, they eventually weaken and fail. Thread is similar—these flexible tools allow for beautiful complexity, while the disease interrupts the cohesion. The loss feels devastating. Beautiful formatting supports this feeling of falling or unstructured and untethered experience.

2nd "Eyes in the Dark": I enjoyed the discomfort of this poem. The difficulty of grappling with a suicide—even of someone unrelated or historical—is turmoil. To encounter the ghosts of writers and thinkers like Woolf through their words and also through their stories is such a personal, empathetic, and connective experience.

"sanctity of stones"—reference to Peter?

"Did her howling mind // drown her screams"—powerful language & so many layers of imagery: water itself, voices/self-narrative, howls and screams...

"In the dark, did she die // eyes open?"—was she fully aware?

3rd "Pass the Salt": Fascinating tension between Judeo-Christian story imagery and experience of salt or symbolized hard truths.

Faith versus truth / Unsalted versus salted / Flat versus risen

Salt is salient symbol with paradoxical meaning, value, and application; great exploration of that tension, that duality and complexity.

HM#1 "Singing to Yourself": I found this personally meaningful and broadly applicable.

Finding ways to "sing yourself whole" through nature, music, presence, and harmony of

body and soul. Music as expression of self-love and healing an important message!

HM#2 “Letter to Mom”: Something about this is profoundly moving. That "quiet" link to Mom, who provides space for listening, for time together. Simple, seemingly mundane, predictable, common experiences and memories seem so salient after loss. So precious.

HM#3 “Identity Rekindled”: Contrasting symbols in this piece—what appears to be an "inappropriate" setting for a religious community (Buns of Steel atop the VCR, ha!). The seemingly casual wafers, grape juice—an almost irreverent Eucharist. A poignant message to Utahns and the religious scene, when efforts are made amid less-ideal settings and atmosphere (including those within Utah) using ironic placements of religious interactions to punctuate tension as non-majority communities reach out for each other.

Read comments on other entries:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mDHSXFM18k77FKUkV3IIAm2bZ_g23Wm0Gjv6wSQPXL4/edit?usp=sharing

18. BEN LOMOND CHAPTER AWARD

Judge: Kathy Jo Carter, IN

19. VALLEY WINDS CHAPTER AWARD

Judge: Gail Jennings, UT

I was pleased to see so many entries! Entering is the perfect way to start the process of winning. The subject of gratitude can be huge. One way to overcome this problem is to turn the subject on its head, look at it from a fresh perspective (remember “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”?) If you can find a quirky, unique view, you've improved your chances of standing out. Additionally, a long list of various items that could connect doesn't rouse much interest in your reader. Focus on a single clear idea, then strengthen your poem with as many senses as you can; involve sound, taste, temperature, color, or more.

20. DOROTHY L. & PAUL ROBERTS MEMORIAL

Judge: Kimberly Johnson, UT

21. LEROY MEAGHER SONNET

Judge: Michael Lavers, UT

22. MEAGHER MEMORIAL

Judge: Cade Huie, TX

I was struck by not only the quality of writing but also the incredible sense of humor exhibited by the poets. A number of times I laughed out loud. I was also impressed by the creativity as well as the variety displayed in this collection. They were all a pleasure to read and deserving of recognition. Congratulations to the winners of this contest as well as to everyone who submitted such great work.

23. ZARA SABIN MEMORIAL

Judge: Sara Gipson, AL

All poems in the category expressed intense personal emotion. I enjoyed reading them all. Most of the poems employed a variety of images which enhanced the emotional messages. The top poems also included at least one metaphor. I salute the poets of these pieces for successfully evoking emotions that I could feel beyond print on paper.

24. LLOYD MURRAY LIGHT VERSE

Judge: Dave Welch, UT

Some clever writing was evident with these poems. From my perspective, the top contenders were those writers whose poems were easy to read, had cadence, and brought a smile immediately when first read.

25. SHORT POEM—Vesta Crawford Memorial

Judge: Sarah McLaughlin, OR

These poems rose to the top based upon their originality and honesty. Astute insights and observations drew me into their carefully crafted forms. It's difficult to speak profoundly in short poems, but these poems spoke volumes briefly, beautifully.

26. REDROCK WRITERS FOUNDERS AWARD

Judge: Ann Howells, TX

Many of the poets used very original language and vivid images. Several used strong metaphors. In many cases my choice where to place a poem came down to a single word or phrase. I enjoyed reading the work and wish winners much luck submitting to journals.

27. DAVID F. & ROBERT H. BALPH MEMORIAL

Judge: Laurie Kolp, TX

Thanks for inviting me to judge. It is always a pleasure. I am impressed with the variety in interpretations of the prompt.

28. AMERICAN INDIAN HERITAGE AWARD

Judge: Susan Chambers, MN

29. HONORING U.F. & AGNES WOOD

Judge: Whitnee Coy, SD

30. HAIKU

Judge: Constance Brewer, WY

Many wonderful haiku in this category. The first-place captured the essence of haiku for me. Second-place poem had a surprise twist in the last line. Third-place poem's last line was warm and wonderful. All three honorable mentions evoked good imagery, and I was able to see the little scenes clearly. First HM was relatable to us gardeners. Second HM had a terrific line, "choreographed by the wind." Third HM captured something we northerners see every year.