

EMERGING WRITERS NONFICTION CONTEST

Judged by J.T. Dutton, author of the Young Adult novels *Freaked* and *Stranded*

FIRST PLACE:

"Yellow and Blue" by Halina Dreger of Lakewood, OH

Judge's comments:

"Yellow and Blue" is an essay which begins in a moment of a crisis. A young adult with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder struggles to control dangerous self-messaging in order to keep herself from the brink. This short non-fiction piece ends with the profound statement, "it helped me to catch my breath in a world that I thought was made entirely of water." Zoloft, the author ruminates, is not a miracle drug, but instead a technological advance that improves the quality of life in such overarching ways it forestalls the narrator's feeling of certain drowning. Could there be a more intimate understanding of the ways in which technology gifts us with futures we once could not imagine? The author combines the lucidity of her confessions with the fullness of gratitude. A reader is made to feel that they, too, have come to insight and inhaled possibility in the transit of this powerful narrative about survival.

SECOND PLACE:

"I Loved the Internet and the Internet Loves Me"

by Tyler Biddulph of Lakewood, OH

Judge's comments:

"My first order of debauchery was to create an account on Instagram": the author of the essay "I Loved the Internet and the Internet Loves Me" opens with a humorous salvo. What follows is a buckle-up-it's going-to-get-crazy reflection on the author's social media habits from the age of eight to young adulthood. The meditation pays careful attention to social media's ways of massaging our egos and tempting us with opportunities for guilty pleasure. The description of the author's online life begins to convey the zeitgeist of our times, the author's story standing in for all of us who check our "likes" before we eat breakfast and our yearning for the day that Rhianna likes us back. The writing in this riff on modern life is imbued with the awareness of technology as both a freeing and inhibiting accompaniment to our experiences. The insights are brilliantly honest and convey an authentic thirst for an identity more enhanced than lessened by social-media.

THIRD PLACE:

"Phone Drawer" by Maya Klatte-McAfee of Pittsburgh, PA

Judge's comments:

The author of the essay "Phone Drawer" wants you to know that they are frustrated, irritated with schools that possess smart technology but not air-conditioning, and about rules for paying attention, but not for keeping an AR-47 out of the hands of a gunman somewhere "downstairs." The author's underlying question seems to be, "what do I have to do to be heard in this technologically obsessed age?" In this examination of a society that seems to care more about its inventions than the children growing up in it, the author finds refuge in reading rather than interaction with world at large. Her imagery is forceful and blunt. The phone drawer, where teachers ask their students to leave their phones before class, becomes a metaphor for the compartmentalization we sometimes engage in order to survive.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

"Disparate Understandings" by Evan Bell of Lakewood, OH

Judge's comments:

The essay "Disparate Understandings" explores Heidegger's dual understanding of technology as both a means to an end as well as a human activity. With thoughtful, polished prose the author parses the paradox of a night talking online with a friend, carefully identifying the layers of technological abstraction that turn the two teens into travelers through time and space. Their souls join in a void that has no physical boundaries. The sophistication with which the author explores the paradox of social and technological experience invites contemplation. What are the philosophical principles which make us human? Can they be drowned out by modern invention, or is modern invention a continuation of our motivation to meet a basic need for a communal existence? The essay leaves us wondering at the indelibility of the human spirit and its desire to join with the world around it.

"The Power and Purpose of Social Media" by Emily Callahan of Chardon, OH

Judge's comments:

The author of "The Power and Purpose of Social Media" argues that social media is an integral and valuable asset to twenty-first century life. They posit that the posts, photographs and opinions they share represent the self that the world observes and understands as identity. Imbedded in the author's social media habit is a daily ritual of checking news stories and exploring the world beyond their experience, the way a pioneer might adventure in uncharted territories. The writer asks the reader also facing the newness of the technological world, to fear not. Beyond the Instagram image that took two-thousand vacation photographs to create is a person in love with invention, a person seeing themselves in many mirrors and reflecting on the miraculous and joy of seeing themselves always anew.

"The Shadows of Maria" by Fabian Vazquez Ramos of Sewickley, PA

Judge's comments:

The essay "The Shadows of Maria" begins with the author's *bisabuela* as a young girl in Puerto Rico searching the sky for signs of a storm—*la tormenta*. When the hurricane rushes in, her tale expands into an allegory for how we read signs of impending change. What follows is a description of modern technology that predicts shifts in the weather and of an aunt dying in the cataclysmic 2017 Hurricane Maria bereft of life support. The many poetic images reveal the author's optimism not just about how the right technology can save a life, but of enduring storms of all kinds that do not discriminate in their power to destroy. In the end, the author embraces a future that permits us to know more, even as we struggle with the unknown.