The best part of sponsoring an annual writing contest is getting to tell the winners they’ve won and hearing their initial response. “Hooray!” one winner fired back in an email. “This is so exciting!” wrote another.

It is gratifying to discover that the words you’ve struggled to put on paper have hit the mark. A writer is never quite sure if what’s in the mind will make sense when it’s placed in front of readers. So it takes special courage to send off one’s hard-won work to be critiqued by a panel of judges.

This year, some 30 medical students and physicians mustered that courage and sent in their stories, essays, commentaries and poems. Some wrote about times long gone. Some described memories that have lingered. Others wrote about events that just occurred. Many were very well-done, and the choosing was difficult.

But our judges deemed two poems to be so carefully crafted they rose above the other entries. And they selected other pieces as noteworthy as well (see our honorable mentions). We’ll publish these in future issues.

Congratulations to the authors of these pieces, and thanks to our judges: Dominic Decker, Theodore Fagrelius, Charles Meyer, MD, Dan Hauser and Ruth Westra, DO, who had the very difficult task of comparing poems with essays and stories. And finally, thanks to all who entered our contest.

That so many in Minnesota’s medical community are reflecting on experiences, probing issues and mulling over ideas says a lot about who our state’s physicians are. And that is worth celebrating. Hooray, this is so exciting!

Word play

The winners of our annual writing contest

The winners of our annual writing contest

Honorable mention

“IF THE TIME CAME,” by Michael Shreve, MD

“INFINITE AND SINGULAR,” by Sean Schulz, DO, University of Minnesota Smiley’s Family Medicine Residency Program

“ROSE,” by John Eikens, MD

“CLINICAL NOTE: MS.S, 25F” by Jessica Saw, Mayo Medical School

“THERE ARE DAYS WHEN I NEED A DAY,” by Holly Belgum, University of Minnesota Medical School

“THE WEIGHT OF DUST,” by Missy McCoy, University of Minnesota Medical School
Our physician winner is pediatrician Gary Snead, DO, who practices with St. Cloud Medical Group. He performs osteopathic manipulation on patients of all ages and practices behavioral medicine mostly with children and adolescents who have ADHD.

ON WRITING

I like “playing” with words. My mother patiently taught me grammar and punctuation rules. Now, it’s sometimes fun to twist, break or change those rules. And I love puns. I’ve been writing creatively since high school, but I’ve never before submitted work for any contest or for publication.

Writing helps me process thoughts and remember interesting ideas. My ADHD brain would otherwise quickly move on to other things. Even the most interesting and clever thoughts are subjected to short-term memory overwriting.

ON WHAT INSPIRED HIS WINNING POEM

Lately, we have been talking a lot about vaccine refusal. I know that basic, scientific, rational arguments are not going to be heard by those who choose to not vaccinate their children. To me, it seemed that a true, emotional, word picture would more clearly communicate the advantages of immunizations. I recalled my Mom and I going to visit someone she knew who had had polio as a child and was in an iron lung. The visits left a strong impression on me.

I was on a long drive through Minnesota last spring, when the parts of the poem just came together. When I got home, I typed up what I had put together on that trip and shared it with my daughter, who had just taken a poetry class at Minnesota State University - Mankato. She shared the poem with a classmate, and together we edited it down to the form I submitted.
Summer's Sorrow

BY GARY SNEAD, DO

Shh, Listen.
Silence speaks a summer's sorrow.
A soft summer's breeze sends whispers
across the water at the NO SWIMMING hole.
White puffs from the cottonwood mixed with milkweed tufts
are the only balls bouncing across the NO BASEBALL field.

It is a summer of lost laughter,
the Big Death, emptying bedrooms.
The funeral is the final goodbye to a family's future.
The little deaths lock life in limbs of lost use,
in useless lungs, air out of reach.

Atmosphere of life
lost to the little ones,
out of reach of the suffering.
Air all around worthless as an ocean of saltwater to the stranded sailor.

Arise, sensitive souls
Sister Kenny heard and obeyed, moved by frozen children's cries,
she moved the motionless,
the lost found some hope.

Arise
Engineers erected electric elongated traps to catch and move the air.
The breathless given a chance to rest.

Arise
Salk heard the supplications from the silenced cries of the sick
and found a possibility, not yet perfected, but
particular,
purposeful,
to push away the pain and paralysis,
to prevent the passing of patients punished by proliferating polio.

Sabin’s sweet success, sugar cubes saved summer.
Some are saved from the Big Death.
Some are spared the loss of little deaths.
Iron lungs now silent.

The silence speaks of summer's sorrows.
Will we now fear what saves?
Have we stopped listening to the silence of those summers?
Our student winner is fourth-year University of Minnesota medical student Angela Volkert. Volkert, who grew up in Northfield, spent her first two years at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. She plans to go into rural practice and is interested in OB/GYN and family medicine.

ON WRITING
I have been writing off and on since taking a creative writing class in high school. I now write as a way to try to capture memories of things that I have experienced throughout this whirlwind process of medical school. I want to remember those big moments, and writing is a nice way to fully process significant events.

Writing also helps me feel connected with the patients I interact with. It is a way I can share what I’ve learned with family and friends. Each day is unique and brings experiences I know others may find hard to fully relate to.

ON WHAT INSPIRED THIS POEM
This poem was inspired by an interaction I had while on my OB/GYN rotation. The morning described in the poem was very difficult emotionally. I found myself replaying the events in my head. Writing about them was a way to not only help me through the difficult situation but to share it with others, as situations like this occur everywhere.
Nursery Trio

BY ANGELA VOLKERT

I was greeted with three bassinets in the nursery this morning,
Two perfect little girls wrapped in pink blankets and a sweet boy in blue
All swaddled and content they slept while a nurse and I worked around them
Soft coos and wide yawns came out of the tiny bundles
Rarely a peek out of a half-opened eye might surprise me
I can only imagine what they might be dreaming about
What is this world besides loud, cold and bright to them?
All three appear the same, navigating Day 1 of this life together

My attention is shifted, there are rising voices outside
Beyond the ambiance of the nursery, the hallway hosts emotional turmoil
A visitor from the County has brought fourth court orders
News that hits like a tornado—ripping and howling the dark reality
Knocking down these new parents—frustrated, ashamed, furious and helpless
Their pasts prove them unsuitable—too dangerous to raise their twin girls
Drugs and jail stints haunt their histories and taunt while circling their conscience
Wishing it all back, wishing for a fresh start, praying for forgiveness
“Effective immediately” the orders echo down the hall
Forcing them to only peer at their two new daughters through the nursery glass

They haven’t moved an inch, but are suddenly in a completely different place than their neighbor in blue
Positioned now behind the starting block before they even knew they were in a race
Destined for a future of foster homes and shuffling
The challenges they will face have just multiplied
Will they share the same playgrounds? Be read to at night?
Will they be able to look up into the stands and see their parents cheering them on?
Will they be the lucky ones and gain their parents back?
Or will they be taken in and loved by another set of parents?

The boy’s bassinet has since returned to the family’s room
He’s across the hall asleep in mom’s breast shadow
The girls sleep side-by-side, with only each other
For those few moments this morning they got to be a part of that perfect tiny trio.
Three new slates: lined up and full of potential.

The pager on my hip interrupts: I have to get to clinic
I leave the dim room slowly and with a heavy heart—willing them my hopes:
Keep that potential girls—bottle it up and protect it.
Fight for yourselves, work toward your goals and look after one another