

2018 Annual Contest Winners: Landscape Category

First Place

Sage Creek Rim Road

Badlands, South Dakota

By Julie Martin

Recent rains have turned gravel to sludge.
Mud accumulates on my bike tires like a giant snowball
causing me to move in the exaggerated slow motion of a mime.
Signs warn of stampeding bison and prairie dogs carrying bubonic plague.
Looking over the landscape my son murmurs, "This looks like Mars."
We are entering another realm.

Before us— valley that used to be ancient ocean.
Striated spires rise— ochre, mustard yellow, cinnamon, umber.
Layer upon layer of fossilized animal remains
suspended in time.
Bison are grazing in the distance.

My husband and boys have biked ahead
vying to outdo one another in feats of strength and endurance—
competition breeding competition.
I stand alone.
Like a mirror, this vast panorama reveals an inner terrain—
rocky and difficult to navigate.

Alone, yet sounds of life surround me
a continual cycle from ancestor to offspring:
spring peepers, low to the ground, but singing high.
Meadowlarks swooping in and out, flaring and fading
annoyed prairie dogs scolding, a 'chit-chit' sound,
exclamations shaking them from mouth to tail.
Cows murmuring maternal calls to their calves.
Finally, the sound of my own heavy breathing as I gain momentum
on the wet gravel.

Second Place

Grand River

By Judy Larson

In winter, placid she lies
Waiting for the azure skies
Warmth of spring: her freedom felt,
Boundaries escaped, rains pelt.

Summer brings deceptive calm;
Waters trickle out a psalm.
In autumn, she awaits the chill
The pools: shallow, staid and still.

Our lives tied closely
with the river's curve.
She offers up freely,
our thirst to serve

Third Place

Rocks, Dirt and Bones

By Kelli Schmidt-Bultena

What makes a South Dakota poet?
Authenticity.
The real, often plain, truth.
Simple even. Too simple to be acclaimed,
of course. It's more like rocks and dirt and bones.
The pieces that make up the foundations of all things.
But really, no one reveres.
No one stops to marvel.
No one places hand over heart to pause.
I do.
This earth, this dirt, in this place, I claim.
Caressed as if it were my baby.
Tilled and turned and put to bed.
These rocks, like specs of prehistoric memories,
gifts given straight from the belly of the earth.
All these truths felt in my bones.
The kind of stories you know without influence.
That's what makes a South Dakota poet:
rocks, dirt and bones.