

Judy Belsky

First prize

my son

dies in an accident
people say: you only had him for sixteen years
but in his absence, he is everywhere
there is no check on the flow of data
memory cells turn themselves inside out
 once, when he is six, we get caught in brambles
I hold the branches back so he can pass
the small white scar on my index finger
a haiku that contains the entire text of that day
 I sense him back in that wild patch of woods
I trip over strange roots
he holds back the branches so I can pass
he is the native here
I, the awkward immigrant
he is fluent
I miss nuance
I cannot find the word for desire
my language is in exile
 I calculate the rough cost of return
I will lose one-sixtieth off the topsoil of memory
I will lose the intimacy of small scars on the lost map of childhood
 he draws away, I think to make room for me
but he pulls back only to gain leverage to stand upright
if I cling to him
I will distort the beauty of his boundaries

 and so, I turn back
when I write
I tilt the angle of my book
my lines run off the page
with him
to infinity

Rumi Morkin

Second prize

Alzheimer's (Villanelle)

*My husband was a talented artist,
an intellectual; partner and friend.*

He couldn't paint, no longer even tried
As talent withered slowly, cell by cell.
We looked on, helpless, as his person died.

His thoughts and feelings locked away inside,
Unvoiced lost words, unable now to tell,
He couldn't paint, no longer even tried.

When asked how he was feeling he replied
With happy smile, a mantra: "I am well..."
We looked on, helpless, as his person died.

Admitting he'd forgotten hurt his pride,
Increased confusion, fleeting lucid spell...
He couldn't paint, no longer even tried.

Already mourning, secretly I cried,
Lost intellect had left a mindless shell,
We looked on, helpless, as his person died.

No longer wife, I slept still by his side,
Year after year, a long drawn-out farewell.
He couldn't paint, no longer even tried.
We looked on, helpless, as his person died.

The Torah Pointer

wasn't mahogany, wasn't precious brass or silver.

If he had to guess, he would say it was
common oak cut from a crooked tree — the pointing finger itself
warped, tilted slightly to the left from a tight knot
in the knuckle. The tailor long wondered how it found
its way to Ciechanowiec, becoming the school's
teaching Yad, and the old man recalled the thrill of holding it,
his chin then smooth as an apple flower.

The Torah Pointer belonged to no one, belonged to
every one; had taught each boy to read the scroll
for generations — the oils of so many hands seasoning it
until the wood glistened as a great wing fanned
in flight above the Noteć. How many boys had it taught?

The question couldn't be answered, yet none
had been denied it — rich or poor man's son,
before the white ribbons, the yellow stars.

But it was the tailor who retrieved it, saving the pointer
from the fire. The sacred scrolls burned, remains rising
in whirls that day in '41. By dawn, Nazis' shells had devastated
the town — so many (in his long life) dead.
He hid behind fallen beams from the rubble synagogue. He found it there.
Ripping the seam of his bekishe, he hid the pointer inside.
The tailor gathered the fabric around it; binding the placket with pins
he carried in the pocket of his coat.

The pointer pressed hard against him. He closed his ears,
shut the ark of his eyes. It was then the words of Job echoed
from the small vault of his body — And I sewed sackcloth on my scabs,
sullied my radiance in the dust.
His fingers burned, as they wrapped round the palm of whittled wood,
the Yad alive as a living oak: The pointer angled upward
to some unseen reach: a reach beyond text and smoke, to sound —
the remote rasp of a Black-Crowned Heron.

Anne McCrady

Honorable mention

Bug Collection

Barefoot when not in school,
outdoors until made to come in,
the boy's first lesson in man's obsession
with dominion was the assignment
by his fifth-grade teacher to collect bugs.
Already nursing a need to please,
he did as instructed, took the task to heart.
Rocks were turned to reveal shy beetles.
Porch lights poached for suicidal moths.
Honey dished up to seduce fruit flies.
Walking sticks, lifted. Wasps, netted.
Butterflies snatched like naïve children.
Earwigs. Crickets. Katydid. Bees.
No species, safe. No genus, unnoticed.
Pinned to black felt, labeled with names
as delicate as their cellophane wings,
the fragile victims were laid out
in desiccated rows of *Insecta's* family tree.
His instructor applauded his perfection,
a model of precision, impressive work...
but for weeks afterward, the child awoke
at night in a sweat, crying out,
Fly! Oh, Please, Fly! Fly Away!

We Stumbled to the Singing Sea

We stumbled
to the singing, rock-edged sea,
where memories are found more than lost,
washed ashore and combed by you and me
in the tide-wrack high upon
the dune-cropped strand.
We sifted,
searching for shells that once
mothered pearls and found chords that go
with words that brought us there
while we lyriced inner hymns, to dreamcatch
distant squalls and scudding foam,
tempted scuttlings of ghost crabs
just beyond our fingers' reach,
and probed loose rafts of
green-nubbled Irish moss souging
in the tuck of restless tidal pools,
each shepherding other memories, other seas,
within the forgiving ebb.
When we left, retracing roads,
we echoed surf and
reprised glitterings of the sea but soon
all faded into the sorting of mail
and retrievals of messages.
Yet the sharp salt air and
the Irish moss kept with me then
and still now.
It's tough
to wash
away.

Esther B Lipton

Honorable mention

Quietude

In silence there is noise.
Turn off the silence and listen
Tick, tick, tick of the old clock
Drip, drip, drip of the leaky tap
Incessant buzzing of the fridge
Intermittent clicking of radiators cooling
Creaks and groans from slow steps on the stairs
Distant rumbles of travelling thunderclouds
Frenzied twitter of wrens fighting for food
Winds shaking the dry autumn leaves
Leaving naked the limbs of the trees
Growls of complaint from my empty stomach
In the middle of private prayer.

In noise there is silence.
In music; da: da: da: dar long pause, repeat
When Star Wars fails to awaken the sleeping child
At the end of a concert, before clapping spoils the joy
When a thumping headache ceases for awhile
When a penalty goal is given and the striker is poised
When the audience stops its chatter and the curtain rises
When the crunch of boots follows snow falling upon snow
When thoughts arise between my tap, tap, of computer keys.

Reuven Goldfarb

Honorable mention

Who's Going To Play Me in the Movies?

Who's going to play me in the movies?
I've given you all the clues — the writings,
photos, audio and video files,
reams of letters to friends and confidants,
the memories of my children and theirs —
(if you interview them); the impression
of my soul on the daily round; my house,
filled with books, mementos, favorite cups
and dishes, cooking pots and utensils —
What more do you need? The patina of age,
I'd guess. How would you acquire that?

How would you get into my skin?
Assume my persona? Adopt my speech?
Emulate its timbre? Its tone? — clipped,
ironic, sincere, engaged. Tell my jokes?
Portray my vivid smile, my raucous laugh,
my inner life? My moral wrestling? My gait?
My prayer? My glance? My flow? My letting go?

David Silverman

Honorable mention

Parting With My Prayer Shawl, Made By My Daughter, Upon the Zombie Apocalypse

My wife and I are talking with our friend Molly, in synagogue, just before services begin. Molly compliments the prayer shawl draped over my shoulders, whose colorful collar has stitched into it an elaborate needlepoint depicting the Old City of Jerusalem. I tell her that my daughter made the collar for me and add, if our house caught fire and I could run in and save only one thing, it would be the shawl. Realizing, an instant too late, that I've prioritized an inanimate object over my wife of 36 years, Lauren shoots me an incredulous look and says, "Seriously? I'm standing right here."

Thankfully, I see she is more amused than annoyed and, contrary to my faux pas, I have often insisted that (a) I would surely run into a burning building to save her; (b) I would donate a kidney to her, if she needed one; and (c) if she committed a crime and was sent to jail, I would wait for her, no matter how long she is gone. And even though she has informed me that if I am sent to jail, she will not reciprocate my grand gesture, it changes nothing. This woman, who has taken care of me in a thousand ways, who has given me children, who accepts me, notwithstanding my general cluelessness and frequent gaffes, has earned my fealty.

So, the bullet meant for Lauren will have to pass through me first, and any internal organ she wants is hers for the asking. And, when the zombie apocalypse begins, she knows I will sacrifice myself and tell her to run. After we embrace, for what may be the last time, I'll wrap her in the prayer shawl made by our daughter, the vibrant blues and reds and yellows providing some cheer in a bleak world overrun by the living dead. And, before she leaves, I tell her what she already knows: that if, somehow, the zombies are vanquished, she can return the shawl to me at home, where I will be waiting. No matter how long she is gone.

Elisa Subin

Honorable mention

One Final Storm

As too hot summer nights fade
And the tired porch rocker begs for oil
I gaze as my soul is drifting away
To where fireflies slow dance with the moon

You beg me to come inside
The storm you holler
But I pretend not to hear, instead resting
Peacefully, under the old sagging awning

From beyond, thunder rattles the trees
Til their ancient roots shake the earth
And at lightning's wide arc, I breathe in the thrill
That only one final summer storm can bring

Verses from a Mediterranean Cruise

i. Aboard the Golden Iris

The captain is out walking, the navigation bridge
manned by a deckful of computers
e-compasses proliferate like coffee cups.
All that remains from bygone days is the mooring rope
and ghosts of sailors sweltering in boiler rooms.

ii. Rome

“Caligula was not a pleasant person,” says our guide Eliferia.
She tells us her name means liberty, shows us umbrella trees
and exclaims, “Just now the jacaranda is blossing.”
We stand at the Colosseum with a throng of tourists
babies sleep in strollers, another guide drones on,
it is hot, we fidget.
When Caligula was bored, between gladiators,
he ordered his guards to throw a portion of the crowd to the bears and lions.
When we hear about aqueducts it reminds us to ask where are the toilets.

iii. Museo delle Marionette, Palermo

Knights and Moors knock each other about, swords clank and clash, wooden heads fly
the puppeteers, not quite obscured behind the screen, strut and croon.
Upstage, their plump little brother grinds the barrel organ like an old, old man.

iv. Valletta, Malta

Oleander spills its perilous perfume everywhere.
The churches have two clocks: one with real time, the other to fool Satan.
In the bird sanctuary wounded falcons are rescued.
Malta is replanting olive groves: with each new baby, an olive tree is born.
Workmen on roofs wave as we ride by
drenched with sun on the top deck of the open-air bus.
We are enchanted, but growing weary.

v. Homecoming

Daybreak, we sail into Haifa Port
gray workaday birds on telephone wires, frayed undershirts on clotheslines
inexplicably move us.
Our houses await, expectant as grandchildren leaning to ask what did we bring them?
Like Odysseus, home from the wine-dark sea, we return,
bowed down with our burden of stories.

Ann Bar-Dov

Honorable mention

The Night Baker

(“No Torah without bread. No bread without Torah.” *Avot* 3:17)

The Night Baker makes his way through deserted Safed streets.
Winter. Two A.M. Cold mist wafts over the slick road.
All the stores are shuttered and locked up tight.
The only light in any building
is in the upstairs windows
of the yeshiva near the square
where yeshiva *buchers* sway and argue over texts,
steam rising from paper cups of coffee,
fluorescent lights humming
and battering at their brains.
The Night Baker walks on.
He has a mission
and his mission is bread.
He arrives at the bakery, turns the key in the lock.
The oven room is dank and grimy.
The Night Baker turns on the ovens.
The room begins to warm.
Little rivulets of odor crack the air.
All-night radio murmurs in the corner.
The Night Baker works till dawn.
Pouring. Measuring. Twisting dough.
He looks up and nods at the first dayshift girl
as she knocks on the glass of the bakery door.
It's time to go home.
The Night Baker retraces his steps in the lightening day
as the yeshiva *buchers* stagger out of the yeshiva doorway
and move down the street to the bakery
for fresh baked goods and a hot drink
and then home.

In the end, everyone goes home.
The *buchers*, and the Night Baker too.
Welcome to Safed. It's a new day.
Morning fog glitters
and gilds the quiet streets.

Prairie Flower

i stood eye to eye with a common kansas
sunflower one hot day in july.
it stared back, daring me to consider my ignorant sensibilities.
the stifling moist air beading its way down the small of my back,
waiting for the story.

how did those young, intrepid immigrant women
from southern russia stand facing those menacing yellow faces
who dared them to make space and allow them to make a home there?
the medicine flower could not save them.

how did the stubborn bobbing head feel upon hearing
the Irish lullaby sung to a dying baby? just how many songs had it heard?
they were burying as many as in the land they left;
trading potatoes for the brazen flower that followed the sun;
followed the babies into their graves.

on a hot day in the middle of a summer storm
a young prairie woman relieved herself among
tall grasses and the silent staring sunflower.
her leather beaded foot-cloths covering tired worn feet
she had already walked many moons with baby.

the bison lifted his head to hear many footfalls coming towards him
eye to eye with the yellow sentry
nodding her head in warning
he sees his herd deep in the tall grasses, rears his heavy head
and bellows the call to run.

the sunflower looked at me and i looked back,
it had been here before the russians, the irish, the pawnee, the bison
and would be here long after me.

we are audacious
to think we can face off with a flower.

Helen Bar-Lev

Honorable mention

The Poetry of Gazelles

We always saw them from a distance
and only one each time,
a little black dot with neck and legs,
still as a statue under a tree's shadow,
hardly a second to search for them
as the car shot by on the wide highway

But then this morning, unsuspecting,
unprepared, I looked up and there were
three gazelles, grazing so close to the road
that the white stripes on their heads,
horns, the movement of muzzles
as they made a meal of leaves,
stood out in tawny relief

The moment of magic gone
I searched the landscape for more,
amongst the shrubs, the low shade trees
and up until the mountains merged with cobalt sky
and the puffy clouds of a November morn

But the only creatures to be seen were cows,
sepia in colour, the exact hue of the earth
as though they had been created
from the self-same clay

A hawk hovered, swooped,
down and up again, a snake in its talons,
and then where nature ended and city began,
the gazelles disappeared
and only the poetry of their presence remained