

at the funeral of a ploughman

by John Gallas, UK – First Prize

The day begins, blank as sheets,
over this dull land's plain pastures.
The men and women come and go, the season's spades,
against this solemn time, laid aside.

I put on my boots and walk to the levels.
Fog hangs in the poplars. A bell bangs far away.
The loam is thick and grey. Perhaps to such people
who tend it this land may be liked and belong.

I wander as far as the marshes. A ghost tractor.
Cabbage-coloured lilies turn up into the rain.
Hats and shoes lie neatly in the Hall porch, tied with flowers
and shaped like shovels. I can hear them singing.

High towns of cloud tow their black suburbs
across the roof. *O give us strength, and a long day's light.*
The land lies heavy, clodded and close. I long for the sea.
Ploughs and harrows wait and gleam like wet insects.

Perhaps such people who tend it
labour and love for its sake. Rain rings on the bell.
I wait on a bench inside the porch. The doors thump open :
the bier sways past. I quietly call his name.

Well, he was kinder than the life that made him.
The bearers carry him into the mist.
Beyond the tilled bank they sink into the earth.
I stamp the mud from my boots. An owl sighs in the spindles.

Pencil Me In

by Donna Bechar, Israel – Second Prize

I.

I remember those eons of days
 chaining together words and arranging arithmetic
 with yellow tooth-pocked number two's

The childish jottings of leaden thoughts
 and leaded lessons not permitted the use
 of ink-definite self-assertion
 only allowed the soft slur of penciled words
 vulnerable to erasure if proved unworthy
 to blemish the crisp white between blue lines

I remember the thrill of sharpening a dulled tip
 the slow rotation of the plastic-housed blade as
 the continuous roll of wooded scrap emerged
 my power over the outcome, if over nothing else
 a new weapon, like a fresh-edged arrowhead
 ready to find home in a concise point

II.

There's 'the power of the pen'
 with its I-am-what-I-am confidence
 its adamant crosshatchings in a portrait

But it's the pencil's power to change
 to become, transmogrify, transform
 that forgives its little by little lax-focus smearing

III.

I wonder if we are ephemeral
 if we are penciled in on calendar squares
 where our name – as if written on the
 ripples of a watery tablet, where
 an undercurrent stretches their tendrils
 back into the quiet calm of non-existence –
 can be rubbed off by those pink cherubs,
 grain by grain, into the crevices of wooded fibers
 instead of standing sturdy in that diehard ink

Alexander Pope in India

by Wendy Dickstein, Israel – Third Prize

Reaching through years
neatly folded up and packed away
like wedding clothes
or old essays and poems,
I stumble on a half-forgotten line of Pope
as I stand musing, mornings at my gate,
watching the heat uncoil like a snake
and the strange, elegantly turned birds
whose names I have not learned
shake the waking music from their throats
like drops of water.
The lizards, poised attentive on the walls,
listen, though they seem to have no ears.
Now come the beggars, banging old tin drums
Allah's battered crooners
shattering morning's stillness
for a handful of last night's rice.

A door squeaks open, spattering light
through the dark shed, windowless
home for two young sisters and their barelegged men.
I watch them at their morning ritual
a small scratched mirror and a plastic comb.
(What was it now, that line from Pope?
something about the "Sacred Rites of Pride,"
and "Awful Beauty putting on Her Arms,"
Belinda at her Toilet – that was it.)
One slender girl, with deft and delicate hand
picks lice eggs from her sister's hair
gossiping of this and that
oblivious as Belinda and her maid.
The sharp-eyed baby, scant as a rag doll
squatting in the dirt
is strangely disconcerted
by the literary visions
cascading through my mind.
She shakes a tiny angry fist
at the sylphs that screech and circle through the air
blurring my morning
with their shrill dark laughter.

Auschwitz

by John Ling, UK – Honorable Mention

She is tall, elegant, cool. Speaks with precision, quietly,
accustomed to quietness, the stillness of death,
even from the living. Does not ask for questions.
She knows none will come. Detached, expressionless,
day after day she recites the facts, ages, dates of birth,
places of origin, length of survival, crimes committed,
punishments meted, each human category, mothers,
babies, under thirteens, young and fit, old and useless,
handicapped, disposal of goods, recycling of materials.

She walks slow and patiently, allows time, time to see,
time to recoil from what we see. Time to recover.
And with each hut we visit the darkness grows deeper.
But her words are relentless, dropping shock upon shock
into our pool of complacency, a driving rainfall of needles
of pain, till we are drenched in agony, heavy with shame,
each mouth clamped shut, unable to speak, nothing to say.
And having reached the end, we are left naked, stunned,
and speechless, in the humble sunshine, as she calmly
walks away, to meet the next consignment.

2001

Bougainvillea

by E.D. Watson, USA – Honorable Mention

Tumbling over limestone walls
a spill of color that stuns the eye
a shock of red and pink that pours
as from a wound in a man's side

a color from which more life shines
than any painted thing
any starving pilgrim's face
any bird or infant's cry

more than the white stones that at noon
dazzle with untrammelled light.
Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
destroyed and then rebuilt again

to suit the changing tastes of men
and their gods, caesars and caliphs
and kings – how many has this ancient vine
survived, how many eyes have seen

this color and stilled the axe, the torch –
who else paused before this aged plant, its trunk
broad as a man's thigh, and understood
the holy can neither be pillaged nor ruined

without some damage to the soul.
Surely this color is a holy thing
this color screaming in my eyes, unmuted
yet silent as the voice of God.

Flamenco

by Celia Merlin, Israel – Honorable Mention

The night we fought
in that hotel in Seville,
I dreamt that you finally left,
worn out by our color
drenched battles.

Your mother appeared –
a castanet clapper, she

rejoiced to be rid,
clapped righteous claps
stomped stubborn heels
on the scuffed wooden floor
that held us.

The rose in her hair was red and full.
Her polka dot dress billowed big
on her arms, like the bare thin curtains,
arched upwards, brow raised,
her eyes pointing sideways at me.

There was no collecting
of words from the pillows.
There was no
one more chance
to be found.

The deserved retribution,
the day of my reckoning,
so dearly and duly expected,
the pride of her wishes
arisen at last.

Puppets and Cotton Candy

by Johnmichael Simon, Israel – Honorable Mention

His hands were scarred and calloused,
experienced with pain, as he wielded the knife
deftly cutting, paring, shaping,
until the puppets emerged from the wood
slits for eyes, gouges for cheeks,
scowls for mouths, always scowls

How the children laughed at them up on the stage
Punch hitting Judy, thwack thwack
and the policeman hitting Punch with his club
knocking him to the floorboards
to rise and cry and receive more whacks

And then we went and bought cotton candy
and watched how the old woman poured sugar
into the hole and how the spindle spun
as she wound long strands of white or pink
around a stick into a great shining wand of fluff

These days when she sees them closing in
with arthritic fingers, cutting away
to gouge and leer, or when she feels hands
underneath the stage manipulating in worn routines,
she closes her eyes, pours herself into
this little hole, winds her flying pink-white
body around a stick, hands it to a sobbing child
and watches how his tears turn into sticky gooey
bites that dissolve in the mouth and disappear
until all there is left is a plain old piece of wood

Rembrandt's Saul Listening to David

by Dina Yehuda, Israel – Honorable Mention

Saul
sits enfolded in darkness
his wild beard a shadow
his face a shroud

the muscles in his neck
strain towards the melody
teasing him closer
to an elusive God

which seems to promise
or remind him
of everything in the world
that is better than glory

All this he sees in David's face
illuminated in sorrow and gentleness
light dances from David's nimble fingers
straight into Saul's shriveled heart

but Saul's right hand
clings tightly to the spear
and his left hand is buried
in the weight of the curtain

what lies ahead is lost
in the heft of the turban
bound too tight on the head
weary of wearing it

it is hidden
in the creases of his cloak
and in the mantle
he is doomed to wear.

Something is Always Arriving at its End

by David Adès, Australia – Honorable Mention

Something is always arriving at its end,
this breath and the next and the next.

I wonder now each time I see you, each time
I speak to you, if it will be the last.

I wonder if something lies beyond each end,
if what has finished continues a secret life

in another realm, if the last time I see you
in this realm is not the last time I see you.

Now I am making a mountain of endings
in order to climb it, to look from its summit

upon what I have never seen before,
spread out before me in every direction,

coming to my own end with eyes open,
not wanting to miss it, not wanting to miss anything.

The Night You Ran Out the Door

by Sophia Luna, USA – Honorable Mention

the night that you ran out the door,
you were a pack of old worn playing cards
duct-taped together after a magic trick gone wrong

it was late summer,
late enough that we were sick of each other
and summer enough that dusk still seemed as endless as
your cold hands in mine

the night that you ran out the door,
the sky was like a skull split down the center of its nose
opened to reveal the worms and maggots crawling in its eye sockets
everything I didn't tell you
was the worms
everything you didn't tell me
was the maggots

you left a bright green post-it on my beloved piano
that read "ignore me"
as if I would ever again caress the keys you said were fireflies
because now the blinking black and white notes
are the steering wheel of a car
that crashed into a tree
for no reason
with no explanation

the next morning,
the cloud-streaked sky was a chalkboard already covered in everyone else's stories
and over those sweeps of dusty white
I wrote and rewrote the story of

the night that you ran out the door

how you were a pigeon and I was a crumb
how together we were a cracked city sidewalk
and how your car crashed into the old oak tree
for no reason
with no explanation

The Numbers

by Patti Tana, USA – Honorable Mention

The first time I saw the numbers was at my first shiva call.
Too young to go to school with my brothers,
I walked across town with my mother to pay her respects
to a woman she sang with in the choir
and to comfort a man who had survived Auschwitz.

As the man poured us tea at his small kitchen table,
I saw the blue numbers on his left arm.
When I turned to my mother, she shook her head,
so I said nothing as I sipped my tea
and ate a piece of bread – my first taste of sweet butter.

The next time I noticed the numbers, we were guests
for Thanksgiving dinner at the home of a friend.
As her aunt carved the turkey, her arm moved back and forth,
back and forth, then she lifted the slices with the long fork
and gave us our portion.

By then my mother had told me the meaning of the numbers
and that our bodies should return to the earth without tattoos.
Many years later, when she was old and I was getting old,
I needed five blue dots tattooed on my chest
to guide the beam that killed the cancer before it killed me.

The Tower

by Esther B. Lipton, UK – Honorable Mention

End of a long bleak concrete corridor
The grey concrete room
Door shuts fast, inside there are no handles
Empty, no windows, acute triangular floor area
Smooth tapering walls disappear into the lofty narrow vortex
From which the dim light of day, drips into the space below
Metal ladders secured against the walls,
Useless, first rung too high, last too short to reach the top.
Horrible humour, hangs around.

The room is empty, full of departed souls
The room is silent, filled with anguished cries
No way out, trapped in terror, hope fades
Fear grows, enclosing walls,
Catatonic, light dust of ashes
Falls and the heat intensifies
The door opens
I come out
Alive.

(Holocaust Memorial, Berlin)

Tilting at Windmills

by Jennifer Lagier, USA – Honorable Mention

Hand in hand, we wander damp trails
in Golden Gate Park, pass sleeping bags,
ragged mattresses holding chilled homeless.

Baghdad by the Bay seems like a war zone.
Displaced refugees hide beneath cypress,
cloaked from view by tangles of flowering bushes.

Cold untouchables converse
with invisible demons
or their own higher powers.

Across the street, church-goers
step over sprawled bodies,
piously enter their places of worship.

A faux windmill towers over all.
Decorative rotor blades uselessly spin,
disconnected from purpose.