

Texts of the Four Prize-Winning Poems, Reuben Rose Competition, 2005

First Prize: "Be ahead of all parting" by Anne Ranasinghe

*Sei allem Abschied voran,
als wäre es hinter dir*

*Be ahead of all parting,
as though it already
were behind you*

– Rilke: *Sonnets to Orpheus*

Such a calm afternoon. A benign sun
greens the needles of monumental firs.
Below the meadow glitters the lake

where a male swan glides in regal style
guiding his cygnets, a downy single file;
and you tell the story of the mother swan

who died, poisoned, while still hatching her young.
Tea-time. We pass the cake. Your face
is pale but beautiful, almost unchanged.

A family circle. We have gathered at this summery place
coming from far. It was arranged.
White linen, old china - and you, a hostess full of grace.

And a guest comes and joins us at the table,
we see him but we do not greet him
and all the while he sits silently.

The afternoon softens into dusk
and the firs cast shadows that blacken and grow
towards a winter, a bitter winter

towards a winter that you will not know.
You are fragile as crystal, but also strong

Second Prize: “even days in December” by Lila Julius

i) House bound, I sit by the glass, looking in. The angel fish have outgrown the aquarium, upstaged the rosy platies, neons, snails plump as golden apples; there are two whites and a black, crushed velvet, Spanish lace. I want to reach in, finger the deceptive softness, tail and fins rippling like petals of a black tulip, wings on the angel of death.

The heavy rains give pause to military operations. I wait for the names of the dead, but the seriously injured, those who'll spend weeks or months in hospital, will not be listed.

The picnic table's slick with light; there's a round mirror of sky in the bird bath, and even when the long arms of the rain stop pitting the road, the eaves have lost their rattle, still in the hush of birds is a hum like a quiet refrigerator; air wears the texture of homespun. I have to believe that across the border sits another woman listening as the steady rain down falls, the patient rain in gray work clothes.

ii) Up to the rafters, the kitchen fills with scent of crushed cloves, coriander. If you're already making soup, I tell my children, double the recipe, freeze half, give some away. In winter you can never make too much. From out of nowhere a daughter asks, "So how does it feel to know your kids are messing up? Or maybe — it's just living?" "Of course it is," I say, regaining breath. "Everybody's got their stuff to work through." I tell him about the conversation, and we wonder. What does she mean? It's not as if they're still at home and we're responsible. Adult kids have adult problems.

Yet for all that, they hold us responsible, won't know until they're older, we did the best we could, had to fool ourselves into thinking it was good, or else we couldn't have continued.

iii) Across the narrow field on this gray day the yellow house next door looks warm and friendly, though it no longer holds my friend, warm and friendly, before the walls were painted. Today I am lonely, imagine that everyone from time to time, even if they never left the house where they were born, feels like a foreigner. Friendship has no borders. From across the ocean I have a friend who helps me keep my balance. My niece, before she died said, "I didn't get it till too late — thought it's about having a profession."

iv) Green creeps down the hill sides. The sun on my back is welcome; it plays with the beads in the ornamental palms, under its touch they flash amber and topaz. Overhead the bees in the eucalyptus set up their sweat shops, the annual whirl of machines for the holiday season. I check the streams. The first is moist as wet clay, yet not even an echo of water; past the apple orchard with its wide rows, the second brook is up and running. It gurgles and bubbles with froth around the barriers. There is moss. I help snails cross the road, unconcerned which side they're aiming for. Grape vines march up and down the hills in military precision, their multi-coloured leaves, like bright berets tucked under khaki shoulder flaps.

v) I tell him, "Do not let me cross the road alone today, or handle kitchen knives. Something is out to get me." Sabotage. I dredge up old ghosts, stuff their mouths with rags I've used to wipe the kitchen floor, I'll show them, shake a finger, box their ears.

vi) It is time to ready the Sabbath candle holders, remove the remnants of last week's wicks. He has taken this job for himself, protector of the house, our Sabbaths. And he is right. If you don't protect your riches you will lose them. We used to store the candle holders in a cupboard, but lately it's been a constant run from shelf to table. "The first twenty years of my life," he said, "took twenty years, the second twenty took ten, the last, five." You can see what we're up against. Old silver with its mesh of fine lines glows with a flame that new silver, for all its bright-faced enthusiasm, can only guess at. The winds pick up; outside the window olive leaves brush light against a cloud-dark sky. My mother's hair grew dark, even in old age, at the nape of her neck, underneath the silver. A fitting image for my mother — olive tree stamina, gnarled age, blossoms almost imperceptible, known by their good fruit.

vii) I take a day off from the violence. Someone will deal with the horror, while I get on with my life. Maybe horror is someone else's job, while we sit on the side lines, watching, like a Greek chorus. Some of us will do the fighting, some protest, some will suffer, while others build. Taking turns, there's more than enough for everyone. It's raining again, every ebony twig with its jewelled pendant.

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Third Prize: "Tahharrah: Borderz" by Stephen Berer

Frum 1, hu am not,
Tu yu, hu ar not;
1, hu hav seest to be
Tu yu, hu ar no mor.

Havving taken wun step up the infinnit ladder
Owwer lumennus boddeez tranzmit thaer knowenz...
A bowndree ov C,
Ware we stand, this side
Ov the ark ov the Lor.

With theze eyz

The long ark ov dezzerted beech
Seen frum on hi, the Truro duenz.
And the koeld Atlantek, ultra mareen,
Rippeld in the tenshenz ov plannettaree moeshenz.
Between the infinnit graenz ov sand
And the kolapsing waevz ov rezistless momentum,
A thin wite line of lasee foem,
Swaying and swerling a dellikut border...
That iz the kerten, and behiend it I stand,

The not me of lite in the not yu ov lite
Within the arken Torrah and Divvine gaetwayz.

With eyz kuvverd by karben shardz
The Hi Preest prepaerz,
Hiz breth groez shallo.
Hiz fase deth pale, handz almoest fleshless,
Hiz skin tranzlusen az parchmen skraept.
Hiz naelz ar klippt, hiz wite beerd trimmd,
He immerst 3 tiemz in a blu chill mikvah.
Kloethd in a robe ov fine woven kotten,
A brusht wite brokade and thik kotten belt.
A brusht wite skull kap, kotten brokade
 Dansing the liyonz, leeping the deer.

The Hi Preest prepaerz.
He seesez tu breeth;
The waevlike moeshen ov hiz puls groez long.
He taeks a last step, an endless instant
Az he enterz the ark ov Divvine Prezzens.

That iz the kerten, and behiend it I stand,
The not me ov lite in the not yu ov lite,
Boddeez ov lite within the tranzlусent arks ov Torrah.

Fourth Prize: "The Wife of Hieronymus Bosch" by Larry Lefkowitz

Cleans gingerly between the paintings
Lest she knock one off its easel
Not from fear of her husband's curses
(He does not curse)
But fearful of the response
Of the creatures in the paintings
Which she strives not to look at
They frighten her and come
To her dreams at night.
Much other time is spent avoiding
Seeing her husband's paintings.
She puts down her feather duster, sighing
"Now where did my darning egg
Disappear to," and spotting it in a corner of the room
Picks it up lest her husband trip
Over it and knock off a painting
Causing those terrible creatures
To spill out onto her floor.
Did her darning egg really inspire
The broken-egged forms in his paintings
As Hieronymus claims? Perhaps, for if he
Is not given to cursing, he is not given to joking.
Her best friend once asked her, on the sly,
How her husband was in bed, adding with
A wink, "Is it really "The Garden of Earthly Delights? "
The wife of Hieronymus Bosch blushed,
And did not answer at first.
"He is the gentlest soul on earth," she said
In almost a whisper. Her friend raised an eyebrow,
"She would say something like that," she told
The second best friend of the wife of Hieronymus Bosch.
"The poor thing's probably afraid to death of ending up
Like the victim of one of his gruesome creatures.
I'm glad my husband's a baker."
The wife of Hieronymus Bosch knew of the conversation
Of her two friends because her second best friend told her.
"They can both go to Hell," she said to herself,
Then froze on the spot. You have to choose your desires
Carefully when you're the wife of Hieronymus Bosch.