

Texts of the Winning Poems and Honourable Mentions, Reuben Rose Competition, 2009

First Prize: "Crows" by Michael Dickel, Israel

i

Resisting rising from bed this gray morning.
A cow lowing lulls me. A crow's short bark
disturbs my rest

At dusk one crow comes,
then another, then a flock gathers in the poplars.
They have eaten frogs. They tasted
duck eggs. They savor carrion, laughing.

ii

Send the crows to Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda!
Refugee camps in Zaire overflow with cholera.
A young girl rolls her brother's body in a reed mat.
A once dignified man cannot hide his shit-stained pants.
The young woman every young man desired dies in the night.
The young man who turned heads when he walked down the street
averts his eyes as he lays desiccated at your feet
The man who cut the throat of his neighbor's
daughter rattles his own bones.

iii

An old couple hear. They peer at the rock covered
with skeletons living and dead, tattered flesh barely
clinging to bone in this killing field.
Their arms
braised with small calligraphy. They turn away.
They climb the mountain.
On the radio they call for help.
They seek solace in burning brush
from the smell of ammonia poured over dead bodies
and the too familiar sound of bulldozers.
They try but cannot cry enough tears
for the thirsty millions.

iv

With the muffler gone from my old Ford tractor
I drive up to where the crows call.

It's open season. I could shoot them,
had I brought my shotgun.

The beast under me roars as its wheels dig
into the raw earth. The tractor submerges;
I hang onto its seat with everything. It takes
me down, down into the gravel left by glaciers,
down through the rock, through the hot mantel,
the liquid core-

out the scabbed crust.

I am on a mountain
covered with skeletons,
rotten flesh. I stop breathing
to stop the stink.

I have arrived
too late.

Second Prize: "Forty-Two Sacrifices" by Michael Dickel, Israel

"When I want to speak a word / The spirit has already descended / From its hiding place,"

—Abraham Isaac Kook (trans. By Ben Zion Bokser)

A messenger resides amid the low clouds on Meron;
a distant falcon rises above a desert. Late sunlight drops onto
the hills from a blue sky. Soon a walk in the wilderness

will reveal *ayin*, a silence speaking; soon candles will shimmer
in the relief of evening; soon words will come only after
tasting salted bread. Balaam shall not go. Balaam may

go. Three times Balaam's donkey stops, blocked by a sword-carrying
messenger. Three letters. Seven bulls and seven rams for seven altars,
three times. Forty-two sacrifices for a blessing, not a curse,

Stand here and look. What do you see? What do you say?
Wait, Stand here, are you sure of what you see and what you say?
That's not the answer I wanted to hear. Stand here, I am Balak.

Three times. Seven altars. The twelve tribes of Israel below;
men sell their services to others in order to fuck fantasy women
and to buy digital flat-screen TVs, fast cars, automatic rifles.

An ibex climbs up the steep slopes to En Gedi. A raven floats on the
wind, A stonemason repairs the walls of an ancient house
with mortar, time and care. Men, women, children climb

up and down stone steps, polishing them to a slippery pleasure
of color and light. Someplace, a guitar plays lazily a hymn to
rhythm and blues. Someplace, light drifts away to dusk.

There are twenty-two letters. Seven doubles. Three times. How
many vowels? Turn off the tv, even if it is the World Cup;
park the cars; hammer the steel gun barrels flat. Speak silence.

An emptiness may be taken in while walking quietly
In a wilderness. A painter, a potter, a poet and a rabbi
step into Shabbat together. Sunlight spreads out into the night—
beyond the earth shadow, the moon witnesses. In the shadow of the earth,
a cool breeze brings together strangers and friends at table.
They speak quietly. At dawn, birds will *daven* in song.

Third Prize: "Blood" by April Bulmer, Canada

The native spirits tread softly,
bear sweet grass
in medicine hide pouch.
They have flown to me
over the River Grand
for I, too, was once an Indian:
tall and lean.
my face a shade of sun.
My hair was long and loose
and my hands moved
like brown birds
among fields of corn.
My babies turned
in my womb
as flowers will bloom
For my man planted them
like seeds in early morn

Ghosts came to me then, too:
my mother in buckskin
rode a spirit colt.
She tapped a little drum
and offered me its rhythm.
I play it still.
It is my heart

But tonight the spirits come
for I have lost my father.
Horses have drawn him
upon a little cart.
The natives hold me
in their smoke.
I mourn as an old soul:
cry a new lore
at dawn.

Honorable Mentions, in random order

“Captured” by Michelle Cohen, USA

The shutters behind me are opened
to the desert of my forefathers,
where my father never wanted me to go.

I am hunched over the bath tub,
wringing bath towels,
hand-washed and heavy

I could be any woman
captured
in cool waters of museum paintings –

Half-robed in muted hues next to a wash basin,
impressionist dots fracturing a woman
washing her feet –

Perhaps a stream-bather
washed in mottled sun, blue light, nude shadow –
or the Odalisque resting on tapestries
and far after a Turkish bath....

Look closer.
These are vibrating paint strokes.
These are contrasting color molecules
contained in the shape of a woman
in my likeness –

A woman confined
in a tiny flat window
where the clothes lines face east
and the clothes never dry...

“Great With Child” by April Bulmer, Canada

I do not recall,
perhaps abortion day
had gone blue,
an early moon
like a skull.

She was sweet with life.
She felt ripe
and whole.
Her breasts soft flowers
and her face, too,
pale as white rose.
Though it was her belly
waxed like new moon.

I made tea, a milky steep.
She poured out the story.

Her hair long as torn roots.

I forgot to pray,
talk to Old Maker
burden Mule of the world
or lay my tender hands
on the sacred lump

~

So at *l'hôpital*, doctor's hands
moved like fish
in the bowl of her hips.

And outside, I saw the St. Lawrence
break open in the cold dim.
God for my witness.

“Velazquez Venus (almost) Nude without Mirror” by Sara Avital, Israel

I
she - in shorts and too big shirt (mine)
stretched hip-cocked
over blue silk cushions –
presses up against the cat
its tail conducting
Leonard Cohen on the box
they

lick her curves
in seeming affection
he paws her face
she tenses squirms
confirms with a young low laugh
woven from scent of lollipops
and sound of stalking cats

who will she betray?

II
in my time
I have closed many doors
become invisible
(even to myself)
but still stand
staring out
at barren yellow-dust
rolling with tumbleweed
needing to know

we dried out diaspores
dispersing now-dead seed

III
the toilet smells of cigarettes I sit
and miss your touch
as that time when I was pregnant
you tried to help me with
my shoes and I pushed your hands away bio
degradable soft it says softsad
it doesn't ever stop sad
dad...

“Cranes Over Galilee” by Johnmichael Simon, Israel

Muscled flesh of migrating cranes
decorates the air above our valley
twice yearly we watch their squadrons,
their flowing flapping arrows bringing
news from Lake Victoria,
messages from the Black Sea
*how the little ones had grown so quickly,
about the scarcity of fishlets this year
(exchanging flavors of grub and tadpole)
the funeral of old Kylos, the wing leader
and how our tears had hushed
even the fretting newly hatched*

*warnings too, about humans to be avoided,
that throw rocks, fire shotguns, yell barbaric threats;
and those to be respected, that scatter corn cobs
on stubbled fields, glint at us only through
snapping glassy eyes*

We watch them arrive and depart each year
above our valley, our tribal wars, our fences
and fortifications mean nothing to them

Mapped out as we are between hills, lakes,
feeding or resting grounds

The higher they fly we realize how fragile
our ownership of these merging landscapes,
these changing seasons. All our efforts,
our patchwork scratches on the terrain
fading into obscurity
beneath the rushing clouds

“Through a Frozen Window” by Johnmichael Simon, Israel

This is the long, long kiss goodnight
that transports you through time
home to some unknown shore

Your boat sails glass
fastened in a sea of ice
your eyelids closed to never-never dreams
sound frozen in your white-muffled ears

I wish to tell you happenings
of days that sail on past
of animated graphics on the glass
of bicycling across the moon
of cars that talk, of Nemo
flickering your golden spark
through underwater deeps

Of Shrek. But your face
remains composed in silent transport
your heartbeat locked forever
at one minute to midnight

I wish I could believe in a tomorrow
like you. The rest of us
and those we love and lose
clasped in stillness, sailing on

Into this long, long kiss goodnight
transporting us through eternity
home to some unknown shore

“Fanning a Dying Love Affair Twenty Years After Sharpeville” by Johnmichael Simon, Israel

It was like quince preserve, this honeyed astringency
revisiting the byways of my youth
with their sweet summers
and sporadic droughts
bare-footed children whipping tops
with strings and spittle
yellow mine dumps everywhere
looking down, flat topped with lust and greed
on sweat and pay envelopes with their promise
of sour mash beer and back yard bedmates.

I’d paid my dues to Suid-Afrika more than once;
this time to Livingstone Laka
by twice in a row advancing him fifty rand,
which he had every intention of paying off
until drunk on cane liquor from a paper bag
he cut two fingers off his left hand
with the workshop bandsaw, wrapped them
in toilet paper before passing out in the ambulance.

“Of course I wrote his debt off”, I told my nightgowned
private investigator, as she parted the curtains
to view the servant’s quarters.
“He’s back again”, she hissed, “after I explicitly
told her no more visitors – and with liquor again.
In the morning they both must leave”.

“But she’s pregnant”, I said, “let her stay,
her sister will look after the baby”.

A honeyed astringency, aircraft lifting one last time
over the trees, the serpentine golf courses,
blue sequins of the private swimming pools,
the tended gardens, the buses, red for whites
green for non-whites, the polished Jaguars
all fading behind in gold dust yellow,
the three of us not really attempting
to revive our flagging love affairs.

We never really hit it off, Johannesburg,
my tarnished lady and I,
but then relationships are at the best of times
mouth puckering in quince-sweet compromises.

“Homecoming After the Fleadh” by Johnmichael Simon, Israel

From Tullamore to Metulla
this thin line of music stretches
I travel it, a string between two cans,
hold it to my ear
at your end, street music of Fleadh
bars, guitars; here all that emerges
two bulbuls flute and oboe, yellow breasted
on a yucca, the green music
of apples growing

Street colleen, tin whistle to your lips
turquoise vest, Roscommon tartan skirt, black tights,
twenty minstrels outside Bridge House Hotel
aged eight to seventeen, serenade your youth,
green river music, your sap pours out
the apples know it, their music
tells them grow, grow

If I had a wish, I could die here
and be reborn to music
a million children playing reels and jigs
outside Bridge House Hotel in Tullamore
a million apples growing in Metulla
two bulbuls singing on a wire

“You Amsterdam” by Rolland Vasi, USA

Children in those cobbled streets jeered: Jew-killer,
German parents held your girly nine-year-old hand,
pretended the hail of Shoah's shadows did not fall.

You told that fifty-year-age story at our Tuesday Witness
meeting. I felt your shame-tears on my hand
during the closing prayer,

written by an unknown prisoner,
in a concentration camp,
left on the body of a dead child:
*Let all the fruits which we have bought,
thanks to our suffering from those of ill will
be their forgiveness.*

I abandoned the desire to punish.
You harvested, my rain, filled your cistern,
when I cried at the memorial.

New vines curled 'round our legs,
stretched for sunrise,
Lips open, our tongues danced an afternoon waltz.

We slept, nested dolls under silk sheets,
bathed in Hillman, Nietzsche, Carlin and Wilbur,
I cuddled your laughter on my chest,

stroked flaxen hair. We braided songs
from fibers of child-hurt,
I chanted your praise from Proverbs.

I released my night visits from dead sailors
into the custody of your downy-soft ear. Dropped
all inquiries into motive and widened my dawn gaze.

Our entwined selves, like a matted tango
of river reeds, dammed Holland's tidal flows.
I fell in love with you.

“Jerusalem Garden” by Andrea Moriah, Israel

Olive boughs and palm fronds gesture
toward the serpentine fence
writhing through swathes of land
separating villages intertwined like fingers of opposing hands
reaching for the shared dull haze of the coastal plain

Only when the setting sun glints off its surface
does one glimpse the sea for the first time in the day.

Falling darkness erases the fence,
blends the lights of the villages and blurs their boundaries.

The coastal lights shimmer through the blackness.
Fishing boat lanterns glimmer offshore
in the deeper black of the sea.

The morning call to prayer undulates thickly through the air.
Electric lights recede in the face of daybreak.
Interlocking villages reappear and reclaim their sides.
The haze takes back the sea and the fence slithers toward the shore.

“The Border” by Andrea Moriah, Israel

I've been to the border
where hate drifts in with the dust
and settles on our rocks and our fields.

I've been to the border
where menace breaches on the back of your neck
and death taunts you from the side of the road.

Where the hooded one
chosen to spark the next violence
crouches on the other side of the fence
hunched over his flint steel and char
waiting for the sign.

I saw scarred chain links
where they burst through
in a gust of smoke
blowing up the jeep
killing some soldiers
and taking two hostage.

We're getting them back.
Dead, of course,
Bones, of course.
We're trading their remains for a man
who, when just a boy
snuck over the border to kidnap a family for his cause.
He murdered a policeman on his way,
Then the father and small daughter.
The baby was suffocated by her mother
who held one hand over her mouth
so she wouldn't cry out from their hiding place
and give them both away

They're getting him back.
Alive, of course.
Flesh and blood, of course.
His people will rejoice upon his return.
And later he will celebrate his delivery

at the tomb of Hafez.

But now he carries his hate in the dust on his shoes
as he crosses back over the border.

“Joseph's Brothers Watch Their Father Mourn” by Yakov Azriel

"And Jacob rent his garments and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son [Joseph] many days. And all his sons and daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, He said, 'For I will go down to my son in mourning to my grave.' And his father wept for him." (Genesis 37:34-35)

He doesn't know that Joseph lives, a slave;
How can we tell him Joseph didn't die?
Father will go in mourning to his grave.

Because we laughed when Joseph begged we save
Him from the pit, we hear our father cry.
He doesn't know that Joseph lives, a slave,

Deceit and sin have sealed him in a cave
As dark as hate; they are the reasons why
Father will go in mourning to his grave.

A sea of pit engulfs us, wave by wave,
When Father grieves he never said good-bye.
He doesn't know that Joseph lives, a slave.

Yet Father doesn't scream or rage or rave;
Instead, we hear and watch our father sigh.
Father will go in mourning to his grave,

Father has grown a beard he will not shave.
How can we tell him that we live a lie?
He doesn't know that Joseph lives, a slave.
Father will go in mourning to his grave.