

Texts of the Winning Poems and Honourable Mentions, Reuben Rose Competition, 2010

First Prize – “Breathing Light” by Judy Belsky, Israel

*Thirty six elms sway in the rhythm of prayer
Arrows of light pierce the dark flesh of dreams*

my father says: breathe, just breathe
to not be afraid is the holiest breath
I breathe my father back
to write the text in my right hand
and the color is blue
there is a well and the water is a silver tear falling into itself
the water is a flame rising out of itself
the water is a bird whose wings repeat the rhythm of prayer
when my father points upward
finch sparrow cardinal light from the ends of his hands
the veins in his hands as familiar as back roads to old orchards
he rubs an apple against his shirt
inhales its fragrance
blesses God King of the universe Who brings forth fruit from the trees
juice makes his beard glisten in that light
on days laden with slow nectar
a sun warmed head beneath a father's hand:
bless these hands crossroads of grief and love
these shoulders square them off for the long journey
these breasts fill with knowledge of their own dark liquor
these hips rounded with the sign of earth inevitable as gravity
this skin that it hold in memory
and on my tongue
O father on my tongue
let seventy tongues invent themselves

Second Prize – “Heavenly Beings” by Valerie Carr Zakovitch

It sounds like a god-damned circus out there –
squeaky, spastic honking,
Clowns sounding their horns.
I dry my hands, walk outside
and see them. The cranes are back.
"Hey, hey! Come outside!" I call
"The cranes – they're back! Come here!"
We stand, my teen-aged son and daughter and I, chins tilted, watching
the birds that circle high above, stretched out and climbing into
the late-afternoon sky, floating and calling out to newcomers as they
collect themselves, above these hills, high,
high above these still-green hills of Judah,
they float, circle, glide in arcs above our books and bicycles,
gardens, beds, and picture albums,
their long necks and ample wings extended, reaching, a grey cloud taking shape
on its interminable journey, Russia-bound.
We wait, watching this flock as it drifts northward,
their high-pitched spluttering, bubbling screeches
slowly fade, now a distant, vague hum, while we
remain, a bit, standing among rocks and red poppies
before we, too, drift back to the house,
to homework and dinner preparations,
the holy hush of the hills ushering us
inwards.

Third Prize – “I learned to be cunning” by Rochelle Mass, Israel

I used to think a piece of sky was enough to tell me where things stood, what was going to happen. Between mountains, the sky became triangles and I watched how trees shivered when temperatures drop.

Predictions came at me the way cold rushes in late November. I learned to trust like laying a fire, paying attention to balance order, weight. Air between the twigs has to be light, not packed nor blocked. In those years

I wanted to learn to love from those who could, but none was ever as good as I wanted. I remember the residue of a smile the warm place round a man's eyes. I'd stare as if I were watching ants climb over a leaf between the mountains

of West Vancouver. Autumn baffled me then, pumped me with memories I didn't think I had a right to, I learned to be cunning like fabric in a market, twisted from the bolt, edges pegged to overhead wires to catch a shopper's eye.

Honorable Mentions (in random order)

“grandmother's song” by Judy Belsky, Israel

the black and white brownie
encases grandmother within pinked edges
her hair is streaked white
her face a map of arrows already
points to the space beside grandfather's grave
 I dream she returns to hold my son
 from his tiny palm
 she predicts
 he will burst from husks
 of this earth in sixteen
 impatient years disappear
 through invisible seams
push inside out the womb wall
an aching phantom
 he is already more hers than mine
 and though I keep time against the empty drum
 she taps out his code against my pores
 indelible syllables
 sign his name
a stranger
a sojourner
in the land of your birth
come
to a place
I will show you
 on the map
 the permanent water stain:
grief

“That Summer” by Rochelle Mass, Israel

This is my grandson's first war.
He and his mother
arrived two days
before it all began

He grabs my face as a siren
wails through the sky.
Minutes later a rocket falls
on the playground down the road

I pick figs for him
stroke his head –
as he eats the dark fruit
the sun is finally setting.

This used to be a quiet time.

“When I was young” by Rochelle Mass, Israel

I thought a totem pole was God when I was young –
I dared come close, rarely touched, but when I did
I remember rough parts and feeling scared.
I wanted to get to the message
discover secrets.

My father once asked me: why do you stare at them?
He didn't understand: even though he could draw
the best hawk I'd ever seen, he couldn't see the moon
above the eyes, the canoe on the shoulder, the thunderbird beak
in the center. He'd tell me how they were carved, tools used.

I wanted to know what the elders chanted
I wanted to watch the chief
pull back the cedar bark, strip trunks smooth.
I wanted to see the rabbit's fur on his jacket and
abalone shells sewn to his headband.

My father told me how strong a carver had to be
how honorable the work, but I heard
tribal dances, imagined spinning capes.
I raised my face as they tossed feathers
to bless the place.

My father talked on about craft but
I wanted to spiral
into the belly of the moon
hold tight to the eagle's wing
reach where the gods really are.

“Yellow-eyed cat” by Andrea Moriah, Israel

I.

When I was young
my mother felt the beat
of the earth through her bare feet.

My father kept his head down
and his eyes closed
to better hear
the ostinati of Tchaikovsky's strings.

They told my sister
you can go as far as you like
with that sharp mind and tart mouth.

To me they said,
you lay low and protect your soft underbelly.

I turn my father's easy chair
to face the plate glass picture window,
curl up in it sleekly,
and fix my feline eyes on the night snow.

There's not enough snow in the sky,
to fill the loneliness
of this Midwestern plain.

II.

Later, my sister and I far fling ourselves
to the ancient spot on earth
that calls us home.

Our parents wizen and age in
the tropical heat and when they're ready,
they follow.

There they jitterbug to the end,
leaning against each other for
balance like two clockwork figures.

In the setting sun
I watch from my balcony as
the east-blown hamsin
kicks sand from the desert
into the Jerusalem sky.

There's not enough dust
to cover the hate that has
settled on this land.

This is what a yellow-eyed cat sees
every time it looks at the world.

“The Heron” by Andrea Moriah, Israel

I sleep,
hospital blanket
pulled over my mouth
to keep my lips from drying,
tucked under my nose,
so the sweet smell of laundry soap
can overpower the chemical stench of my body.

Here is the heron again
perched on a leafless winter branch
stiff head feathers slicked back,
one eye fixed on me.

Here am I, naked, in the reservoir again,
its clay sides red-marbled as dead meat
like earth in a painting by Courbet.

The heron nods offstage
which triggers a gush of water into the pit.
It fills so quickly that soon
I am dog paddling
to keep my head above water.

I gouge my fingers and toes into the red clay,
heave myself up over the edge.

At dawn, one eye opens onto Ibrahim's hand
encircling my biceps as he draws blood
from the catheter in the crook of my arm.
The one time in the day
I feel a human touch.

“Birds of War” by Andrea Moriah, Israel

Indigo blurs with black-needle siphons
supping honey out of rusted trumpet vines.

Don't come to this garden expecting
God's voice from the blaze of a rhododendron
that does not consume itself.

I'd go the way of the raven – not the one
that hauled meat scraps to Elijah in the desert –
now plucking medical waste off the beaches of Gaza.

That one – with an olive branch stuck in its craw.
With deadened eyes heading due east to Eden.

Bird-dropping God's will over deserts
sun-baked and brittle as unleavened bread.

Or. Stay with me
in this twice-promised garden.

Beat your honed beaks into ploughshares
and your wings against the coming storm.

“Anger not the Gods” by Tom Berman, Israel

This is a land
of ancient gods

They have not left this landscape
they reside in the anguish of stones
in the gray bark of carob trees
in the dimness of karst caves,
and rubble remains
of forgotten dwellings
They sigh in dry thorn stalks
on summer hillsides,
their breath hovers
in whorls of dust

This is an old, hard land
with a surfeit of memory

It does not take much
to stir passions
or memories
when the wind rustles
leaves in the olive groves

Tread lightly on the land
of ancient gods

“My Granddaughter wakes” by Tom Berman, Israel

Deep within her blanket
my granddaughter stirs,
stretching
sighs a farewell
to her dream

she speaks quiet words
to someone elsewhere
far off,

she tenses fingers, legs and toes
yawns, most ladylike,
blinks her eyes
and relapses again
to a soft delight
of semi-slumber

outside, expectant
the green dawning
of her world
awaits.

“Punctuation” by Dina Yehuda, Israel

Your hands
dipped an oar
in the lake,
a clear opening line.

your arms
cradled the boat
enfolding us,
parentheses.

your wrists
dangled,
drew lazy
question marks.

do your hands
remember mine,
do they reach out
over time and space

for that which has
no grammar.

“Two Figures in the Undergrowth” by Dina Yehuda, Israel

A man and woman
are standing in the forest
surrounded by poplars

knee deep in green, yellow, pink
narcissus, daffodils, jonquil
the undergrowth rising

buries their legs,
leaves them rooted, static
in Van Gogh's forest world

the man, a study in black,
narrow shoulders lost in his coat,
looks down

the woman, in a green frock,
blends in, but there is blankness
where her face should be

and I am sad to see
the back of her head,
that she is turned away

until I notice a smudge
that might be her eyes, mouth
facing me

a pale orb, enigmatic
as the face in the moon
and I think, yes

we stand in this
undergrowth
together.

“The Fortieth Day” by Wayne Lee, USA

An angel rises
from thunderheads erupting
over mountains.

Be aware, the messenger implores.
Although you haven't had rain
in forty days,

that could change in one afternoon.
Be alert, watch for movement
among the juniper.

This is where you saw the coyote
on your walk last week,
that is where

the red racer crossed your path
just yesterday. Be present.
Notice the ants

mining their kingdom underground.
The angel dissipates
only to reappear as rain.

“Inventing the Alphabet” by Courtney Druz, Israel

What I have written is quiet and what I have not written is quiet. See them looking at the marks on my slate—ox, house, camel, door. Muttering and gesturing, trying to put the story together, why a homeowner with an ox keeps only one camel. Why keep a record at all for so few animals, such a small transaction. I tell them these are a list of sounds. Not an ox lowing, a door slamming; I mean the first sound when I say ox. This door a sound that opens so many words—day, death, distance. Now they are muttering again and spitting three times against the evil eye, but eye comes later, it is what you will call O, exclaiming your lyrical rapture at what you will see, these ownerless herds rampaging through overgrazed fields.

“Instructions to the waiter at the poetry retreat” by Johnmichael Simon, Israel

Make mine
au naturel
not slathered in cultural
name droppings, acronyms
adenoidal accents
froggy appendages

I will
send it back
if it contains
piripiri, pornographic material,
references to *obscurae*
or if it's covered
with dense
unpronounceable gravy

Give it to me
plain
one or two syllabled
containing only
local ingredients and
associations

No fancy
dressings please
only olive oil
opinions and
easily digested
language

Oh and some
fries on the side

“Myth Of The Israeli Man” by Sarah Wetzel, Israel

Please just stop with the story
about your father's three friends, Israeli soldiers
furloughed from the army who slipped over

Israel's ill-guarded southern border
into enemy territory, the old story
about how they walked forty kilometers

across Jordan's black basalt desert
to reach the base of Mt. Hor. Stop telling me
they just wanted to photograph

themselves, their arms around each other's
shoulders, big stupid grins on blistered faces
standing in Petra's two-thousand-year-old temples,

the robbed-bare tombs of some
long-dead Nabataean Arabs. Stop talking
about how they only drank water

because Israelis didn't learn to like alcohol
until the Russians showed up, about how
the three friends returned by night

by the same sand and granite route. They
weren't just lucky, you said. It was 1966
the year my father learned to fear

dogs, you said, because they might
be carrying dynamite. It was the year
of Star Trek, Valley of the Dolls, the year

you were born which was why
your father didn't go with them. Please stop
saying that if the Bedouins had found

the soldiers, they'd have taken them
hostage, shot them as spies. Stop saying,
Perhaps they did find them, at least

some of them. Please just stop
with the story about how
you would never have gone, and go.

“Princess of Egypt” by Miriam Green, Israel

Bat Paraoh heads for the *shuk*.
There's a sale on pomegranates,
and the avocados are ripe.
Water pools under the stalls
from the last rains.

She hears they want to plant a tree in her honor
in the Avenue of the Righteous Gentiles.
They say saving one life is like saving a whole world,
How the basket bobbed and dipped on the water's crest,
her arms like elongated rubber
stretched and stretched –
and stretched until her fingers gripped rough woven reeds
and she reeled it in, knowing she'd find
the bright, open eyes,
his cut foreskin.

She expected nothing from him,
a beautiful child.
When he stops by,
they have tea and biscuits,
or lemonade if it's hot.
He tells her about his latest conversations
with God. He's taken up mountain climbing.
She hides her loneliness,
it is a small detail in the magnificent story.

Bat Paraoh heads for the bus,
her frame balanced by the swaying bags.
She is old now, older than Pharaoh was.
She remembers her father,
omnipotent dreams crushed
by God's miracles,
his heart a brittle stone on the sea bed.
She did not mean to hurt him.
She chose to leave Egypt,
the long trek in the desert
like a fresh morning's stroll.

Note: Bat Paraoh is the Hebrew transliteration of Pharaoh's Daughter. This poem is based on a midrash that suggests Bat Paraoh chose to leave Egypt with Moshe and the Israelites.

“What big Teeth You Have” by Shimshon Leshinsky, Israel

Can I buy you a drink?
Asks Wolf sitting next to Riding Hood
At the bar.
You've changed, he says.
She looks great tonight
In her red party dress
With the low neckline.

Riding laughs
Yeah, I dropped my first name and changed my outlook.
You also fixed yourself up
She looks at him admiringly
Still need a shave but you've got attitude
In that leather jacket

I'll have a tequila
She says
He orders a scotch on the rocks

Where you headed? Wolf enquires
I'm going to see Grandma.
You know me by now
She's in bed with the Swine Flu
and I'm bringing her this fruit basket
Cool says Wolf
Maybe I'll come along.
I'm good with grandmothers.
Riding laughs
You never learn your lesson, do you?