

Texts of the Prizes and Honourable Mentions Winners, Reuben Rose Competition 2012

First Prize: "A Short History of Everything Sexual" by Violet Samir

I love those little flights of fancy
that keep us ticking over. This week
I had sex with the washing machine
technician, on the floor with nuts and
bolts, which took me back to an encounter
with an aeronautical engineer who
was a Christian, and didn't believe in
sex before marriage, and me still
high on school. I might have married
him just for the sex, since I remember
his name, but he didn't propose.

That means something, don't you think,
remembering a name that held a fantasy
from forty years ago. Instead, I ate poets
for breakfast, dressed in thin jeans,
sprinkled exams with answers and went nuts
waiting for a bolt of lightning and a prince.
It was the sixties and I was the girl left with
James on the tropical island before the credits
in "Dr No", "Gold Finger" and "From Russia with Love"
All that romance closed down for me
with the end of Sean as 007.

But I learned how to get laid in the sixties.
It wasn't so hard in those days. All you had to
do was declare that you were for free love,
at weddings with the bridegroom's friends,
and there would be a line of boys waiting
for the next dance or your telephone or both.
There wasn't a prince among them, I found him
all by myself at a University beer bar wearing
a corduroy jacket and green lambswool sweater.

It was his black eyes and the gap in
his front teeth and how his fingers coaxed
a garden from my body and my lips swelled.
it was mostly how his grey matter
connected with mine and for a moment
I understood the theory of relativity.
James Bond has gone and the prince,

and so from time to time I open the
washing machine door and the technician
falls out with nuts and bolts for teeth.

Second Prize: “Before the flood” by Clare Kirwan

Hammering, head down against the clouds,
he stops occasionally to stretch
arthritic joints – stiffer each day
There’s a stillness in the air.
Birds fly to higher ground. He frowns
when his missus says it looks like rain
and tells his sons to choose their wives with care.
When you commit it is for life, he says.

More wood. More nails. The storekeeper
rattles a pocketful of coins: Somewhere
nice for the holidays? The old man
buying supplies – enough to feed an army –
looks at him as though he were the mad one.
Lately he’s become obsessed with clouds:
breathes easier at cirrus, altostratus;
watches for weighty nimbus.

No – don’t go out tonight, he tells his sons.
Let’s eat together. Lingers over bread
from his own oven, but will not eat the fish.
There’ll be fish enough, he says, eyes darting
into the gathering gloom, ears tuned for thunder.
He lies awake, and lists all he’s been saving –
the fish and fowl, the family. Each night the same;
perhaps tomorrow will be that rainy day.

And in the grey-lit morning, new wind rattles.
His neighbour’s children point: Look – there’s the man
who built a boat, here in the desert! Their laughter
splashes him, he hopes he’ll always be the old fool
with that monstrosity and all those mouths to feed –
not just chickens now, a whole menagerie.
He paces like his pair of lions – more
protectiveness than fear. The moment comes:

he feels two drops of water on his face:
the first a raindrop and the next a tear.

Third Prize: "The Conversion of Inigo Montoya" by Johnmichael Simon

When you were young, climbed on the roof
waving a flag, you were a renegade
Prepare to die you shouted, your grin
impersonating a Spanish fencer. Lover of westerns,
bandit, bank robber, braggard, you were good, bad,
but never ugly in my eyes.

Observing you I viewed a generation crying
Mama I killed a man as if an anthem.
Splitting straws with your front teeth or
dressed in ragged uniform, biceps oiled
and bulging, cannons blazing, you strode
to wreak your vengeance on a hostile world.

Some of your friends mobilized, went off
to face the truth that lurked behind the mask
of foreign camouflage. Some donned disguises
eschewed ambition, slashing each other's profits
with corporate blades. Others gathered in city
parks and squares, restless, looking for a fight

You chose enlightenment, tradition, listening,
repeating phrases handed down three hundred
years. You dressed in somber colors, long socks,
oversized hat, sidelocks dancing at your shoulders,
fingers paging well-thumbed hieroglyphics, your
mouth filled with blessings and amens.

Yesterday I saw you at the train station, arm around the shoulders
of a passenger you'd spied who still had a little time to spare.
Fingers unwinding tefillin placing them just here, just there,
to represent the holy name. I hardly recognized you with your beard, your
black coat and shiny shoes, confirming that you'd finally crossed the line.

Then you looked up at me and smiled. *Shalom Aba*.
I could have been anyone's Aba standing there – perhaps
in your eyes I even was. And then I glimpsed the tattoo on
your arm, the one you could not erase, a piece of past life
showing through. It was a compass with a sword pointing
at north. And though you had turned back away, continuing
to recite your prayer, I once again saw, as in a vision, that
unshaven bandit that you had been, once again heard your
mocking voice –

*My name is Inigo Montoya,
You killed my father, prepare to die.*

“Ovens” by Clare Kirwan

Even before we volunteers stumbled
in at six a.m. with bleary eyes
to a kitchen made, it seemed, for giants
the old women would be hard at work:

Edit, in her eighties, peeling onions
for the whole kibbutz, Yafa frying
aubergines and Sarah at the soup,
fearsome in the steam. They were

fast and tiny, as though a fiery energy
condensed them down to strident voices,
wiry frames for flowered aprons, always
busy, running without thinking.

After the war they sailed here from Europe,
spoke different languages, but not my own.
I could ask them nothing, so I only
smiled and accepted tidbits, scolds.

All day they were in and out of ovens
not heeding careless burns upon their arms
between the livid marks from these hot surfaces
their oldest scars were numbers.

“the passing” by Marc Radzyner

I am trying to hang on
there's a feeling I know too well,
a hot wind gusts into my face
as I turn towards the fields this morning
& something is saying to me, careful –
eternal spring has passed
the former rains and the latter rains
are over,
 the wild
blood-red anemones that strewed the fields &
the cycles
 of cyclamen
 & white asphodel
have fulfilled their circles –

now is the time
 for
the silk thistle
the blue globe thistle
the sharp green
 sword thistle;

gnarled ancient olive trees conceal their flowering,

& this is saying to me, careful,
like my friend
of the strong arms and beautiful face
who said to me a long time ago
pausing and turning to me
in the middle of building and planting,
before the setting in before the setting out
ah, careful, it shouldn't get any better than this

“Twin Sister” by Seree Cohen Zohar

Had we argued harshly the night before, you’d have
been too upset to rush to work, wanting to clear
the air despite your fear of dismissal for lateness:
It would have sufficed us.

A shame it was only a spat, that we didn’t get
down and bitchy, that you didn’t huff off to sulk,
then make amends in the morning, maybe missing
the subway:

It would have sufficed us.

For had you sulked all evening and said sorry in
haste in the morning; and had I quickly forgiven,
then gladly given you my scarf; had I teased you,
though, before waving you off, you might anyhow
have missed your bus to the subway:

It would have sufficed us.

And while you hurried to work, had I called to play
on your guilt, begging you do an errand as proof
that all’s fine between us:

It would have sufficed us.

And if in the end you’d been wheelchair bound so
that now I’d tower over you; and had that meant I’d
shower and tend you, clothe you and feed you,
become your manicurist, house cleaner, secretary:

It would have sufficed us.

But I forgave your insult that night, straight after
dinner; right away, gladly, lending my scarf that
matched your new shoes; borne on my palms, the
fringes swinging; a peace offering, sister –

the morning that followed imprinted by only two
hues: those who stayed whole, those who remain
ashen –

so I do not kneel at your feet
tying ∞ into your shoelaces,
nor fetch your mail or button your blouse.
Nor do I lift you at night onto your bed.
Your arms and legs do not dangle dumbly.
I do not know where they are.

You are but a sliver of name
silvered in soot-black granite.

Which will never suffice us.

“Julius Buchwald” by Joel Moskowitz

On that night
my wife’s father died,
I had to tell her.
A doctor, he knew the signs –
crushing weight
like a car on his chest,
that red TR-6 convertible
he had steered,
an indulgence,
over his heart.
Still, with all that sorrow,
he somehow got up
and dressed for winter,
then paramedics cut
open his down parka,

a dense gray mass of feathers
lifting a little in the air,
clung to surfaces
as if wings budded.

Those goose feathers
stuck everywhere,
clogging my mind.
I forgot where she was
in a distant city. She slept,
unprepared for the train ride,
unprepared for the hurried service,
unprepared for all the year’s changes
save for her lovely body turning
to cocoon the child we would name Julia.

“Stars” by Violet Samir

The sun is not a yellow star, although
in every picture you may see of it, it is.
Eyes' color cones conspire with earth
and atmosphere to spawn
a misconception in our minds
and flood our view of sun
with yellow hue.

And the few men and women who have walked
in outer space and seen sunlight safely
through their helmet's visor, can tell us
sun is white. But there are men
in England who believe the earth is flat
although quite manifestly, it is a globe
and yet they may live well-adjusted lives in spite of that.

As our earth turns from morning into night
the sun pulls sunflowers round to face the light
in one coordinated move. But dissonant humans
love the clash of cymbals and deep shade.
while claiming to love peace, prepare for war.
A child appears in borrowed coat, too large
for him by far, hiding a yellow star sewn
on his fraying jacket, and stuffs some stolen
bread into his mouth.

In the field below the sunflowers, field mice run,
this to avoid the snake another to avoid the owl,
and if for a moment a mouse looked up to see the sun
what we see as yellow he would see as blue.
It matters little, a star of any other hue
would burn as bright.

“Days of Awe” by Joel Moskowitz

This might be the final trip
that my children will permit
as they grow, as they fit
into their independence
but for now, our hands become oars
in the traffic, which funnels
 into a gap
through the stone wall,
bramble-bearded, leading
to Honey Pot Hill Orchard.

Up the grassy footpath we go
to carry out the ritual.
My eleven-, my fifteen-year-old and I pick apples
the day before the beginning,
the Jewish new year that drops in, tapping,
tapping as a friendly fist on my door,
holding me to face smeared mirrors.

Dandelions spill milky clouds
on the path we climb. I step
on a rotting fruit, I slip.
We fill our bag to near-bursting.
We throw half-eaten Macs
into the duck pond, watching the cores fly.

The sky tells the hour;
and we, our hands almost touching, turn
to face the land. I could stay here forever,
somehow warm even as fall sweeps into
these hills where jammed locks unlatch,
the leafless young branches will sway,
even the sturdy, but we must drive—
to homework, television,
cleaning greasy dust.
Tomorrow,
the gates will open.

“on the stone we dedicate to fear” by Judy Belsky

four years and I never tell our therapist I am scared we speak of other odds
and ends, my eating – no, not the way terror runs up the throat
or the soothing slide of liquids or the tearing to bits of
things too big to manage

you never tell him either twitches in your neck grimaces you can’t control
and not to what lies beneath them

fear runs in the pipes between the stories of our house
we breathe against pressure of air
when you sleep a bird beneath your lid shudders

he is hungry for the soft places in a man’s neck
he enters the channels of your ears he understudies the script
the one you recite when you are too tired to resist
the one that says worthless broken
who do you think you are to survive the deaths
of two teen-aged children

he exposes the wound where hopeful skin stretches over it
he peels it back petal by petal
to the tale etched in veins

when you speak you speak in his voice
I can’t find you

I wait for you by the fire this cold, cold spring
I invent riddles trap monsters
bones rise from the flames
from the pulse behind my throat an insistent hymn:
I have smoothed their skin I have released the bodies to the vault of memory
I surrender to the burden of proof

one day you will enter the room take my hand
you will lift the coil of sorrow from its niche in history
we will jump over the stone we dedicate to fear
we will revise our story as simply as we shift a burden
from one hand to the next

“Bus 148 To Ariel” by Steven Sher

I was reading how much they pay the murderers of Jews,
the great praise, plus monthly stipends, they will heap
upon the families of suicide bombers –
more than any laborer makes, two-legged mules
who build these towns and work the groves.
I recall the outcry of one of these killers,
one of a thousand condemned terrorists
exchanged for Gilad Shalit. He demanded
something must be done – What would become
of his incompletes, the latest courses he’d begun? –
bemoaned his lack of luck, the timing of his release,
so few credits left toward completing his degree.
What choice was there but to return
to the work he did before – slitting throats
and smashing stones against the heads of sleeping infants?

We forget how disaffection and education form
an unholy alliance, surprised when we catch them
in bed together – lovers bringing violent
bastards into the world as fast as they can produce them.
These are the hard truths we are facing,
the only mathematical equation that matters,
irrefutable demographics that the sane mind will dismiss.
On the bus to Ariel today, we passed the Arab children
walking home, dismissed from school, beside
the parched-brown fields – hordes of boys
and girls in hijabs, strung along a quarter mile
on both shoulders of the road, from afar
like blowing scraps of fabric littering the highway –
and when we reached the first of them, the boys
gave us the finger and threw stones that struck our flanks,
laughed and spit obscenities, a swirl of dust in our draft,
and all this Egged bus could do was maintain speed.

“Getting In” by Patricia Har-Even

Hiding in the hay at the bottom of lorries
Stolen by the Resistance, we
Were disbelieving of our luck to have got so far.
We had a fair time of it at first
On the Italian boat, chasing the young girls
Around the open decks in the sunshine,
Laughing. Afterwards they had to go below
To help the mothers of young babies, and our
Sleeping quarters stank with sweat, urine and sick.
Then the British ship appeared and we
Crouched down to whisper on our bunks, and
Heard the sailors shouting to our captain with a
Bullhorn, though he cried this was a refugee
Vessel – no guns on board; but still the English sailors shot at us.
We used potatoes, which were all we had;
And of course so useless, that kind of ammunition -
We had to sacrifice our stores, and thus we were
Forced into gentlemanly arrest by the
Policemen of the sea, who put a pistol on the captain's back.
In the King's English they instructed him
To set a course for Cyprus. Not Germany at
Least, not there. Some of us, we later heard,
Got through, but how? And found themselves
Naked in prison at Atlit, with DDT. Great open green tin
Chambers shown to them, which many of us
Recalled were like the rumoured unspeakable
Places that had no exit doors. These only cleansing
Stations however, on the way to a prison
By no means inhumane. Of course no men and boys allowed
With wives or sisters in the same huts,
Or families might attempt escape together.
Yet finally one night the shifts of history turned
Round and the kibbutzniks came at last;
We'd heard the warnings, made up our
Small packages of possessions and crept out.
We made a silent coming of it and
Arrived, bewildered, into Palestine.
It should be told, and bitterly, that we came like this.

“My Poem is a Dog” by Johnmichael Simon

My poem is a dog
A disheveled mongrel,
a pandemonium of yaps
yelps and scampering
that greets me when I open
the door of my notebook

My poem is a wet nose
on my ankle, a thirsty tongue
lapping at a bowl full of waking impressions,
a shivering water level of dream recollections

My poem is a collection of cut-out
phrases and phonemes from phone books
anthologies and newspapers —
triangles, rectangles and carelessly torn
fragments piled haphazardly in my brain

That suddenly origami-like rearrange
themselves into the semblance of a dog
who when he sees me reaching for a pencil
performs circles around himself
in tail-catching delight
paws at my trouser leg scratches at the door

And then he's off barking in anticipation
sniffing at traditional or popular
territorial markings – then dashing away
pissing on his own choice of trees

My poem has four nimble legs but I
only have two. I can't walk on my hands
so most of the time he is far in front of me
unleashed, tail raised like a flag held by
a tour guide, sometimes disappearing
in a crowd of bushes or getting impatient
at other poems lifting their stanzas in French or Spanish

But then I spy him waiting at some intersection
of ideas, looking back at me to sense which way
I wish to go today. He's quite unpredictable,
at times he intuits my undeclared choice
but often as not takes off on his own accord

And I must follow,
not a tussle for mastery, but simply
a mutt and a poet having a romp