

## Reuben Rose Competition, 2013: Texts of the Winning Poems and Honourable Mentions

### First Prize: "Questions my Mother Asked, Answers my Father Gave Her" by Miriam Green

*after Mark Strand*

Where were you last night?

*I was here, with you, though you thought I was your father.*

Where were you last night?

*Out dancing with my lover who never forgets my name.*

Where are the children?

*They are grown with children of their own. They live in their own homes.*

Where are the children?

*They are waiting in the silken sky for your goodnight kisses.*

Do you want a cup of tea?

*Not now. I'm busy. You made some an hour ago.*

Do you want a cup of tea?

*I want many things I can no longer have. I want to stand with you under the canopy and never look forward.*

How many children did I give birth to?

*You cradled them both in your arms, raised them to adulthood.*

How many children did I give birth to?

*Daughter earth is calling. Go gently to her.*

Where are my keys?

*I told you. Check the back pocket of your bag.*

Where are my keys?

*We are locked inside this room together.*

Is it time yet?

*We have plenty of time.*

Is it time yet?

*Yes, it is time.*

## Second Prize: "Yungay" by Art Heifetz

This is not Pompeii  
where the dead are on display  
like plaster sculptures,  
their last horrific gestures  
frozen for the ages  
while the guide drones on  
with scholarly precision.  
This is more recent,  
more frightening, more real,  
an entire city crushed beneath  
the flowering mountain plants,  
blessed by the downturned hands  
of the towering white Christ  
who stands atop the ossuary  
like a groom on a wedding cake.

The serene nevasdas bear no trace  
of the fury they unleashed.  
Children circle round the monuments.  
Finches alight on the four remaining palms.  
As if the screams at the circus  
when the earth split its seams,  
of the people huddled in the church  
when the avalanche roared down  
were only the screams of a feverish child  
awakening safely in his mother's arms.  
As if the coche de Ancash  
were heading back to Huaraz as usual.  
As if the premonitions of the good doctor  
were only the ravings of a loco.

No this is not Pompeii.  
If it were our andina guide would not be  
hiding her tears beneath dark glasses.  
I would not be hearing  
the cries of my lost son  
as he slid beneath the truck.  
Your best friend would not be  
calling out to you  
from the rubble in Managua.

### **Third Prize: "Mike" by Jan Fitzgerald**

The photo in the lounge told the story.  
A handsome man sitting on a hay bale in a barn  
flanked by his wife, four children  
and six border collies  
their ruffs ribboned with medals.

Other dogs he had buried under the willows  
each with its own headstone.  
He would greet them  
as he drove by on the tractor  
Morning Georgie! Champ! Flicker!  
And somewhere  
from the freshly mown hay  
smell of sun on the river stones  
they'd answer.

And so it was each morning  
that we held him up in the hoist  
and removed his pyjamas to wash him  
face hands armpits chest belly privates  
eased on his rugby shorts  
settled him in the wheelchair  
put on his fleecy checked shirt  
and the hat crowned with winning dog badges  
laced up his boots  
fed him his porridge and cup of tea...  
wheeled him into the hospital lounge  
by his photo

left him calling out  
Hunter! Flash! Shadow! Mac! Bailey! Jess!

## **“When They Ask Us” by Niki Nymark**

When Moses saw the golden calf,  
he shattered the Commandments  
into dust like desert sand,  
gold and azure speckles  
that spilled and filled  
the peoples’ eyes, and ears,  
the corners of  
their mouths and  
the fringes of their garments.

Nobody knew what the  
fragments said,  
but everyone had an atom of  
“I am,” or “Thou shalt,” or  
“Father and Mother.”  
Everyone had a particle of  
“*lech lecha*,” or “if not now, when.”

God didn’t make it easy.  
God said, “The first tablets, I created  
with gold and precious gems,  
I signed My name in the corner,  
“The Artist of the Heavenly Word“.  
This time you’ll have to make them by hand.  
I’m not even going to tell you what to say,  
you have to remember that yourselves.”

Moses kicked himself. The people  
cried aloud,  
but they felt the prickly shards  
of Torah in their eyes,  
they could taste them  
in their mouths.  
they itched with curiosity,  
began to search for  
the ten words, so elusive,  
and all the meaning  
folded within them.

We search for them still.  
It takes a whole people to find  
all the tiny letters,  
no one can do it alone.  
So, who are the Jews?  
We are the people who feel the itch  
We are the people who search together.

**“Joseph's Coat” by Dina Yehuda**

I know how it feels  
to have your father  
drape his hopes

over your shoulders  
a soft cloak  
warm and wondrous

woven from golden sheaves  
and silver stars and all the colors  
in earth and heaven

Yet all the while you know  
that your brothers wait and work  
for the words you bask in daily

and the coat  
begins to hang heavier  
with each sun scorched day

I know how it feels  
to wear your brothers' envy  
to have to live with love

undeserved  
for which you have not worked  
but have only dreamed.

**“Yiddish” by Yakov Azriel**

Yiddish,  
You lived across the sea  
In *die alte haim*, the Old Country,  
In a kingdom that is no more.  
Come to my country  
To teach me the *lieder*, the songs  
You once sang  
And the *niggunim*, the tunes  
Your clarinetists and your violinists used to play.

Speak to me, Yiddish,  
I fear I am becoming as mute as you,  
Another *Bontshe Schweig*, Bontshe the Silent.  
Look, I have brought you a buttered roll,  
I have brought you raisins and almonds  
And a little white goat to sleep under your bed.  
Yiddish, *mein tei'ereh*, my precious one,  
Light your Shabbos candles  
And let me hear your voice.

And dance with me, Yiddish, we shall dance together  
Like a *chasan* and *kolleh*, a bridegroom and bride,  
With only a handkerchief between us,  
*Gelibte meine*, my beloved one.

*Zog mir*, tell me, please –  
What light in the night-sky will the world know  
And who shall pull its tides  
Without the *levoneh*, the moon, of a Yiddish word?

I wander in a castle's unweeded garden,  
In an untended orchard, in a forest,  
And cannot find my way.  
Perhaps you can be my guide,  
*Shaine Yiddish*, *die bas-melech*,  
Beautiful Yiddish, princess —  
For I am lost,  
Lost in translation.

**“The Binding” by Joel Moskowitz**

In your interminable infancy –  
I suppose that you drank too long at Mom's breast –  
I painted and repainted with keen fervor  
a life-sized Binding of Isaac,  
a drastic deed, potentially important canvas,  
but – like most of my work from that period –

never finished.

Was it the bat's fault – that creature hanging  
between panes of the studio window,  
its dark wings folded neatly  
all the while I was losing my purpose  
in painting that old family trauma –  
perhaps to work out something aching  
between my father and me.

My son, now that you're almost thirteen –  
are your bar mitzvah blessings memorized?  
I'll swell with pride when you stand on the *bima*.  
Meanwhile, your shoe's already bigger than mine,  
so we expect a growth spurt.

But, I worry. As we climb Tippling Rock,  
a Native American sacred landscape,  
we pass Jack in the pulpits, delicate ferns,  
our whole town below us caught through trees –  
and you're totally bored,

lean one of your long arms like a yoke on my shoulders.  
Then in the kitchen, you stand on your toes,  
our faces almost rubbing, yours menacing.  
You ask, Do you want to die?

Today, after we fought over the TV,  
I found that pen knife I've kept since college  
stabbed into the top of my drafting table.  
The tool's metal shaft, like a finger,  
cursed me for being your father.

## **“A Soldier Learns to Sleep” by David Silverman**

### A Soldier Learns to Sleep

wherever and whenever he can. Once, he slept in the back of a truck, heading to battle on the Syrian border. Undisturbed by the rutted road or sound of gunfire in the distance, he dreamed he was in bed with his wife, their infant son nestled between them. When the truck stopped, they had to poke his shoulder with the butt of an M-16 to wake him.

That day, Tal, Yoav, and Itamar fell.

Years later, in bed with his wife, he dreams he is riding in the back of a truck, heading to battle on the Syrian border. Next to him is his son. Undisturbed by the rutted road or sound of gunfire in the distance, his son sleeps, like a soldier.

Reality, memory, dream, nightmare.  
When the conscious and unconscious converge, even the dead awaken.



## **“Border Blues” by Johnmichael Simon**

Beyond these orchards roars the road, winding  
between villages and hills, a writhing asphalt snake,  
southward it heaves, then east again, until  
it disappears leaving a constant echo in its wake.

Trucks rumble up and down the road, laden with  
sand from quarries, rocks and timber. Some are covered  
with tarpaulins and even binoculars can only  
guess their contents – bulky, ominous, concealed.

Dividing ‘us’ from ‘them’, brothers from cousins,  
hard by the road, a wire fence, marked off by  
electronic posts, pencils in twenty yard segments  
the barrier which, in its way, despite seeming fragility

Shouts louder than a road can understand. It shouts  
‘keep out’, no entry’, ‘military zone’ in Hebrew, English,  
Arabic. Here only crows, mountain breeze and ants  
cross with impunity, heedless of the signs, the wires, the road.

Signboards pointing to the border still bear the legend  
‘The Good Fence’, and now and then a visitor, still  
uninformed arrives, asks for directions to the gate where  
women smiling behind burqas once peddled halvah

Olives and pastel-colored squares of *Rahat Lokum*,  
their children and ours observing each other curiously  
like animals in a zoo. That was before the war, now gateway,  
smiles and kiosks are replaced with concrete walls

While children in their schoolrooms, so close yet not  
so close, chant ‘God is Great’, or sing of cypress trees  
that grow in Lebanon, unconscious of the irony – the trees,  
the birds, the ants and God – don’t really care at all.

## **“Sanction” by Rachael Clyne**

They sell them now in Sainsbury's  
between rice cakes and crispbreads  
low calorie, yeast free  
appealing to an eco-clientele  
ever grazing *nouveau* pastures  
Rakusen's Matzot still bear  
the sanction of Beth Din.

The Jew in me who craves acceptance  
is pleased to share her soulfood.  
Deeper down another rankles.  
The wounded Jew cries out  
This is mine, sacred!

Passover bread baked in memory  
of endless hurried departures  
escape from the Angel of Death.  
No time to taste the yeast of life  
between slavery and desert.

This precious freedom painfully won  
is eaten once a year  
how dare you take it from me  
would you wrap communion wafers  
in cellophane and sell them too?

Jews were murdered for making *matzot*  
not martyred blood of Christian boys  
Hugh of Lincoln's name resounds  
with hundreds slaughtered in his name.

Now they lie among slimming breads  
I wonder if the dead would sanction  
this instead, a place on the shelf  
the final integration?

**“Budapest and Beyond” by Breindel Lieba Kasher**

Mr. Feldman, my driver, and his wife are survivors  
Living in Budapest’s Jewish quarter

4 in the morning Mrs. Feldman boils milk for our coffee  
In her kosher kitchen, she worries over her husband  
Like a mother of children she could not have

Our papers in order, at the Ukrainian border  
Police detain us for hours, as if we are criminals

Mr. Feldman whispers:

“Don’t ask questions, give simple answers, don’t look them in the eye”

Mother’s Ungvar:

Lilac flowers, chestnut trees, horse and wagons, Gypsies  
Shriveled ladies, black kerchiefs, white hens, wooden houses, dirt roads  
Everything as it was except, the Jews are gone, all but one

She opens slowly and pulls me in quickly  
As if still in hiding, her basement memories  
Resurface in Yiddish, she has not spoken since the war

The war took all:

Family, friends, neighbors, streets, smells, shadows, songs  
Her mother’s tongue, dead and gone, only she lives  
With her husband, the man who hid her in the basement

Afternoon turns evening, we hold each other, weeping  
It is hard leaving, back to Budapest  
The border police break our thermos full of coffee  
Mrs. Feldman made that morning

**“The Carrier” by Irene Bloom**

Like a recessive gene  
I am a carrier  
of hidden secrets  
lost childhoods  
and forgotten stories

but they are not yet mine to tell

In my youth they waited  
germinated in guilt  
twisted and silent  
shrouded inside their genetic code

My mother  
who lived those horrors of a Holocaust  
planted them unknowingly  
deep within me

Today she relates them to strangers  
in the supermarket  
in spite of my shame

Perhaps  
after a generation  
when the proper time comes  
I will bring them to the surface  
dominant and strong

When she is gone her stories  
will be revealed again  
their telling will become  
my task  
my burden  
my honor

**“The Passing of That Night” by Bernard Mann**

We grieved the passing of that night,  
a night unlike any other, so we murmured,  
So good the air, softly stirred by a hand  
    called a breeze, a wandering air  
    that curled and came about to hold and caress.

So warm the touch,  
    fingering keys that  
    brought the notes that  
        carried the hues that planted the seeds  
        of what we'll remember  
in tomorrow's florist shop  
of long-stemmed memories,

So vivid in the mind's eye,  
    swifts winging  
    against a mauve and crimson sunset,  
        of couplings in ocean surf,  
        towels splashed across a sand-dune fence,

So sharp the cries of gulls  
and the terse utterings of terns  
    now so interchangeable with yours, and mine  
that a thousand years hence either you or I or they  
    will see and hear it yet again  
        much as it burned itself into the dusk,  
        into that deepest evening indigo.

So good the taste of salt upon the tongue,  
    upon the lip of ocean's edge,  
        upon the shore upon the islet  
        where no one had ever been.

So fond the heart for the dying days.  
    So lonely the heart for the morrow for which  
        desire longs, eager in its waiting

        for the rose-nippled dawn  
to seduce yet all again.

**“Fifties Flashback” by Jennifer Lagier**

A Sears repairman removed  
the pegboard back of our giant  
black and white TV, fussed inside.

He’s cleaning out the dead cowboys,  
Daddy told my sister and me  
as we watched, open-mouthed.

I imagined cold, stiff piles  
of shot-down desperadoes,  
swept away with gray dust.

Now my father is gone; nights bring  
blurry reruns of past peach harvests,  
truck rides he gave us to the cannery and back.

At the grading station, he  
hitched up perpetually sagging levis,  
handed me a quarter to purchase strawberry pop.

I miss our Saturdays, simple monochrome westerns,  
Cisco and Pancho galloping to the rescue,  
happy endings that last.

## **“Ten Minutes” by Judy Kronenfeld**

My father always set the alarm  
ten minutes early – 4:50 instead of  
5:00 A.M – so he could fall back  
into a gauzy sleep on the hide-a-bed  
in the living room. Perhaps he was gentling  
himself, showing himself a deliberate  
kindness, by adding a step  
between oblivion and the icy jolt  
of another exhausting day. Perhaps his sleep  
was made that much more delicious  
because he was almost conscious of it,  
almost enjoyed the sensation of sleeping  
while sleeping, thought ah, ten...nine...eight...seven  
more long minutes (as I did, following his lead  
on interminable high school mornings), before,  
rank with sleep sweat, he sat  
a few seconds in striped boxers  
and ribbed undershirt, then hauled  
himself up to shower in our tiny  
bathroom, humid with laundry,  
and get dressed for work.

It’s terrifying how far back  
this memory goes. I feel as if  
I’ve had to lie on my belly  
with a head lamp and inch forward  
in the dark to see it. And now I grab hold  
of it, as if he could have ten minutes  
again, and I could grant them because  
I remember how he treasured them:  
ten minutes good as pre-dinner cupcakes for a kid  
who’s been bullied at school when at last  
at home; ten more minutes  
of breathing, for me to see him,  
nine, eight, seven, six—as if  
ten minutes would sweeten arm-twisting  
death, or gentle us into braving his.