

Texts of the Prizes and Honourable Mentions Winners, Reuben Rose Competition 2016

First Prize: “Director’s Notes: Holocaust Memorial Day, Tel Aviv” by Ricky Friesem

Pan across the bustling plaza
bursting with the energy
of busy people on the go.
Zoom out to a long shot
as the siren’s piercing howl
brings them to an abrupt halt.
Hold on the shot of the plaza,
still now, and silent.

Zoom in on a pair of sandals
glistening with wet sand.
Cut to a series of tight close ups
of dusty shoes, trendy shoes,
soldiers’ boots, high heels,
low heels, new shoes, old shoes,
bridled feet twitching with life.

Tilt up to motionless legs and torsos,
faces settling into solemnity.
Pan the plaza until the siren’s
howl is sucked into the void again
and the crowd lets out a collective sigh,
like swimmers coming up for air.

Zoom out to a long shot of the crowd, stirring.
Zoom in to their shoes, in motion once again, then
cut to tight close ups of fancy buckles, worn heels,
burnished leather, delicate straps and tangled laces.

Zoom out to reveal they belong
to the tumbled mass of shoes on display
behind glass in the Auschwitz museum where
they rest now, undisturbed and unclaimed.
Slowly fade to black.

Second Prize: "Filíocht" by Joyce Schmid

That is Heaven's part, our part / To murmur name upon name -- W.B. Yeats

I met an Irish poet, once,
in Kepler's Bookstore, and I asked him
why he'd come to Menlo Park from Ireland.
He said, "In Ireland, everyone's a poet,
so I came to be a poet here."

I wish that I were Irish,
with the greeny eyes, the fiddle in my ears,
the River Shannon winding through my mind
from Cuilcagh Mountain, County Cavan,
to Loop Head in County Clare.

My blood lines flow from Kamenetz-Podolsk
on Smotritch River in Ukraine,
where Cossacks and Red Army troops
killed people by the hundreds,
and the Germans came and lined up all the rest

and shot them by the tens
of thousands into open pits,
no Connolly or Pearse, MacDonagh or MacBride
to harry and dismay the murderers,
no Yeats

to name the martyrs.
I wish I had an Irish throat
to sing them for you, one by one,
the beauty
of their unknown names.

Third prize: "Salonika, Mother of Israel" by Wendy Dickstein

The toy seller's shadow
stains the street.
Her burden of balloons
blossoms over the Aegean Sea.
From a café drift the strains
of a George Dalaras song: "
You opened the door and left everything in pieces."
She lingers to listen, a boy buys a balloon.
The song resumes:
"All that binds us walks away like steps on the stairs."

In Roman, Spanish, Ottoman times
this was a Jewish town.
La madre de Israel, the poets called it.
On Sabbath the harbor fell silent.
Eggs baked overnight in the ovens — huevos haminados.

1942, Black Sabbath, nine thousand Jewish men and boys
entrapped in Freedom Square,
the Nazis kept them sweltering there for hours.
Months later, when they got to Auschwitz, the other inmates
almost rejoiced, thinking these husky watermen
had come to set them free.

Today you'd never know
sixty thousand Jews once lived here
but for the lone menorah — artful mesh of bodies and flames,
and the street sign: "Jewish Martyrs' Square"
defaced so often they keep a stockpile of spares.

Bleak eyed, each evening the toy seller
roams Aristotelous Square.
Above the gaudy port
soar sixty thousand unseen souls
ghosts of lost balloons.

Honorable mentions, in random order

“My Acting Career in Two Bit Parts” by Chaim Bezalel

I (1964 - Dobbs Ferry High School production of Jean Anouilh's Antigone)

In my first role, freshman year
Age fourteen, a modern adaptation
of Antigone, I began my career
on stage. Stage right was my location
Throughout the play. I stood pretending
to write, although the author, Jean Anouilh,
Wrote in the secretary without intending
A single line to relieve the ennui.
Fifty years later I search the script
and of such a part there is no mention,
Only the Page among the nondescript.
I was coached not to attract much attention.
Two small corrections need to be added.
Half a century, one may forget one's lines.
I had always thought my part had been padded
by the director; sometimes memory undermines
The truth. I see the page I played
Did have a speaking part, five lines,
Each ending in “Sir,” but mostly charade.
And there was a momentary exit and re-entry,
The page leaves the stage to usher Guard Number One,
Private Jonas. At least this bit of supplementary
information rounds out the picture before I am done.

II (2015 – Light Opera Company of the Negev production of Fiddler on the Roof)

In a dressing room in Haifa I check my makeup, await my cue
Half a century since Antigone and my thespian debut.
The fiddler on the roof moves his bow, pretends to play.
We sit around the table making noise with nothing to say,
Speaking gibberish, getting drunk from glasses of air,
We all get up, dance across the stage like Fred Astaire
If he had been a drunken Jew back in the Russian pale
With his Jewish surname, Austerlitz, but Tradition didn't prevail.
Both quarry and hunter, I wear two hats, cloth and fur,
Cossack and Jew, bit part by bit, side by side, till transfer
Led some to America, some to destruction, some to the Promised Land.
We strut and fret and play out our roles, not always as we had planned.

“Derricks & Dreidls” by Davi Walders

There must have been a dreidl turning somewhere

as I twisted out
into a dusty Texas
town pulsing with
derricks pumping to fuel
the war heating up
that summer before
Pearl Harbor, before
the first roundups
as the first trains
filled the first camps.

There must have been a dreidl turning somewhere

spinning out of control,
its small twirling body
weighted against gimmel,
hey, families and children,
toppling always on nun--nothing,
shin — you lose, shin again —
you always lose, tilting
farther away from those
whose every share
had been anteed up, emptied out
in round-ups and line-ups.

There must have been a dreidl turning somewhere

as I blinked at orderly
cross-armed derricks pricking
the sky, tried to focus
on refineries firing
clouds into bright blue.
There must have been a dreidl
toppling elsewhere
against those who could never
break even, whose turns
burned into dust
as I twisted and tumbled
to safety.

“Upon Learning Einstein Was Wrong” by Grace Curtis

Notice which parts
of the body are moving

unconsulted, blowing newspapers,
loose tea, a novel, novel idea, novella,

genitival, blue cloisonné, metallic, crackly.
We can't say we weren't warned, that we

hadn't warmed up to the idea. We can't say
it hadn't been said. Now it's all break, beak, and

tally, stretching appetites for the no-longer. Clinging
to our pristine pages — the one thing we believed in —

paper — thin, featherweight, in the scheme, opaque, part
cotton-linen, part flax mixed with wood pulp. That too —

digitized, flung spontaneously, without supervision, limitless,
concourse of souvenir shops, electrical charges; charged, then

neutrons, then nothing, bruised, blue and black. Artificial, Bible-less,
bivalvia, unhinged, impotent, unspiritual. Notice which parts of the body

are moving. Notice which parts of the body. Notice which parts are moving,
moving outward. Notice which parts are expanding at an ever expanding rate.

“Jew as Noun” by Ellaraine Lockie

As a child, I assumed it was a verb
A word that had to do with a cheap price
Later, school history defined it as noun
Ephemeral beside a list of dates to memorize
Later still, exploited in movies and novels
until facts blurred into fiction
And there the facts stayed
rooted in everyday farm and small-town life
Life without any nowned Jews, or was it
How many other grandfathers emigrated
from a Germany that repressed their very breath
Who went West where the air was free for all
Who married into Catholicism and homesteading
Still, fear squeezed truth into silence
The secret as buried as the blackened
silver dollar collection found under the floor
when the prairie house was torn down
The first layer of tarnish stripped long after his death
when several states away a man with a nose
like my daughter's and nephew's
said our last name was certain to be Jewish
A genealogist scraped off the next layer
after learning the Stettin birthplace
But what removed the last dark smudge of deceit
is Josephus' Complete Works: History of the Jews
The ragged book hidden in an out-building
An inscription by my grandfather to my father
dated Christmas Day
Here in my hands, a new heritage
Polished as bright as a jeweled Star of David
Yet withered and falling apart
Like my perception of who I am
and what linguistics apply to me now
It should be as easy as adding
another adjective to Irish and Polish
But this shine burns a hole
of questions that can't be filled
The answers underground for decades
Imagination haunting in their place

“Aunt Lillian” by Judith R. Robinson

Paper dolls & Little Women,
the shaded summer porch, alone;
blue myopic eyes, skin pale as curdle;
delicate young feet bound
not by clay but carpet slippers

Later, a spinster’s work: Father’s mountain
of accounts, the busy store, the bank,
his trade union, his taxes, the inventories:
every brand of smokes. Payables, receivables.
Pinch each gritty penny. Orders to fill.
Bull Durham & Pall Mall & Lucky Strike.

Sundays on Murray Avenue: buggy rides
give way to somebody else’s Ford or Chevy,
she, the ever-grateful passenger
never chattier than on trips to the cemetery —

business among the stones and myrtle
rags & scissors to tidy up mother’s bridge club,
the poor rabbi, cut off in his prime.
Bits of a maiden aunt’s sadness: only her own hands
to soothe peach-scented cream on thinning skin;

the left hand that trembles,
the skin brown and dotted as an owlet’s wing;
a photograph kept under starched white sheets,
Clark Gable, his dazzling, crooked smile,
hidden from the sight of sister Ruth;
and next to Clark rests Lillian, herself,

in sepia, at eighteen, looking dreamy,
up and away from the camera,
ready to begin the life that never comes.

“Drinking the Sea (a lullaby for Etai)” by Bill Freedman

When he couldn't sleep
I'd press his tiny body to my chest,
set his teacup chin in my shoulder's rest
that I might be his violin,
and sing him up and down the corridor
between his bedroom and our own.
Rockabye Baby a hundred
dying toward a whisper times until he slept.

I was forty four, my spine a twisted
olive branch that proposed no peace.
And within minutes, where the bough
for the thirty-seventh time gives way,
I'd feel my own. Feel it curtsy, bow,
swing its vertebrae like a white plumed hat
and step aside for anguish, wide as any pavement,
striding through.

No shifting of his six apples and a grapefruit weight,
no Tarot, leaf, or palm-read realignment
with the moons of Saturn, piety or stars
would detain it with a friendly conversation,
block its way.
Only the glassy smoothness of his skin
the world these foundling months lend out,
lies at our doorstep, sparkling
its flat sandpaper smile when we take it in.
This and the swooning scent of newness I sucked in,
deep as the Chinese brother in the tale
who could drink in a single draught the sea.

He calls sometimes, from another continent
for help with something costly, broken
or in his love life not quite right.
It isn't easy. He's a little heavier now, my size,
but though he wears a three-months beard
and sweats a little on the treadmill
or weeding with his woman in their yard,
I lift him still, set his satin smooth sweet chin
where throat and shoulder meet to let him in
and drink the sea to reach him.

“Artist and Mother: Poland, 1950s” by Joan Michelson

He paints the two together, still lifes, close ups.
They’re in a space that is no space, a join

of earth to sky, of absence to existence.
The woman is always in her prime. The son,

who paints, changes from a man, to infant,
to a boy in short trousers. Although there was

a time when both were alive together,
on his canvas, always, however life-like,

one of them is dead. For death, the artist
uses blues, for life, hot fire colours.

In this painting, the mother is all blue,
blue flesh in silky thin-strap, shroud-like dress.

The boy, feisty, fiery bright, hugs
his face between her hips. As if she senses

what the dead cannot and responds
to his embrace, her hand is spread and pressed

into his back. Elsewhere, the reverse.
The same full female figure female is bright

while he, a pudgy toddler, is cold blue.
Gazing at him, she stands him on her knees,

his blue hands in hers, his blue arms
outstretched; an angel designate perhaps,

trying out his wings. This life-in-death
coupling is his obsession. Last, he paints

Self-Portrait of the Artist. A lean young man
in round dark-rim glasses, he’s at work

inside his work. In his hand, his palette.

“Stranger” by Orit Perlman

What kind of wind is this that can pull you out by your socks
toes curling into the marble flagstones, dry leaves
scaling them sideways — ocean crazed crabs, your fingers
vines growing wildly at the joints.

What kind of wind is this, that befuddles the lemon tree
heavy breasted with fruit, sagging at the spine, into forgetting
her puddings and pies and other smiling yellow glories as she opens
new leaves sharp-eyed as stars. What kind
of wind has come, narrow hipped and dry as a bone
in the middle of this rainy, soup-warmed
in the middle of this hubby, muffin-kissed
December, like a stranger without luggage, his silhouette
ripples over the grass as weeds lovingly pry into his pockets.

You have met him before, you were marked
by the turn of his wrist through a crack of a window
or maybe much later, or much earlier, but nevertheless
in hazy fields or vagabond huts, sometimes
by a strain of melody or whiff of salt, but even then
his back was turned, he was just passing through, whistles
on his collar, and you want to follow, in your socks
out through the gate to the edge of the garden and ride
forever on the tatters of his southbound shirt.

“Ternivka” by Elisabeth Murawski

From the roundup,
the Gestapo in charge

chooses two Jewish beauties
for his pleasure,

queens for a day. He has
the same name, Hummel,

as the Bavarian nun,
Sister Mary Innocentia,

whose drawings inspired
the figurines. Not one

of those adorable
porcelain children

whistling and singing
in oversized shoes

has seen a schoolmate shot
or trampled

a naked corpse
as if it were grapes.

A hummel, German
for bumblebee, is also

a Swedish musical instrument
much like a zither.

Its drone resembles
the insect’s hum as it circles

a flower, the whirr
of an oncoming fighter plane.

“Toward Forgiveness” by Jed Myers

So say you chose — you were moved,
by the world, by the body
you’ll say was yours. Sure as you felt,
you were leaned to your conviction,
like any reed in the wind.

Call it decision — you followed
your heart. You bowed to the ruling
party that monitored your inside
transmissions, intercepted and shredded
your doubts, and had you serve

purposes you didn’t know about. You lived
in another city. You did
what the limbs were told by the nerves.
You spoke the words in your throat.
How could you not? You were sent,

task after task. Your fingers
undid the buttons between you and others
on their unknown missions. You wept
tears of real love, no idea
what greetings you were there to convey

nor why those meetings took years.
And you’re still confused. Whose
were the acts you committed — yours?
The wind pressed. You were driven.
The world gets under your skin.