

David's Shield

by Ricky Rapoport Friesem (Israel)

First Prize

I overheard a woman in the next aisle ask the clerk
for a greeting card for someone about to be drafted.
My grandson's going into the army on Sunday,
into the Golani Brigade, she was saying. I heard
the bravado in her voice, but I also detected
the quiver, and I knew that what she really wanted
was a mantra, a prayer, an amulet, some guarantee
of safety, a shield to protect her grandson,
not a cheery good luck message on colored paper.
I didn't dare look up to see the woman's face,
yet I felt I already knew her, knew so many like her,
knew myself. And besides, if we were to meet
face to face, she'd see my tears, and that she didn't need...

Lantern Fish

by Jane Seitel (USA)

Second Prize

*Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?*

Job 38:16

Beyond our shallow trawling
a mother-orca hauls
the corpse of her newborn calf.
She drags him week after week.
Sharks circle, their daggers ready
as the pod moans their songs.

Above, red giants slowly die
in the wild dust of nebulas.
Miles below the whales,
arthropods older than Adam
lie undetected near black smokers
of soot, sulfur and iron.

Suddenly a vitreous shrimp veers
too close to an altar stone;
gets seared by a spewing vent.
A lantern fish navigates
swirls of marine snow. A sentinel,
he lights glowing mounds

in the flow and ebb of magma.
Here in a realm ardent with matter,
skeletons heap the salt mountains
in a relentless reservoir
born of hydrogen in heavy water.
Here lives a world beyond reckoning
— furtive as the far moon's face.

The Burden of Memory

by Esther B. Lipton (UK)

Third Prize

I write this poem for you, my friend
a friend of fifty years and more
whose life was spent carrying a rucksack of rocks
invisible and hidden upon your bent back
that heavy sad burden of guiltless remorse,
victim of a callous, cruel rape that memory
cannot cast aside but surfaces for air to breathe,
and crashes into your thoughts unannounced
disturbing your life, as a teenager, young woman, wife
mother, and now grandmother.
A Jack in the box, hiding in the recesses of your heart
the psyche jolted, by a sight, a sound
a smell, a cry, a kiss and the vision reappeared
faithful but fated to hinder your happiness

Yet you've lived your life without bitterness
by giving, giving, giving of yourself,
denying your right to be a person
negating your very existence
do not consider me, I am worthless you say
the needs, real or imagined, of your
family, friends, community, the underdog, anyone
is greater than mine so I must help
the anger, rejection and shame replaced by
kindness, compassion and love for others.

Now that I have heard your story
the time has come for me, your loyal friend
to unload those rocks from your broken back
and replace the rucksack with angel wings.

Blind

by Haya Onallah (Israel)

Honorable Mention

Mother always said he was troublesome even before his birth.
When he was just a fetus, he grabbed her umbilical cord
And tangled it in a thousand knots. A true Scout he was.

He would hurt Mother until a point of agony; then, he would let her be.
Mother would love him again. She would become happy.
He always knew how to control her like that.
He always knew how to push her buttons all at once,
Then release, before her wind became his storm.

The baby became a child who left the milk carton out on hot summer days,
But that's just what children do.
They color outside the lines and watch you admire their piece of art.
They become demons, "but a demon son will always be angelic,"
That is what Mother always said.

The child became a teenager who stole a car and drove it without a license,
But that's just what teenagers do.
They make mistakes and expect you to correct them.
They become criminals, "but a criminal son will always be innocent,"
That is what Mother always said.

The teenager became a man who replaced milk with alcohol,
But that's just what men do.
They replace innocence with addictions and crimes with more crimes.
They became drunks, "but a drunk son will always be sober,"
That is what Mother always said.

The man became a body Mother found with a bottle in its hand,
But that's just what bodies do.
They assume the fetal position and die in their creators' womb.
They become cold, "but a son's cold body will always be warm,"
Mother said, this time a little less sure.

Now that you're here

by Immanuel Suttner (Australia)

Honorable Mention

The quiet
and stillness
of late afternoon
autumn sun
on the plant
on the table
in Sydney
is not
so very different
from the quiet
and stillness
of late afternoon
autumn sun
on the table
in Johannesburg
and are both
much the same
as the quiet
and stillness
of late afternoon
autumn sun
in Jerusalem
because
the quiet
and stillness
are not
in Sydney, or Johannesburg,
or Jerusalem
but in you

The Color Jew

by Sarah Sassoon (Israel)

Honorable Mention

My skin is the color
of olive tree roots
spanning continents
in-generated thousands of years
under the Middle Eastern sun

My foremothers were dhimmis
harbored in black hijabs
the color of wailing
my grandmother says
I am not allowed to wear

She's my Baghdadi grandmother
replanted near Haifa by the sea
behind a guarded fence
where she learnt to scrub
immigrant tent mud
off her family

She wore dresses
the color of singing flowers
lavender allium blue woodruff
Persian iris the wild pink
and her favorite red roses

Today I picked a dandelion
and blew its silvery seeds far
and countless over wild grass
never to forget my grandmother's
11th commandment
be happy

Walks Along Oirase Gorge

by Mervyn R. Seivwright (USA)

Honorable Mention

I miss walking in Japan's Towada valley, distance
in kilometers, the lines of a sonnet.
At spring, I would drift through raining
pink cherry blossom flakes, pausing—smelling
birthed life released from winter's grasp.

The summer brings green prism hues
to Oirase Gorge where rivers converge,
snakes intertwining, water carving its path
while feeding moss partners with each stone.

Centuries of forest growth find careful steps
of onlookers and me counting waterfalls
with mist drips or thundering white rapids—
sounds harsh enough for closed eye meditation.

Opening my eyes at autumn, sunset
leaf tints find the brushes of painters
quietly at the river's edge. I find
my pen to create a picture of words.

Gates

by Susan B. Olsburgh (Israel)

Honorable Mention

Is a gate to open or close?
Viewed this way our whole lives
are an opening till the gate closes.
Shall we open the catch
undo the latch enter and explore
or pull the gate shut closing it like a door?
Do we guard, protect what lies beyond
or secure any likelihood of escape?

Descriptions of a gate abound.
Throughout history symbolic gates
have marked the passage of time
From the simple five barred garden gate
inheritor of Eden's gates sublime
to temple gates and palace gates
significant markers of boundaries,
or more homely childhood's prohibition
not to go beyond the garden gate
to wondrous golden gate bridges
linking land masses in more modern times.

A school gate demarcated a boundary line
and trellised romantic gates
in lovers lanes roses and hearts entwined.
The heavenly gates await the end of time
and in between from birth to lifetime's end
gates are entered, gates are closed
gates are forced or left ajar
wood, metal, stone, real and ethereal,
remote controlled, security patrolled
closed with a clang or a click
opened in excitement or with a fearful flick.

Be careful to use the right trick
to navigate all the gates a lifetime offers
the ones we choose and the ones we cannot pick.

Acceptance Speech

by Anne McCrady (USA)

Honorable Mention

In appreciation, I want to acknowledge
those who made me who I am today:

parents who saved me
from myself
and my constant asthma

teachers who allowed
me the freedom
to write troubled poems

soldiers who have died fighting
and those who lived
to answer the question of war

the abuela lugging groceries
who accepted a ride
and paid me with stories

politicians in blue jeans
whose platform is loud
and clear

the ten-year-old who told me
God was black
a notion I still consider

patient parents
in crowded grocery store aisles
with their tired children

friends who knew
when to push
and when to pull

boyfriends who believed
I was beautiful especially
the one I married.

Pictures from an Exhibition

(Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

by Iris Dan (Israel)

Honorable Mention

In the center sits the Pharaoh who ruled this land from afar
three and a half millennia ago (what was he doing in this sorry hole,
a reporter asked on TV, and a historian pointed out that the place
was of high strategic importance: for a time at least).

As his eyes are simultaneously directed inwards, upwards and laterally
Pharaoh's field of vision does not include us; he converses with entirely
different spheres; nor does it include the prisoners from conquered cities,
represented, on extremely expressive vividly colored cartouches,
kneeling down, ankles and wrists tied at their back - looking into the dust
as befits the vanquished.

We are duly awed, duly saddened. We console ourselves with the fact
that our tribal name, Israel, is there on a list of infamously crushed
vassal peoples. (In our geopolitical situation a historiographical mention
of such import is worth more than any victory.) A settler bends
to inspect the inscription. We can see the gun tucked in his trousers
between his talith katan and his bare skin.

In a corner of the room a young father bends to explain to his little boy
the meaning of the stone objects around. What sculptor is able to render
the tenderness that curves his knee, shortens his tendon? The intense,
the worried, the loving seriousness of his still unlined face?

In every museum where war is on display, where exquisite artifacts
are framed by death and destruction, where the ceiling of history
threatens to fall upon us, may there always be a parent attempting
to make sense of it for his child, looking together with the child
for the right answer to give to the Sphinx.

Silent Night, Revisited

Israel 1992

by John Cecil Dendy (USA)

Honorable Mention

There is no silence in this place
this promised land, this holy land;
no field where sheep may safely graze
nor shepherd may serenely gaze
in peace and trust of fellow man.

There is no peace upon this land
there never was, there never was;
old tribal fears of other clans,
a hundred struggling striving bands
with staff or star or moon or cross.

There is no calm within the breasts
of those whose lives are so entwined
in eager independent quests;
a tangled danger, Life distressed
by fate, by choice, by place and time.

Is there still time? Do wise men dare
to prophesy a future when
old Noah's creatures gladly share
a life together without fear?
Lamb and lion? Man and Man?

Babushkas

by Johnmichael Simon

Honorable Mention

I look at them
queuing at the supermarket checkout
fidgeting at PTA meetings
or at creative writing groups
handing out copies of their poems
about their mothers, about their children

Babushkas all
inside each one is a mother
and inside each mother, a child
pretty and smiling girly smiles
in their differently colored frocks
reds, blues, oranges and yellows
going back to old countries
Russia, Lithuania, Eastern Europe

So many stories hidden inside
variations on a theme of common femininity:
weddings, births, divorces and funerals
happiness and disappointment
all mixed up in their faces and petticoat memories

The smallest babushka is so tiny
I'll hide her away so she can stay protected and pretty
perhaps inside a pumpkin shell
where she can dance around all year
especially on Halloween
to the music of the Nutcracker Suite

The Mist

A Villanelle

by Amiel Schotz (Israel)

Honorable Mention

My portion am I helpless to resist
the evening cannot guarantee the dawn
as all my days recede into the mist

By untold blessings I am graced and kissed
though lines of loss and pain are surely drawn
my portion am I helpless to resist

I contemplate the lives I surely missed
the chances lost the coming and the gone
as all my days recede into the mist

Must I at fate futilely shake my fist
of cruel circumstance the hapless pawn
my portion am I helpless to resist

Perhaps a wisp—a spirit shall persist
though void and precipice before me yawn
as all my days recede into the mist

So when I'm done a trace may linger on
for a brief span—before oblivion
my portion am I helpless to resist
as all my days recede into the mist