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It's (Not) All Small Stuff: The 2009 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry

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As the planet approaches peak oil production, the judges of the *Lion and the Unicorn* Poetry Award wonder if we have already passed peak poetry production. This year marks the fifth anniversary of the award, yet the number of poetry books contending for it was appreciably lower than in previous years. Adjusting to a smaller field has its rewards: we can cull the best of the best without wading through oceans of effluvia. This year's stellar collections include Marion Dane Bauer's *The Longest Night*, Heidi Mordhorst's *Pumpkin Butterfly: Poems from the Other Side of Nature*, and Andrea Cheng's *Brushing Mom's Hair*. In a "normal" year (and we trust that this year is not the new normal!) these would be candidates for the award, yet we suspected, and our research confirmed, that many of the children's poetry books published in 2009 did not reach us—including, for instance, new work by a past honoree, Helen Frost. Therefore, after some collective soul-searching, we decided not to pick a winner this year. If the field of children's poetry is indeed shrinking along with the national economy, then surely those books that *are* published must be vigorously promoted, so that they make it into the hands of teachers, librarians, parents, children—and yes, contest judges. That said, even this year we enjoyed a reduced but still dazzling array of poems: some timid, some bold, some mediocre, some good, and a few real stunners.

In addition to judging the contest this year, judge Angela Sorby also happens to be editing a collection of nineteenth-century children's poetry. She notes that some of the collections in this year's group hearken back, seemingly unconsciously, to older commercial traditions, including textbook didacticism and "nature-study." Nineteenth-century "nature study" poems tended to be reverent, faintly educational paeans to grasses and herons. Jane Yolen treads this worn path in *A Mirror to Nature: Poems about Reflection*,

representing nature as a prelapsarian Eden. Now, picking on nature poetry is akin to fishing by electric shock: it's too easy, and it doesn't stop their eventual swimming along. Nevertheless, we feel obliged to pick on Yolen's book, if only a bit, for the sake of contrast with the others. Yolen takes on the potentially rich conceit of the "mirror" in nature, but doesn't fully explore its possibilities.¹ The red-tail drum, for instance, "has moves in the water galore," and the raccoon is the "children's darling" (30, 10). We are also reminded that "A deer that stays / too long / reflecting / is a deer called / meat," and this uninspired conclusion comes after the homophonic obviousness of the opening line, "Oh dear, oh deer" (17). To make matters worse, a factoid is attached, like a hangnail, to each piece, such as the enlightening, "In some places, deer herds have grown so large they are considered a nuisance" (17). The schoolmarm and marketeer collaborate, trying to delight and instruct, but fail on both accounts.

A more inspired offering comes in the form of Marion Dane Bauer's narrative poem, *The Longest Night*, which combines hints of modernist poetry with powerful illustrations to form a vision of dark, luminous night. Bauer sets the story in spare, chilly verse:

The snow lies deep.
The night is long and long.
The stars are ice, the moon is frost,
and all the world is still.

She adds a touch of the sinister, "A moon shadow lies by every tree, / thin as a hungry wolf," and each spread is matched with Ted Lewin's paintings in blue, white, and black. In this story, the night wind finds the different animals claiming they can bring back the sun with their unique natural abilities, but in the end, the wind confirms that it is only the chickadee who can bring back the sun. She can do so not with horns and claws, but with her call, "Dee-dee-dee." The simple, almost Steinian call continues: "And dee and dee and dee. . . . And dee and dee, again," creating a strangely self-aware vocalization. The word "dee" is isolated from its onomatopoeic function by the surrounding *ands*, implying something more semantic, and with the "again" (interestingly, included within the quoted call), a more complex speech act. The other animals are rightly suspicious of her call, labeling it "nonsense," questioning its meaning. But it works: the sun wakes. We are left wondering why a fox or moose might be ineffectual in their quite practical thinking and how "nonsense" can be of the ultimate utility. Yet it is a wonderful wondering, one that we lovers of nonsense readily endorse.

Bauer's play with language and the twilight paintings elevate the work above the average nature poetry, but Heidi Mordhorst's *Pumpkin Butterfly*:

Poems from the Other Side of Nature, goes even further by way of defamiliarizing nature poetry, and is perhaps the closest to a winner that we have. This volume is stronger than Mordhorst's last book, *Squeeze: Poems from a Juicy Universe* (2005), with a more rigorous poetics and the ability to push even further beyond her mundane subjects (and indeed, the tiredness of the genre). Luckily, the publisher decided to move away from the dull, amateurish photographs of the previous volume and go with Jenny Reynish's delicate drawings, though sometimes these do not quite do justice to the verse, especially as Mordhorst explores the eponymous "Other Side of Nature." The subtitle anticipates an unusual course down the oft-dreaded path of the nature poem, and we find the "Other Side," with her careful prosody, to be well worth our careful attention. Her poems are not revolutionary by any means, but she has a firm, subtle control of form that pushes her work beyond both the usual free verse banality and traditional form for its own sake.

In *Poems from the Other Side*, Mordhorst imagines complicated, sometimes messy encounters between children and the natural world; indeed, she embeds nature within human culture: it's a back yard, not a "preserve." In "Ghosts," for instance, a family harvests pumpkins—and, as they lift them, swarms of butterflies emerge from underneath. The family sees the butterflies as "the ghosts of our pumpkins / untethered from the earth" (7). The pumpkins are heavy and vivid and orange but they are also being killed as they are picked. The poem's engagement with nature recalls Robert Frost's darker moments, reflecting our ambivalence as humans: we are part of nature, and yet we cannot fully enter into its mysteries. Can a pumpkin really have a ghost? Why not? Who knows? Likewise, in the closing poem, a child imagines lying down in the street in the middle of a thunderstorm, indifferent to the danger:

Lie down in the rain
 lie down in the road
 look up at the streaking sky
 lie down
 look up
 Heaven might be
 heaven might be this
 dark and wet and dangerous. (32)

These final lines spell out a post-romantic vision: the storm is like us and yet it's also utterly alien, and the messages that it sends are always partial and dangerous.

Mordhorst's varied use of sound, rhythm, and repetition in "April Gale," another highpoint of the book, creates a mesmerizing incantation. After the exclamatory "Oh" beginning each couplet, the actions corresponding to the subjects are repeated at the start of the next line, creating a connection that is

amplified by internal alliteration, assonance, and slant-rhyme endings, as in the first lines, "Oh, how the wind howls, / howls the blossoms from the boughs." As with the blossoms being "howled" asunder, her verbs often act strangely, and are thereby strangely appealing; soon thereafter, the boughs "willow" to the ground. Such effects blend well with the poem's subtle sonic unity: every couplet is slant-rhymed, although line four's "willow to the ground" rhymes perfectly with the seventh and penultimate line, which ends, aptly enough, with the word "sound," the only true-rhyme in the poem. The end result is an intricate aural landscape that mirrors the swirling subject matter.

While the poems are usually written to a high standard, the volume is marred by the occasional nature poetry sentimentalism, as in "In Praise of Squirrels." We might forgive the squirrels' "minding their own bushy business," but when they are referred to as "Nobody's and everybody's / winsome wildlife pet / frisky whisky yes indeed," we must object, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that we take our whisky neat (so cloying those lines that Joseph initially misread "indeed" as "indeedy," an excess only slightly more excessive than the actual words on the page).

At the same time, to be fair, this kind of folksiness works on occasion, as in "Cherry Very," where we find this energetic description of the spitting of cherry pits:

It's over the fence!
It's out of the park!
It's a letloose cherryjuice
noschool slobberdrool
spitwhistle summerfun home run! (31)

The "Other Side" of the title begins to unfold as we see the wonder, danger, and decay within nature. As we've noted, in "Ghosts," the spirits of slain pumpkins rise surreally on butterfly wings; in "Cauldron Full of Compost" all of the shiny fruits and vegetables tipping into the pot become a "dead soup" to "feed the tree," a strikingly monosyllabic, stark image augmented by the worms in Reynish's drawing. Trees and leaves are transmogrified into "risky things" in "Fireplace," just as childhood snow angels become a "graveyard / in the snow," neatly (and eerily) linking youth and death, play and frozen stasis. In many of these pieces we half-expect the goat-footed Pan to be whistling far and wee, and indeed Mordhorst tips her pen to Cummings with her use of "mudluscious" in "Cauldron," noted above. As with "in just," her best pieces mix innocence and experience, casting a sinister shadow at times, a step into nature's Twilight Zone that most nature poems for children rarely dare to take.

In last year's essay we longed for "a book that riffs on playground poetry to good effect, books by adult poets as daring as their child counterparts (and

a publisher courageous enough to print profanity in a humorous context” (377). Joseph, a longtime advocate of children’s playground poetry, had his hopes raised and dashed by Betsy Franco’s *Messing Around on the Monkey Bars and Other School Poems for Two Voices*, illustrated capably by Jessie Hartland. *Messing Around* also seems to answer our call for more poems schooled by Paul Fleischman’s *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* (1988), yet it fails too in that regard, aping his polyphonic textures just as it apes the poetics of the playground, an aping that goes nowhere new, and, unfortunately, neglects to equal its precursors, literary and folk. The book opens with “Wild Bus Ride,” a title that only asserts its wildness, a facsimile of energy too familiar and staid to get the blood pumping:

Snort, squeal,
snort, squeal.
We’re gobbled up
by a beast with wheels.

Grumble, growl,
grumble, growl.
The beast shoots smoke.
It moans and howls.

The children are eaten by the beastly bus, and, upon arriving at school, they “scramble off.” Besides the tired metaphor of the motorized vehicle as beast, Franco doesn’t have the guts to extend the conceit and have the beast vomit forth its passengers (or, more daring, excrete them in some other way), an impulse to which the poem’s less domesticated folk cousins gleefully succumb. Other poems in the book are equally disappointing. The folk poetry recited around actual monkey bars submit for our consideration images of schools covered in blood or burned to the ground, teachers with barbecued heads, their bodies flushed down the toilet; conversely, Franco gives us only the suggestion of kids dorking around in the library:

Snicker, snort
Ouch, eeek
Burp, snort
Tee-hee

The “Burp” is as transgressive as these authority-pleasing verses get, yet even this bit of bodily rejoicing is censured, the children’s rude, but ultimately impotent noise-making shouted down by a librarian who gets the final word:

Silence now,
girls and boys.
Put an end to all your noise. . . .

That's enough!
 Listen to me!!
 Quiet in the
 library-eee!!!

Sure, the children goad the librarian into breaking her own rule (the accumulating exclamation points indicating her rising, angry voice), but that is as far as childhood resistance goes, even in the imaginary. Unlike, for example, the famous folk-rhyme "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Burning of the School," there's no principal hanging from the flagpole "with a rope around her neck" in this schoolyard, and, for Joseph, at least, that's a goddamned shame.

Likewise, Paul B. Janeczko and Chris Raschka's latest anthology, *A Foot in the Mouth: Poems to Speak, Sing, and Shout*, also disappoints. Last year we spoke of the need for a children's poetry willing to explore "the trails blazed by proponents of literary Cubism, Dada, surrealism, [or] Fluxus" (377). Sadly, Janeczko and Raschka missed a grand opportunity to embrace those traditions. Where is the sound poetry of Kurt Schwitters or Hans Arp or Tristan Tzara, or the sonically rich poetry of Gertrude Stein or the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (whose name alone begs to be sung or shouted), or perhaps the work of more contemporary writers like BP Nichols or The Four Horsemen or Christian Bök or Yoko Ono or even Miranda July (whose soundscapes transcend the merely linguistic)?² Instead, we get more overexposed lyrics from (the admittedly capable) Shakespeare, Edward Lear ("The Owl and the Pussycat"? Really?), and Lewis Carroll (yes, they've included that neglected and obscure poem, "Jabberwocky"), alongside a nod to multiculturalism in the form of "Good Hot Dogs / Ricos *Hot Dogs*" by Sandra Cisneros (translated on the facing page by Lilliana Valenzuela). It is the squandered potential of this otherwise lovely anthology that bothers us the most (Raschka's up to his regular, excellent tricks: the illustrations are perhaps overfamiliar, but it's hard not to like just about anything Raschka cooks up). Also: why no CD? Janeczko anticipates this question in his introduction, noting that "You don't need to be an expert" to "speak, sing, and shout" these poems, but, nevertheless, it would be nice to hear what "an expert" reader might do with them, just as it would be nice to see how an expert (i.e., an actual) sound-poet might enrich the poetic lives of our children (11). And speaking of his introduction, we find it odd that Janeczko claims, "Poetry is sound" given that he edited a previous anthology of visual poetry, *A Poke in the I* (2001), which definitively demonstrates that, for some poetry at least, sound not only isn't "near the top of the list" of its characteristics, it isn't even on the list (10).

While Andrea Cheng's *Brushing Mom's Hair* is not experimental in the modernist sense, it is a dangerous and beautiful little book that pushes the boundaries of what we expect from children's poetry. Cheng dares to represent a young girl's mixed emotions as her mother undergoes breast cancer treatment. Because teenagers are, for developmental reasons, notoriously self-centered, it's a challenge to represent Ann's voice both realistically and sympathetically. But Cheng nails it. Ann worries about the school dance even as her mom loses her hair. She's no saint, but she also grows increasingly mature and empathetic as her mother's treatment progresses. Cheng works against the fake-reassurances of popular culture, and indeed a stellar moment comes when Ann reads a self-help book:

It's midnight
 but I can't sleep
 so I turn on the light
 and open my new book
 to the middle.
 Don't sweat the small stuff
 and it's all small stuff.
 Even cancer?

Ann doesn't answer her own question, but it's clear: cancer is not small stuff. At the same time, Cheng has an eye for how small details can convey bigger issues. Thus we learn, for instance, that the medical pouch holding Ann's mom's drainage tubes is called a marsupial. This functions as a subtle metaphor for how her mother can no longer "carry" Ann, physically or emotionally. She needs to use all her resources to take care of herself. Will tween or teen readers care about this story, despite all the competition from bodice-ripping yet virginal vampires? Maybe. A few. Let's hope so.

The omnipresent Jack Prelutsky weighs in again this year, and while he is never bad, he can be uneven. His offering, *The Swamps of Sleethe: Poems from Beyond the Solar System*, imagines what happens to a visitor on various far-flung, hostile planets. Such a set-up has considerable potential, and there are some successful pieces, particularly the shorter ones. The first poem shows Prelutsky at his best:

On sweltering Sleethe, in swamps aseethe,
 Malignant beings thrive,
 Abhorrent things that need not breathe,
 And yet are quite alive.

As this poem demonstrates, Prelutsky is able to paint sinister, vivid images, often employing challenging diction, and still we gallop through his swamps and forests astride smooth, regular meters. These planets teem with muck

and hostile or impenetrable beings like the evocative “globulings of Wolar Sprod,” who spin visitors on a pedestal before dissolving them, for some unknown reason.

Prelutsky has proven himself an equal to many a daunting poetic task, but even he can sometimes sputter and crash; our journey from planet to planet begins to drag once the conceit becomes weighty with repetition. The poems, especially the longer ones, turn into formulaic lists:

When you're on Grob, you undergo
A cataclysmic change
Beyond your understanding,
And unconscionably strange.
Your ankles ache and tremble,
And you don't like how that feels.
You glance down at your feet, and find
They're now a pair of wheels.

Not only does the list of *your x does y, and your z does q* get tiresome for each planet, but he is forced to insert too many filler lines just to continue the same rhyming pattern. Perhaps when the book is not read straight through this formula might work better, but we have to believe that Prelutsky could have varied the forms a bit more, just as he might have streamlined each poem. Jimmy Pickering was a good choice for illustrator, and his wild, angular images, which often look computer-generated even when they are not, complement Prelutsky's vivid imagination. As one might expect with Pickering, who has worked for various movie studios, his work veers toward the 3-D revolution in recent films. It pops, but some might find it a little slick and sterile.

Harkening back to nineteenth-century traditions of children's poetry does not necessarily create overly commercial, sentimental, or didactic art, but publishers and poets should beware of which elements to follow and which to forget—embracing, perhaps, the experimental spirit of Victorian nonsense while spurning the didactic impulse. The books under consideration for this year's award, as we have seen, seek to delight and to instruct, and even to experiment, with some significant successes. Why not just give an award? And here we are forced to conclude with a bit of navel-gazing: are our standards too high? Maybe so. We do wish publishers would take more risks, publish a wider array of authors, and promote poetry more energetically. At the same time, we want to end on a hopeful note: all of these collections, good, bad, or indifferent, represent an investment in the tradition of children's poetry, and all expand its reach in some way. Children's poetry is worth criticizing—maybe even a little harshly—precisely because it matters. It's not small stuff, and this year's submissions demonstrate how the smallest of details are often the most crucial.

Michael Heyman is a scholar and writer of literary nonsense and children's literature. He is a professor of English at Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he teaches courses partly, if not wholly nonsensical. He is the head editor of The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense (Penguin, 2007). His short stories for children can be found in The Puffin Book of Bedtime Stories (Puffin, 2006) and The Moustache Maharishi and Other Unlikely Stories (Scholastic, 2007). He is currently working on The Anthology of World Nonsense with Kevin Shortleeve.

Angela Sorby's books include Distance Learning (New Issues P, 1998); Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917 (U of New Hampshire P, 2005); and Bird Skin Coat (U of Wisconsin P, 2009), which won the Brittingham Prize and a Midwest Book Award. She teaches at Marquette University, and next year she'll be a Fulbright fellow in China.

Joseph Thomas contributed to this essay while serving as a visiting associate professor at Hollins University. His home, however, is in SoCal, where he holds an associate professorship at San Diego State University. In addition to articles on such unsavory subjects as dirty playground rhymes and The Funk, he is the author of two books, Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry (Wayne State UP, 2007), which was named the 2007 ChLA Honor Book, and Strong Measures (Make Now P, 2007), a collection of constraint-based poetry.

Notes

The judges would like to thank Hollins University graduate students Shawna N. Brogan, Shannon J. Cummings, Megan D. Flynn, and Ruth L. Link for their thoughtful engagement with this year's submissions.

¹ A running joke in this series of essays has been the mirror poem employing the tired trope of mirrored text. We are happy to report that Yolen resisted the siren song of mirrored text, and we salute her for it.

² We acknowledge, of course, that these poets—or at least, many of them—did not write expressly for a child audience. However, given the ludic and non-semantic nature of much of their work, we feel that it is well within the hearing and enjoyment of children. Recently, in fact, while teaching a graduate seminar in children's poetry at Hollins University, Joseph shared Bök's performance of Schwitters's *Ursonate* with his students, and they agreed that its complex rhythms, syncopated repetitions of linguistic fragments, and the apparent joy both the writer and performer seem to take

in the piece's nonsensical proto-language would be ideal for adventurous children; indeed, at times it sounds much like the joyful babbling or, as Lyn Hejinian puts it, the "glossolalic chants and rhyme" typical of childhood play (278).

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