

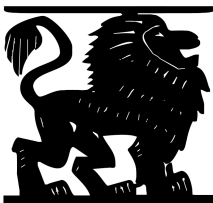
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“from brain all the way to heart”: The 2008 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry

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Winner:

Linda Sue Park, *Tap Dancing on the Roof: Sijo (Poems)*. Pictures by Istvan Banyai. New York: Clarion, 2007.

Honor Books:

Jay M. Harris. *The Moon Is La Luna: Silly Rhymes in English & Spanish*. Pictures by Matthew Cordell. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

Carole Boston Weatherford. *Birmingham, 1963*. Honesdale, PA: Word-song, 2007.

In a recent *New Yorker* cartoon, Roz Chast imagines a new publisher's imprint, *Why? Books*; its titles include *Teach Yourself to Eat Canned Oysters in Thirty Days* and *How to Live on One Hour of Sleep Per Night*. Chast's point is: *Why?* Children's poetry might well be subject to the same test: Arctic science poems? Guinea pig poems? Spanglish pun poems? *Why?* Sometimes a *raison d'être* emerges for these titles, and sometimes it does not. Our winner, our honor books, and many other notable titles have this in common: they work as books of poetry, rather than as history lessons or science textbooks *manqué*. Moreover, they remind us that poetry is sometimes (not always!) the perfect medium for the message.

In contrast to past years, we find few shameless groaners among our contestants. Most of the books we received are competent, but some remain mired in *mere* competence because they don't justify their choice of the verse medium. The trouble with a book such as *Polar Bear, Arctic Hare* lies, not in its good intentions (which are evident) but in its lyric execution. The book thanks Dr. David R. Klein, emeritus professor of

wildlife ecology, for reviewing the text, but clearly no English professors (and apparently no poets) were consulted. The result is a set of poems that simply conveys information:

If you should awaken
Arctic walrus,
be prepared
for quite a flap.
Usually a peaceful fellow,
nothing makes him fuss or bellow
like an interrupted nap.
(Spinelli 17)

Like much (but not all) didactic-science poetry for children, this collection fails the "why poetry?" test because it does not work *as verse*. Poetry has not been an informational genre since the eighteenth century—and one wonders if, even in the eighteenth century, the lives of bees and the circulation of blood were topics best described in couplets.

Other books pass the "why poetry?" test, only to fail the "why bother?" test. An example of this is John Grandits's *Blue Lipstick*, a mess of junior-high "concrete" poems that strain the eyes and fatigue the brain. Grandits twists his saggy prose into the most obvious shapes imaginable, giving us lazy visual poetry in the voice of young people who exist only in the minds of adults. One speaker, for instance, after a visit to the Art Institute, insists, "Mondrian . . . totally rocks!" (n.p.). And if we never read another "mirror" poem involving mirrored text, it will be too soon. Ultimately, *Blue Lipstick* suffers from the same problem as Grandits's previous book of visual poetry, *Technically It's Not My Fault*: namely, that its author appears almost willfully ignorant of visual poetry's rich traditions and techniques. Judge Joseph Thomas has discussed visual poetry for young people in his book *Poetry's Playground*, where he argues that this ignorance is prevalent in the world of children's visual poetry. Grandits's *Blue Lipstick* traces (or blotches) led us to wonder why children's editors and poets do not take more seriously what others have done with the form historically, why they do not interact with visual poetry's complex traditions.

While Karen Jo Shapiro's *I Must Go Down to the Beach Again* is certainly informed by at least one set of literary traditions, it really doesn't make very good use of them. Like her earlier and equally forgettable volume *Because I Could Not Stop My Bike* ("It kindly stopped for me") these knockoffs offer "apologies to" the originals. For instance, "My Mouth Closed Twice" appears "with apologies to Emily Dickinson, 'My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close.'" Unfortunately (or fortunately), this method made us want to bolt for our Dickinson volumes, dropping *I Must*

Go Down to the Beach Again in our haste. Shapiro is a competent versifier, but why offer children this pabulum when the superior originals exist? In any event, good parodies do not simply imitate the structure of the older poems; rather, they truly engage them in dialogue or in combat. If Shapiro's poems did that, then there would be no need to apologize.

Stephanie Hemphill's, *Your Own, Sylvia*, a "Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath," is more ambitious than Shapiro's work in that it does directly engage with the work of a great poet, but it suffers by comparison. Hemphill's biography-in-verse retells the story of Plath's life—as Plath herself already did in much better verse. Frankly, Hemphill has a tin ear: consider the first stanza of her poem "Manic Depression," which purports to be in the style of Plath's poem "Aerialist":

She balances night,
 She floats on days.
 She cannot see the shift—
 Her smile of light,
 Her frown of haze,
 She's constantly adrift.
 (54)

Now read the first stanza of Plath's original:

Each night, this adroit young lady
 Lies among sheets
 Shredded fine as snowflakes
 Until dream takes her body
 From bed to strict tryouts
 In tightrope acrobatics.
 (*Collected Poems* 331)

Hemphill's doggerel doesn't resemble Plath's poem metrically, nor do its clunky exact rhymes resemble the subtle music of Plath's poem, which isn't even representative of the poet at the height of her powers: "Aerialist" is classified as juvenilia in the *Collected Poems*.

Hemphill's tin ear leads to such annoying tics as the frequent verbing of nouns for "poetic" effect. For instance, Hemphill has Sylvia's brother, Warren Plath, say he is "scholarshipped to Exeter" (26); she also has college student Eddie Cohen, who wrote to Plath after learning about her in *Seventeen Magazine*, say, "She pen-pals me back" (32). Not only do these verbal tics strike us as false colloquially, they often seem anachronistic. The *Mademoiselle* acceptance-letter poem, "Pleasure," uses the term "role model" as a verb (61)! ("Role model" bothered judge Richard Flynn so much that he investigated its origin; evidently, it arose from the work

of sociologist Robert K. Merton, where it makes its first appearance in 1957—four years after the *Mademoiselle* poem-letter occurs.)

It seems to us that Hemphill was too much in a hurry. After all, there are 151 poems in *Your Own, Sylvia* compared with the 224 poems in Plath's mature canon. One has to admire Hemphill's audacity in contending with Plath, but she really can't hold her own. When she attempts fixed forms she produces some truly embarrassing work such as the villanelle "Why She Writes" (20). That the poem uses "journals" as a verb is hard enough to stomach, but a line like "she dances, studies, paints until exhaust" (to rhyme with "cost") is simply sloppy writing. We wanted to like this book, and we read it diligently—until exhaust.

Happily, many books from this year's crop do engage more successfully with established traditions. One notable example is *Tough Boy Sonatas*, by Curtis Crisler—a volume that combines street smarts with technical prowess. Although Amazon.com suggests that we "Buy this book with *Your Own, Sylvia: A Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath* by Stephanie Hemphill today!" Crisler's book is far more successful. Crisler is a Cave Canem Fellow who comes from the (too-often hermetically sealed) universe of academic creative writing programs. Few writers from this universe stray into children's poetry, despite its relatively larger readership and also despite (or because of) its commercial edge. Not surprisingly, many of Crisler's poems are wonderful: "Surroundings of LaRoy," for instance, with its meditations on an incense-burning Buddha and adult pot-smoking is a viscerally powerful poem:

[. . .] we had the stick incense that burned inside
the hole in Buddha's head. Was that it, his place
of Enlightenment? We were not Buddhist,
had no prajna, we had Jesus, hope, pride all
ghetto folks wrapped themselves up in for
comfort. We weren't hippies, I don't think.
And as coconut or vanilla scent grabbed my nose
I would fall asleep on our zebra-print couch,
have my face stick to plastic—kids were seen
not heard and never Scotchguarded. Earth, Wind
& Fire or the Commodores would mellow me
out into a nap those hot summer days or
maybe I caught a contact from wafts of weed
that the grown folks inhaled to make their eye-
lids heavy—a lethargy, up close, that fooled
me to suppose sleep and fantasy the same.
(54)

There are many moments involving this kind of verbal and emotional brilliance in the collection. However, as a whole, it remains uneven, and we wonder why Crisler so often dispenses with articles. Lacking “the” and “a,” too many of his sentences read like telegraph dispatches. Still, one can’t help rooting for everything this book represents: serious young-adult poetry, with one foot in literary history and the other planted firmly in Gary, Indiana.

Elizabeth Alexander and Marilyn Nelson, both award-winning poets for adults, also produce serious young-adult poetry in *Miss Crandall’s School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color*. These poems, which depict the rise and fall of a nineteenth-century school, offer compelling historical details packed into carefully-crafted sonnets. Nelson and Alexander are thoroughly familiar with the sonnet tradition and they concisely and cogently explain its importance in their “Authors’ Notes,” focusing particularly on the innovative uses of the sonnet in the African-American poetic tradition. Rather than collaborate on individual poems, each poet writes in her own style. Nelson uses a modified form of the Onegin stanza, whereas Alexander’s sonnets are freer and irregularly rhymed, when they are rhymed at all. Remarkably, the individual styles are complementary rather than distracting. Consider the more formal diction of Nelson’s “The Book”:

Jolted insensible mile upon mile,
 a thin, high-breasted, sloe-eyed yellow girl.
 Deferential but wearing the latest style
 of Paris bonnet from which one brown curl
 has broken free and frolics below her jaw
 all the stagecoach ride from Philadelphia
 she has followed the beckoning finger of destiny
 toward the place where she’ll shoulder the burden of being free:
I shall learn, I shall teach.
 (12)

Complementing it on facing page is Alexander’s more colloquial sounding “Knowledge”:

It wasn’t as if we knew nothing before.
 After all, colored girls must know many
 things in order to survive. Not only
 could I sew buttons and hems, but I could
 make a dress and pantaloons from scratch.
 I could milk cows, churn butter, feed chickens,
 clean their coops, wring their necks, pluck and cook them.
 I cut wood, set fires, and boiled water

to wash the clothes and sheets, then wrung them dry.

And I could read the Bible.

(13)

And yet the sum of what these two poems have to say about the relationship between practical knowledge and learning one's book is greater when one considers the poems together.

Miss Crandall's School is also a physically beautiful book: the illustrations by Floyd Cooper (who also illustrated Crisler's book) do not overpower the poems, and the book's dimensions (it's about twice as long as it is tall) make for an elegant and shapely object. However, this volume in particular raises interesting questions about what we call "children's poetry." Several of our judges have written about the economics of children's poetry, Joseph going so far as to suggest that although a poet for adults can expect few readers and even fewer dollars, our children's poets are the popular poets of the day. Nelson and Alexander will reach more libraries, more buyers, and probably more readers because *Miss Crandall's School* is marketed as a children's book, but only a handful of the most sophisticated child readers will appreciate these poems. We would like to think that such an eloquent and accomplished volume might serve to bridge the gap between the worlds of adult and children's poetry—and, perhaps, that it might aid us in rediscovering the model of a dual audience. Judge Angela Sorby has discussed the importance of that dual audience for many nineteenth-century poets such as Whittier and Longfellow in her book *Schoolroom Poets*, but in the absence of an expanded civic function for poetry in the twenty-first century, we wonder whether *Miss Crandall's School* is more the poetry adults wish their children would love than the poetry children themselves will love.

This year, the judges were struck with the high quality of verse for the very young, and such quality is reflected in our final choices for the award and its honor books. That said, we were not at all sure that a book entirely devoted to guinea pig poems was worthy of our attention. Susan Katz's *Oh, Theodore!: Guinea Pig Poems* did not initially pass the "why" test, but Angela's five-year-old fell in love with it, which forced Angela to take a second (and a third, and a tenth) look. *Oh, Theodore!* is a success on its own terms. These terms are limited because guinea pigs—unlike, say, heroic collies—are limited. Theodore's owner admits: "I don't take Theodore for a walk. I take him for a sit" (32). And yet, the text's modesty ultimately charms as Katz allows Theodore to overcome his shyness to bond with his child owner. There's even drama, as Theodore gets lost, and ultimately found, in a spaghetti pot. The text is simple, the illustrations take a kid's-eye-view, and the lyric possibilities of this slab-like rodent

are explored but not inflated, creating a lovely collection for very young children.

While a collection of poems about a guinea pig may be somewhat narrow thematically, we note with approval the practice of disciplined thematic unity that runs through almost every book of juvenile poetry. This unity exists in marked contrast to the random-lyrics-culled-from-random-literary-journals that dominate the adult market, and it is certainly found in the various anthologies we received this year. Although anthologies are not ultimately considered for the award, one definitely deserves mention: Patrice Vecchione's *Faith and Doubt*, a treat for any serious teen or adult reader. In *Faith and Doubt* poets from Li Po to Pablo Neruda to Charles Harper Webb consider, as Joy Castro puts it, "the genuine meaning of grace" (17). Of course, many meanings emerge; as Vecchione writes in her introduction, "These poems are here for you to read and question, believe in and doubt, and hold up to the light" (9). The selections are imaginative (who knew that Elizabeth I wrote poetry?), sometimes funny (as in Webb's "The Death of Santa Claus"), and always thought-provoking. Can't we sneak a few copies into our local right-wing Christian bookstore?

We were initially suspicious of Joyce Sidman's *This Is Just to Say: Poems of Apology and Forgiveness*, which seems to draw its inspiration from Kenneth Koch's 1962 poem "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams." At first, we feared it was an anthology of such poems. As Sidman's note indicates, it draws its inspiration not from "Variations," but from the "Sorry" poems written by Koch's students, collected in *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Unlike the poems written by Koch's actual students, these "student" poems are Sidman's own inventions, but in capturing the intensity and fierceness of the children's emotions, they are successful inventions indeed, as in "The Black Spot":

That black spot on your palm.
It never goes away.
So long ago
I can hardly remember,
I stabbed you with a pencil.
Part of the lead, there,
still inside you.
And inside me, too,
something small and black.
(15)

Sidman's book is the exception which proves the judges' new rule that, as far as we are concerned, verse novels and collection of poems that purport to be in the voices of various members of a school or classroom

have outlived their usefulness. Even when it is done extremely well as in Andrea Cheng's *Where the Steps Were*, the convention itself is no longer interesting. Yet, for all its derivativeness, Sidman's book is charming and energetic. Her ingenious arrangement of the poems into two sections—apology poems and responses—encourage the reader to flip back and forth, refreshing his or her memory about which poem is paired with which. For the most part, the poems withstand repeated readings. Occasionally, a questionable pedagogy wins out over poetry, as in the note that explains that pantoums are supposed to rhyme, "but [the teacher] Mrs. Merz says rhymes are not as important as meaning." However, these lapses are few. Moreover, even its weak moments are burnished by Zagarenski's brilliant illustrations.

Our honor books, however, never leave us asking "why," if only because our natural state of pedantry is stymied by our constant delight. In our first honor book, *The Moon Is La Luna: Silly Rhymes in English and Spanish*, Jay M. Harris shifts gracefully between English and *Español*, never breaking stride and never (it seems) breaking a sweat:

Una cama is a bed.
 ("Comma" is how it is said.)
 A comma is placed in a sentence
 To give the reader a rest.
Mi cama is placed in my bedroom.
 I rest in that *cama* the best.
 (Harris, n.p.)

In junior high school language classes, words like "cama" are called *false friends*, but Harris makes them his true amigos. He understands the ludic possibilities in language; for instance, he turns *una flor* (a flower) into a floor—just in time to catch a woman who passes out from the *flor*'s strong *floral* odor. *The Moon Is La Luna* crosses borders blithely, as children are wont to do, and plays with friends—*faux* and *fast*—along the way.

For all its surprises, the book looks familiar, like the children's books some of us grew up with in the 1970s. It's colorful without being gaudy; bright without being garish. The poems have the foreground, and the illustrations, by Matthew Cordell, are inviting, as is the book itself. It's a comfortable little book, one you wouldn't worry about dinging, one you could carry around with you in your backpack and spill grape juice on without thinking you've despoiled a work of art. But the poems are works of art, although small ones. We do wish some of the Spanglish was weighted more in the Spanish direction. The poems imply an English speaking reader; the sentences are English with Spanish substitutions, and they helpfully define the Spanish, but rarely the English. A few poems

from the other perspective would have been nice. Still, this is a book for very young readers that will surely appeal to them. This is a book for kids, not an *objet d'art* for parents. It earns its laughs the hard way—through cleverness, not bathroom humor—and the language play evident here is at the heart of poetry. These are poems about language first and foremost. That's a tendency we can get behind, *alegremente*.

Last year, we lamented the proliferation of “safe” books that celebrated African American culture, such as the “constant stream of books about Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks,” and wondered whether the tendency toward the historical fell short of speaking meaningfully to contemporary young people. Certainly the 1963 murder of the four girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, while historical is not a safe subject for children's poetry. While not as poetically complex as our 2006 honor book, Marilyn Nelson's *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, our second honor book, Carole Boston Weatherford's *Birmingham 1963*, involves an invented ten-year-old speaker who gives us a contemporary, child's eye view of the murders, making the events powerful and immediate. We were struck right away by Weatherford's sense of line:

The year I turned ten
I missed school to march with other children
For a seat at whites-only lunch counters.
Like a junior choir, we chanted “We Shall Overcome.”
Then, police loosed snarling dogs and fire hoses on us,
And buses carted us, nine hundred strong, to jail.

The next poem repeats the opening line (which reappears throughout the book in various forms), modulating line-length to nice effect:

The year I turned ten,
Mama, Daddy, and I stood at Lincoln's feet,
While King's dream woke the nation from a long night of wrongs.

The last line is quite strong, opening with “King's dream,” and ending with “long night of wrongs”—balancing the long line with the internal rhyme “long” and “wrong.” Five syllables, eleven, and then thirteen, the “long night” is echoed formalistically with the long line, just as the short opening line formally suggests the young age of the speaker. Form and theme are linked throughout the book, details like these indicating the nuances within what seems like straightforward, direct language.

The documentary photographs that illustrate the volume are juxtaposed effectively with the deceptively simple, skillful free-verse monologue of the speaker, which concludes:

The day I turned ten,
There was no birthday cake with candles;
Just cinders, ash, and a wish I were still nine.

The monologue proper is followed by poems memorializing each of the four little girls, with a snapshot on each facing page. These poems are understated, grounded in the children's specific activities: "hopscotch and bright colors," "soul music and sipped sodas," "a neighborhood revue / To fight muscular dystrophy," "Girl Scouts and science club." The precise economy of Weatherford's imagery in these poems (as well as her sure ear) made it a close contender for this year's award, and a certain choice as an honor book.

Haiku is to Japan what mime is to France: a culturally-specific art form that works well in its original context but that can easily be overdone or done badly. Having been traumatized by bad haiku (not to mention mime), we approached Linda Sue Park's *sijo* collection, *Tap Dancing on the Roof*, gingerly since Park compares *sijo* to haiku in her introduction. We need not have worried: Park is a witty cultural mediator and the *sijo* is a fresh and flexible poetic form. *Tap Dancing on the Roof* is our winner, and it has it all: connections to a tradition, a sense of wordplay, lively illustrations, and consistently well-placed surprises.

We even learned something. A *sijo*, as Park explains, is a Korean form that typically has 3–6 lines of 14–16 syllables; the first lines introduce and develop a topic, while the last line delivers a twist. Thus Park's "Long Division" unfolds:

This number gets a wall and a ceiling. Nice and comfy in there.
But a bunch of other numbers are about to disrupt the peace—
bumping the wall, digging up the cellar, tap dancing on the roof. (n.p.)

Like all good children's poetry, "Long Division" is direct and appealing, but it also works on a number of levels, forcing readers to think visually about an abstract math problem. There's tension—numbers "are about to disrupt the peace"—and an element of surprise, as the problem-solving remainders dig a cellar. Plus the ending makes sense: of course a quotient *would* tap-dance triumphantly; after all, it's the answer to the problem.

We liked the quirky rhythm of the poems—the various line lengths, the unpredictable rhyme. For instance, "Art Class" is quite good (although we're not sure we appreciate the aping of childhood slang in "tie-dyed weirdo green"). The last line, comprised of two sentences, is a real success, not really "funny," not really "sweet," but simply an arresting and enjoyable bit of language:

In this ocean, I am Queen. That tail, my dear, is aquamarine.

A lesser poet would have broken that line into two, but Park resists that impulse, keeping the poem asymmetric, a nice way of suggesting the mermaid in the illustration (or anticipating it, if the illustration, as we suspect, came after the poem). “Word Watch,” too, triumphs with its concentration on language, characterizing words in surprising ways: “*snuggle* curls up around itself,” for instance, is just charming, as the *s* and *n* and *u* and double *g*’s and even the final *e* curve and warp around themselves. This poem suggests the concrete poetry tradition better than, say, *Blue Lipstick*, as it attends to the physicality of language.

Park’s poems work as poems (not information) because they use metaphors to explore the world and prosody to push the limits of language. Even nature poems pack a punch because the sijo form demands a surprise ending, as in “Crocuses”:

They pierce the thin skin of snow
with narrow swords of green
to clear the way for colors—
purple, yellow, lavender,
petals huddled close, guarding
the treasure: a lode of gold dust.

(n.p.)

Park re-animates a potentially hackneyed topic, finding tension even in flowers, which wave swords and guard treasure. Throughout the collection, Park takes an ordinary object (a pocket, a shell, a school lunch) and “makes it new,” following an edict that Ezra Pound issued to his fellow modernists, but that Pound himself had found in Confucius. It’s a pleasure to see an Asian form from the sixth century B.C.E. “made new” by Park, who in turn encourages her readers to extend the tradition. Included at the end of the book, “Some Tips for Writing Your Own Sijo” outlines the form’s technical dimensions, stressing the ways that the sijo bridges rational logic with intuitive leaps. Park ends with a “Wish”:

For someone to read a poem
again, and again, and then,
having lifted it from page
to brain—the easy part—
cradle it on the longer trek
from brain all the way to heart.

Most of the poems in *Tap Dancing on the Roof* make the trek, arriving at “the heart” via many deft and unexpected detours. Istvan Banyai’s illustrations also make the old new: vaguely vintage tots—reminiscent of Palmer Cox’s Brownies—dive and climb and don bee-wings, enlivening but not overwhelming Park’s verses. No other English-language sijo-col-

lection for children is currently in print, which makes *Tap Dancing on the Roof* important as well as amusing: it establishes a baseline tradition in children's poetry that is well worth developing further.

In closing, it's interesting to note that our top picks, *The Moon Is La Luna*, Birmingham, 1963, and *Tap Dancing on the Roof*, all have didactic elements, even though didacticism is often seen as the Kiss of Death in children's poetry. What makes these books successful, though, is that the "lessons" operate more like "explorations." Park shares her poetic method—and her poetic struggles—with her readers in her notes, emphasizing that each sijo is a kind of experiment or puzzle. Likewise in *Birmingham*, the child narrator is puzzled and disoriented by the events unfolding around her. She does not have all the answers, even though readers learn something about the Civil Rights movement through her experiences. And in *La Luna*, language-learning becomes synonymous with language-play. Teaching and learning *can* happen through poetry—in fact, the pedagogical process carries tensions that are inherently creative and productive. Perhaps problems emerge mainly when didactic poets take all the power for themselves, telling children what to think or what to learn, instead of embarking on a journey alongside their readers. We were thrilled to make the journey with Harris, Weatherford, and Park—from the brain all the way to the heart.

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Angela Sorby is the author of Distance Learning: Poems (New Issues P, 1998); Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917 (UPNE, 2005); and Bird Skin Coat: Poems (U of Wisconsin P, forthcoming). She teaches at Marquette University.

Richard Flynn teaches modern and contemporary poetry and children's and adolescent literature at Georgia Southern University. He is nearing the end of his six-year term as editor of The Children's Literature Association Quarterly and is planning to turn his attention to completing a monograph on childhood and postmodern poetry.

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