

First Prize – Eric Berlin

Weird Sisters

I have walked through many lives, some of them my own...
– Stanley Kunitz

Applause can only last so long, so the last few steps
he takes in silence, the oldest poet alive,
to the podium, where, with a palm, he irons

the crease from his poems and the microphone
broadcasts the intricate crinkling, but all I see from the edge
of the crowd, where I stand on a tent peg, hand

on a cable, is the backs of heads, row on row stacked
like cantaloupes sinking in sweetness. *You don't want
to spin him over*, someone pleads behind me, and I turn

to see the shortest of three small girls, who've encircled a planter
flooded with run-off from last night's rain. *Flip him*, she says,
and the tallest, whose back is to me, takes a stick

they must have snapped from a sapling, a twist of white wood
where they fatigued it free, and stirs the brown swill, the charms
on her wrist clacking, until in the space between them

a drowned mouse bobs by. *Look, it's got such skinny fingers*,
the middle one says, as she lowers a chokecherry towards its mouth,
and that's when the one whose face I haven't seen yet

suddenly turns.

Second Prize – David Van-Cauter

Leakage

..8am, no sun, ash sky, train tracks and my neighbour's headphones leaking tinny drum and bass,
as you are jammed between commuters, your arms pinned, red-faced,
trying not to cry, for blood tests, misplaced information, the weeks and months ahead.

Today I smell everything – Strepsils, curry, fresh paint, the still air on the bus. A woman boards, a sign around her neck claiming *Jesus Is Our Saviour*. We move off, as an ageing Rastafarian on the street stumbles, lugging a huge white wooden cross. I take your hand.

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The sun appears at noon. We have been deferred, referred, talk now of dining tables, new shoes, pints of milk. But I can feel the grass under the pavement, pushing at the cracks, touching the skin at the base of my feet, and voices in the air pressing my face.

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Words leak out

but we don't

let them in

Third Prize – Penny Hope

Climbing Girl

Imagine her trapped within the chimney,
her limbs bent to fit the angles of the flue.
Listen to the quiet wheezing of her song:
Soot Oh, Sweep Oh! Soot Oh, Sweep Oh!

Imagine, now, the bird which her hand
has found among the debris of a nest.
A black bird; not seen, but felt, within
the dark; its feather-warmth, its trembling.

When her Master comes, *Soot Oh, Soot!*
When Joe comes limping, *Sweep Oh!*
They'll tug at her feet and prise her gently
into the free air. Imagine her imagining.

She is Jack-in-the-Green, she is dancing
in her leaves. *My heart lives in a tree!*
She mustn't struggle or the falling dust
will smother her. Imagine all the kinds

of dark she knows in her narrow chamber.
She is tired of coughing, tired of climbing.
The bird throbs with silent song. Imagine
the song dying, the fear dying in her hand.

Local Prize – Darius Victor Sneickus

Rising

Rising out of the supersensible oil-
lensed foam, the frog lazily turns its pale

belly to the light, buoyed by swell in the flood
at the drain-mouth, as bathwaters, unplugged,

rush down from above, fetal webbed fingers
splayed, its round eyes seeing only dark water.

A bee, droning, floats by while the blanched
spring sun climbs through the branches

of the lilac tree, so late to leaf this year.
At the foot of the low wall, on the manure-

cut, re-seeded soil, a pair of blind, bent-kneed
fledglings lie, in the flesh, side by side,

like stones, alive with clambering flies
leaping into brief orbit from the two bodies.

High Commended – Natalie Whittaker

Thoughts are Origami Birds

tied to the tree that branches from my scalp.
They snap from their strings in the lightest wind.

Sometimes I can hear a real bird singing:
lost beneath the papery flapping

of those folded mathematical birds
and the rasp of branches scraping the sky.

High Commended – Iris Anne Lewis

A hot summer day in Cougnac

The cave is cool and spacious.
I see a frieze: mammoths,
three megaloceros,
and two wounded men,
spears thrust in their sides.
Two red-coated pillars
of calcite frame
an ibex.
And I remember a hot summer day
when I took refuge
in a cool country church.
Pillars of fluted stone
framed a cross
and a wounded man,
his side gashed by a spear.
Above him, in stained glass,
a lamb.
And now, in Cougnac,
I look at the ibex
but see the Lamb.

High Commended – Zoë Síobhan Howarth-Lowe

When NASA Finishes Mining

There used to be craters on the moon, now the moon is a crater. Carved out, mined of all its juices, it remains derelict. Too light to continue to orbit: it just hangs, skeletal and listless. Unable to wax or wane, its cycle broken.

Tidal-confusion grips the ocean below. Trapped, neither flowing in nor out, unable to turn yet trying to. Turning itself one way, then the next, like an uncomfortable sleeper, too hot inside its own shape.

I sit, bare-footed, on night-dewed grass, sniffing out the hot-salt of the ocean that cannot rest, the orange-rind moon above. I too am neither one thing, nor another. I whisper to the blades of grass, tap on the earth, and wait for the flowers that will never come.

High Commended – Lesley Saunders

Glass Man

The war peters out in ruined orchards, faint sounds of rubble settling in the dead hours, a metallic smoulder on the edge of towns. Then plague. These are the years when a man might dream his body is as frail as butter, lighter than a feather, that his head will roll, that his brain and bones have turned to glass. He knows he'll shatter at a touch, he's an exploding teardrop, a flawed solitaire. Hiding his face in crystalline hands, he falls and falls through the cloudless houses of his body, half-blinded by their brittle brilliance. A gift of vision, say physicians, to scry the soul with such clarity, such self-clairvoyance: but he only stares at his feet and sees the melting sand in which he stands, the lime-pits, the flame-throwers.

High Commended – Ama Bolton

Greyhaar, city of sea-mist

You will ride north for weeks before you reach the city of Grayhaar. When you arrive, the chances are you will not see its full glory. The granite castle's crenelated roof-line, the towers and spires and domes of the city's churches and temples, the ornamented parapets of the buildings of state, the upper storeys of the tall narrow houses, all are obscured by fog. Wagons

drawn by shaggy oxen will rumble out of the sea-fret, pass you by and disappear. You will not see ships but you will hear the voices of mariners and kittiwakes. You will not see the grey-green waters of the estuary but you will smell pitch and rotting seaweed. You will not see the summit of the extinct volcano that sits incongruously within the city's walls. At midwinter the noontday light is a mere lessening of the gloom.

For one month at midsummer the city sparkles in cloudless sunshine. Trees break into blossom and the slopes of the volcano are covered in wild flowers whose fragrance fills the air. Butterflies and song-birds flock from the south. The citizens are freed from toil by the arrival of itinerant workers. Minstrels and mountebanks throng the city squares. In place of drab work-wear everyone puts on bright clothes. It is a brief and hectic season of wooing and wedding, of dancing in the streets and merrymaking late into the summer-dim. You may wonder why the citizens stay there year after year. It is said that the joy they know during that single month of summer more than compensates for eleven months of dreary weather, and that indeed the pleasure of anticipation is one of the greatest benefits of life in Grayhaar.