



**“Roses are planted where thorns grow”:  
The 2012 *Lion and the Unicorn*  
Award for Excellence in North American  
Poetry**

**Michael Heyman, Michael Joseph, and Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.**

Winner:

Arnold Adoff. *Roots and Blues: A Celebration*. Illus. Gregory Christie. New York: Clarion Books, 2011.

Honor Books:

Nan Forler. *Winterberries and Apple Blossoms: Reflections and Flavors of a Mennonite Year*. Illus. Peter Etril Snyder. Ontario: Tundra Books, 2011.

Paul B. Janeczko. *Requiem: Poems of the Terezín Ghetto*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2011.

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This year was a difficult one for the judges of *The Lion and the Unicorn* Poetry Award. But it was difficult for reasons that make one feel foolish and spoiled when complaining. While last year the quantity and variety of our submissions dipped, this year we were back to a larger array (thirty-seven books), and among the usual—and by far more numerous—poetically barren collections we found several remarkably fine books and a handful of powerful, shapely poems. As an experiment in criticism, we took it upon ourselves to treat our submissions in rough accord with the insights of William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, whose heterodox perspectives and innovative combination of the visual and verbal arts as well as its canny and whimsical dialectical mischief seem eminently apposite to judging children’s poetry. Serving as our Virgil, Blake guided our

deliberations, reminding us that “Roses are planted where thorns grow[,] / And on the barren heath / Sing the honey bees” (pl. 2).<sup>1</sup> Temporary as it may have been, the “infernal wisdom” (pl. 6) this approach afforded us led in the end to three books of exceptional merit: our winner, Arnold Adoff’s *Roots and Blues: A Celebration*; and our two honor books, Nan Forler’s *Winterberries and Apple Blossoms: Reflections and Flavors of a Mennonite Year* and Paul B. Janeczko’s *Requiem: Poems of the Terezín Ghetto*.

However, we begin not with the best but rather by taking up a few submissions worthy of—if not our scorn—then at least a little medicinal teasing (“Listen to the fools reproach. It is a kingly title!” [pl. 9]). At the top of this list is *The Legend of Messy M’Cheany*, by Kathie Lee Gifford and illustrated by Peter Bay Alexandersen. Gifford’s little book plumbs the dark heart of contemporary gender relations, reminding us in unvarying, anapestic meter that good girls don’t play in the dirt, but instead attend to more virtuous matters, like serving as a moral compass for filthy boys, bringing those same boys to their penitent knees, and studying their own considerable beauty with no fewer than five mirrors simultaneously (and should the young woman need more reminder of her worshipful loveliness, the illustration suggests that hanging a portrait of herself near her amply mirrored toilette will do the trick). A fair parody of Robert Service, *The Legend of Messy M’Cheany* reminded one of the judges of another in this esteemed genus, sometimes called the “Ballad of Mangy Nell and Pisspot Pete,” that warhorse of a filthy folk poem similarly preoccupied by gender relations and cultural constructions of chastity—although one certainly less coy in its celebration of the Blakean proverb, “the lust of the goat is the bounty of God” (pl. 8). *Messy M’Cheany* is a kind of warped reflection of “Mangy Nell.” The poem’s concluding rhyme reveals Gifford as the eponymous narrator of our feminist manifesto, and of course it is the shamelessly self-aggrandizing Gifford who exemplifies its moral lessons: be kind and graceful, beautiful and blonde (as if to underline this point, the back cover is dominated like a dirty, dirty boy by a full-color glamour shot of the poet). Gifford’s psalm of over-cleanliness, chaste girls, and filthy boys recalls Blake’s observation that “[w]ithout Contraries is no progression” (pl. 3). Therefore, the judges were inclined to read *Messy M’Cheany* redemptively as an inversion of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque emphasis on the body and the filthy pleasures of its lower regions (hell), yet even then its puerile morality forgets Robert Venturi’s Blakean notion that “valid [art] must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion” (16), conveying the bizarre impression that what the small and ineffectual spirit of nature really needs is for us to Wash Our Hands Right Now. This impression (and the malaria-like shivers of disgust the whole project sent down our collective spine) inspired one of the judges

to suggest we honor it with the award—no, not the *Lion and the Unicorn* Poetry Award, but one we contemplated calling (with reference to Blake’s forgiving worm) the Newt Award for the Book that in Response to which no Violent Act Would Seem Disproportionate.

Some of the most unsatisfying books we received this year participate in a trend we’ve noticed in children’s poetry of the last decade or so: the application of poetic technique to the scientific description of animals and their habitats, a trend leading poetry down perilous paths. (What was it Billy Blake inscribed in his copy of *Laocoön*? “Art is the Tree of Life. Science is the Tree of Death” [*Complete* 274]). Inspired by parable and folktale and perhaps indirectly by epic and myth, animals poems and proverbs (e.g., “The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow” [pl. 8]) traditionally employ animals to elucidate the mysteries of human passion and thought, to exhort astute readers to aspire to acts of great valor and tenderness, or to lead them into rare perceptions of beauty and sublimity. Among contemporary publishers of children’s poetry (to put the accent where it seems to belong), we’ve detected a tendency to turn the formula inside out. Perhaps because of the gradual erosion of natural habitats, our lessening contact with wildlife, and the privileging of scientific and technological information over poetic knowledge, children’s poetry appears less ready to explore the mystery of technique for poetic truth, but rather mechanistically places it in the service of instruction, a Blakean term of contempt. (Ahania is murdered by Urizen, who blindly presses his Newtonian “facts” into pretty books of verse, on sale now for \$24.99.)

One can adduce many examples of this phenomenon over the past several years, and in previous essays we’ve discussed several, including Stephen R. Swinburne’s *Ocean Soup: Tide-pool Poems* (2010) and Eileen Spinelli’s *Polar Bear, Artic Hare* (2007), both of which were reincarnated this year as Leslie Bulion’s *At the Sea Floor Café: Odd Ocean Critter Poems* and Amy Gibson’s capacious *Around the World on Eighty Legs*, the latter of which features a thirty-one line poem about krill, one of the many animals poetized therein. “Krill” tells us that its eponymous animal is a small, spineless creature that swarms in colder waters where it serves as food for seals and humpback whales. Their swarms (*nota bene*) are called “clouds” (presumably not by seals and humpbacks). A number of poems about krill exist in the English-speaking world, but it is doubtful that anyone could make art out of this particular dish of information. Of course, art is not its intention and, indeed, is superfluous, maybe even defeating the purpose, which is to use rudimentary poetic technique as a delivery system for what strikes the judges as random trivia but what the editors at Scholastic must have read as fun facts. This insistence on the scientific is as pernicious as it is pointless. It

is more pernicious because it is pointless, and more pernicious still because its pointlessness is impossible to disguise or circumvent. Demanding to be taken on its own terms, information freezes poetry in its tracks, like a blast from a basilisk, yet not without raising the question, what immortal hand or eye compels us to process factoids into children's verse?

Gibson isn't without a certain playfulness, however, and some of the shorter poems are okay ("Koala," "Weddell Seal"), but her desire to convey information overwhelms her aptitude for nonsense. What else could explain this twelve-word stanza? "They feast (at least) / on tons a day, / a cheap, all-you-can-eat / buffet." What is compelling or at least provocative here is not that krill are consumed by the ton, but the mordant observation that the feeding habits of baleen whales, which consist of opening their mouths and swimming through krill clouds, are fundamentally no different from those of humans cramming down food at all-you-can-eat buffets: a grotesque simile that seems entirely incidental. When poetry turns against interpretation in this way, when it generates insincere opportunities for verbal play, it is no longer poetry but writing that suppresses poetry. We believe, "sooner murder an Infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (pl. 10); sooner a twenty-five word prose caption than a thirty-one line anti-poetic poem.

There are however upward rising modulations in this cloud of didactic nature books, here exemplified by *Birds of a Feather*, poems by Jane Yolen and photographs by her son, Jason Stemple. Informative prose captions relieve the poems of the pressure to edify, freeing them to deport themselves as poems. And they do, although not as freely or frequently as one might like. Rather than attempt to teach us about *Haematopus palliatus*, Yolen's "Oystercatchers on Parade" is an affectionate and whimsical response to Stemple's sweet photograph. Yolen is in her element in this interplay of verbal and visual art:

Who notices the pink legs, spotlight eyes?  
 Instead,  
 All we see is orange bill, orange bill,  
 A signal lamp, a traffic cone,  
 A poster for a chemical spill,  
 While oystercatchers, unafraid,  
 Continue on their stiff parade. (21)

Yolen and Stemple are veteran collaborators, having already produced a dozen books, and the most effective pages are the ones on which Yolen is able to respond to Stemple's visual style, getting into trouble only when straining to wrap her poem around hard facts. For example, in "The Regal Eagle," a poem that judge Michael Heyman terms "politically perplexing and just lunkheaded," Yolen attempts to poeticize the phenomenon of crows uniting to attack an eagle, behavior (a caption explains) ornithologists call "mobbing." Thus, she compares the eagle to a king and the mobbing crows

(because *they attack together*) to “Democracy.” At the very least, the logic is faulty and the conceit far-fetched (the eagle, as we know, never lost so much time—never mind), but folded into heroic couplets, at least it displays a quirky sense of individuality and reaffirms—if only in a passing, pastel way—our belief in old B.B.’s observation, “no bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings” (pl. 7).

The chosen form of *Birds of a Feather*—the picture book—is not unusual in the world of contemporary children’s poetry. “One thought fills immensity” (pl. 8) might be Blake’s pronouncement on the form, one he anticipated in his *Songs and Innocence and Experience*. Applied to the picture book, these words suggest an object shaping through the call and response of poetry and art the intricacies of a single thought in which we might perceive the hovering presence of magnitude. In other words, as our guy was to write in “The Auguries of Innocence,” “a world in a grain of sand” (*Complete* 490). Perhaps because of their hybrid nature, picture books typically figure among the oddest offerings in a year’s list of submissions. However, they can also be quite sophisticated, as is *A Primer about the Flag*, written by the distinguished poet Marvin Bell and illustrated by double Caldecott Medal Winner Chris Raschka (2006, 2012). Rendered in gouache and ink, Raschka’s art combines smudgy black and white drawings decorated with fuzzy black and sleet-gray globs and puddles of wash and boldly colored flag designs. While seeming at first more decorative than interpretive, the art gradually assumes a strong interpretive presence, the interplay between word and image eventually proving itself more interesting than the poetry alone.

Helen Frost’s *Step Gently Out*, from Candlewick Press, is another case in which the poetry is somewhat eclipsed by the art. *Step Gently Out* gives us quite a good single poem, though in a supporting role. The star of the book is Rick Lieder, whose brilliantly colored close-up photographs of insects take center stage, Frost’s poetry a kind of annotation, a through-line grounding the page-sized images (no margins here), the bugs achieving a grotesque beauty, at once alien and all-too-familiar. Chameleon-like, her verses change color depending on the photograph, moving here and there on the page, present but unobtrusive. Joseph Thomas wished for at least one page solely dedicated to her delicate poem, a spot where it could breathe, be seen as a poem instead of verse commentary on the stunning photographs (and yet, praise Ahania, not one “fact” in the whole poem!). The little poem (about fifty-one lines, by our count) is broken, scattered about the pages, a close-up in a book of close-ups (the carved-up poem forgives the book designer). But whereas each insect is shown in its entirety, the extreme close-ups of the poem render it impossible to take in, a collection of parts: mandible here, thorax there, its intricacies magnified to distortion. Still, Frost’s talent is unmistakable, and

the lines resonate with their accompanying image. A photograph of a big dipster firefly, for instance, is ornamented with the words

flashing,  
                   *look,*  
*I'm over here,*  
 as evening  
 turns to  
 night[.]

The sentence to which these words belong begins two pages earlier, where it crosses a double-page spread of the common yellow jacket (verso) and a pavement ant (recto): “Balanced lightly / on a leaf, / bathed in golden light, flashing. . . .” The words’ references shift depending on the images on which they lie. The yellow jacket, then, is “balanced lightly on a leaf” and the ant is “bathed in golden light” whereas the firefly flashes “*Look, I’m over here.*” On their own, however, the lines of poetry speak solely of the firefly (never mentioned in the poem, but implied by the “flashing / . . . as evening / turns to / night”), continuing, “the / creatures / shine with / stardust, / they’re / splashed / with / morning / dew.” The tension between the poem as poem, its references more stable, if still implied, and the poem as picture book text, which references the image on which the words are printed, is productive and beguiling, if also somewhat frustrating: one moment we’re reading a picture book, the next a poem, our apprehension stuttering like a camera shutter. Whether the result is more or less than either, we leave to you.

Picture books are more likely than conventional collections of children’s poetry to show a kind of textual self-consciousness regarding their embodiment as *books*, as made things designed to be held and looked at.<sup>2</sup> *BookSpeak: Poems about Books*, a collection of light verse by Laura Purdie Salas and illustrated by Josée Bisaillon, exemplifies this self-consciousness. We appreciate the conceit of a book that speaks for itself, not with the single voice one might expect—*I’m a book / take a look / read, you schnook!*—but with a multitrack vocal sounding different elements of content and structure. Still, it starts off on shaky ground with tired anapests and a text not too far from the passage above: “I promise adventure. / Come on, take a look! / On a day like today, / there’s no friend like a book.” (Here, we’ll say it: *a ten-year moratorium on anapestic children’s poems!*) But if readers can work through this dull opening, they are immediately confronted with “Skywriting,” a poem that charts impressively the verbal and visual progression of “inky black birds” to words on a page. At the top of the page, we find the splotchy black birds (mixed with a few actual ink spots) and the title, in thick black painterly print, sitting on electric wires and/or a music staff. The first line of the poem, “Line after line of inky black birds” is in a font similar to the title, but smaller,

finer, a little more printerly. As the poem descends, the font progresses from the splotchy black birds to a more conventional, bookish type: “forming the flocks that shift into words. / Page after page of tales winging by, / singing a story against a / white sky.” The last and shortest line, in a mechanical, inorganic, and courier-like font, sits alone, having made the complete transformation from wild black bird to book print—yet in the transformation, we see the spirit behind the book’s apparent sobriety. With sets of alliteration, end rhyme, and subtle assonance (“forming” and “story”; “line” and “by”), the poem’s dactyls evoke the birds’ song in words. (Joseph Thomas, especially, was charmed by the poet’s unconventional choice to end the penultimate line with an article: that lingering *a* preparing us, somehow, for our turn to the “white sky” of the page, that final, isolated pair linked syntactically to the preceding text. In these touches we find poetry.) Such a piece works on many levels, and if all the poems in this book were like this, it would have been a real contender. The variety of voices—whether from the index, the characters, the end, conflict, or illustration—gives *BookSpeak* enough cohesion and spark to enchant. However, Salas misses an opportunity, for these individual voices could have been even more poetically individuated. While some of the poems offer some formal variety (such as the brilliant “On the Shelf and Under the Bed”), too many are anapestically inclined, even when irregular line breaks disguise that inclination. Still, we find *BookSpeak* to be one of the stronger collections of light verse.

Somewhere between a picture book and a collection of poems is *A Little Bitty Man and Other Poems for the Very Young* by Halfdan Rasmussen, and translated from the Danish by Marilyn Nelson, a previous winner of our humble award, and Pamela Espeland, with illustrations by Kevin Hawkes. The judges found the book of nonsense poems sweet and inventive, with a charmingly acontemporary feel: the sort of book that evokes reading aloud to children in a cozy room overlooking a rustic meadow. *A Little Bitty Man* is the third of Nelson’s translations of Rasmussen’s poetry, following *Hundreds of Hens* (1982) and *The Ladder* (2006), a thoroughly worthwhile project to open up Rasmussen’s light-hearted work to English speaking children. Hawkes’s charcoal pencil and acrylic illustrations seem to allude to hand-colored woodcut vignettes and to late nineteenth century chromolithographs, perfectly matching the poems’ distanced, amused affect, their endearing quality of effortlessness, that intimation of a “soul of sweet delight” (pl. 9).

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In our first honor book, *Requiem: Poems of the Terezín Ghetto*, Paul B. Janeczko offers his readers sparse and powerful poetry suffused with a new kind

of music, a harmonic collision of Blake's contraries: passivity and action; cold reason and fiery energy. The atrocities of slavery and racism in America birthed a music, one Arnold Adoff adeptly evokes in *Roots and Blues*, but poets have struggled to find a lyric voice befitting the senseless evil of the Holocaust. We admire Janeczko, then, not just for the temerity required to treat this subject in the form of children's poetry, but for managing to compose a spare poetic sound—a requiem—appropriate to the unspeakable contraries of the Holocaust.

Illustrated with reproductions of minimalist, black-and-white drawings and prints by the residents of Terezín—work running from bleak to terrifying—*Requiem* is told through the voices of various characters, mostly Jewish (but also Nazi and Czech guards), charting the development of Terezín into a ghetto. Sounding through *Requiem*, and through Terezín itself, are the strains of forgotten Jewish classical musicians and the opera *Brundibár*, a production the Nazis allowed as a centerpiece to the artistic and intellectual environment they fostered in Terezín, a cruel façade existing only to placate the international community and distract from the ghetto's true purpose. In the author's note, Janeczko explains that he chose *Requiem* as the title because he "saw many of the poems in it as solemn songs to the memory of the people who died within the walls of Theresienstadt" (94). Of note here is his acknowledgment that many—but not all—of the poems create this music, that some of them have other purposes. The Nazi voices are allowed no music, no lyricism; and even within some of the Jewish voices we hear a mixture of spare utility sometimes softening into a plaintive note. But the music runs deeper; the varied voices and variations within voices, even those less musical, less "poetic," present the contraries without which, as Blake's devil tells us, there is no progression.

Part of Janeczko's music, then, emerges from the reasoning, passive principle. In the first moments of the book, inmates move without resistance into the camp on Nazi promises of a "haven for the elderly" (4), which are of course cruelly broken. But this compliance is a barbed issue, brought to the fore here by voices such as Otto Beck, a Czech who joins the Nazis, who says, "The Jews are weak. / They let the soldiers push them around. / I would never permit that, / not without throwing some punches" (65). The Jews themselves sometimes preach a kind of fatalism; Aaron Nantova, about to jump to his death, is told by friends, "Have heart / Our people must endure!" (42). This counsel isn't enough, however, and he soon commits the ultimate self-negating act. Such passive despair finds a sad music in Josefina Rabsky's story, as she notes the friends she has lost:

Olga stopped eating  
the day after her parents died of typhus

Just stopped  
 and became a sacred sack of sticks  
 that I bore in my arms  
 to the hearse. (73)

The directness of the first two lines seems almost journalistic, but the third line feels like an annihilation. A heavy piano chord—just stopped—a spondee, and a “sacred sack of sticks,” the reshuffling of a few consonants that suggests the reductive abstraction of death and indicates the dehumanizing disposition of her bones. Following this with the waltzy “that I bore in my arms / to the hearse” hints ironically of Yiddish theater music.

The contrary to such passivity finds voice with David Epstein, who hisses: “I wish I could kill one of them / A small number, no?” (26). In accord with Blake’s devils, Epstein speaks not only with direct energy, but also a spot of humor—Jewish humor in this case—both self-deprecating and pointed. Epstein continues to describe the precise manner of the murder, always trying to inflict the utmost cruelty and retribution on the imagined Nazi victim. He first describes simply stabbing him and looking into his face but then devises something far more disturbing: “I would like to feed him my Sarah’s ashes / one spoonful after another / without pause / until he could no longer breathe. / Then I would force more ashes into his nose. / Whatever he choked down or spit out / I would replace with more / of my Sarah’s ashes. / When he died / I would cram / more ashes down his throat. / Dead or not / he must taste my Sarah’s ashes” (27). Here is the fiery music, Blake’s blazing rebel Orc, as expressed through an overabundance of avenging imagination—and in a book of children’s poems, let’s not forget—abundant enough to imagine even further ways to achieve what he calls “justice.” Like the Nazi, we are also crammed with these same “ashes” and “more ashes,” over and over, in the spare, repetitive lines. The irony of course is that this revenge exists only in Epstein’s imagination, but he may take some solace in Blake’s words, “Every thing possible to be believ’d is an image of truth” (pl. 8).

The voice of reason seems to dominate a poem, more a dry lecture, until we see the contrary musics collide. Erich Rosenberg is one of the fictional characters who represents the secret (but increasingly tolerated) lectures that took place in Terezín; in this case, he speaks in the plainest language on the habits of the humble bedbug. Contrary to some of the earlier books we’ve discussed, here science serves poetry, the poem continuing in a clinical, reasoned manner until the end, when the inmates are told:

they find a spot to suck your blood  
 injecting their saliva  
 leaving a blister, a rash  
 that must *not* be scratched.

That will bring passing relief  
 but blood as well  
 more blood  
 on bedclothes, sheets,  
 under fingernails.  
 You must resist.  
 You must endure. (10)

Literally, this seems another statement of passivity, of patience and endurance, the “power” simply not to scratch. And yet, we find ourselves falling victim to the subtle but fierce music. Note the perfect line of iambic tetrameter that introduces those poignant, final verses, the repetition of “blood,” the bursting “b”-sounds, the assonant gash of “rash,” “scratched,” and “passing” coming within the blood, and finally the realization that resistance, generally, is much more than a passive negative. The unqualified “You must resist” tips closer to rebellion, in which case “enduring” becomes in some ways a paradox—the active resistance against the passive enduring—bringing us back to a balanced collision of contraries, the passive that obeys reason and the energy of “honest indignation” (pl. 12).

The most consistent narrative strain that both holds this text together but also lets it dissipate is the only repeated voice, that of Miklos, or the “Professor,” a boy who keeps his journal in his shoe. While most of the others barely have time to speak before they are shipped off to death camps, he manages to stick around longer. His voice strains to form sense out of the horror, inscribing a disjointed narrative arc that begins with the plight of the living, moves to the inexorable path to death (first, with a dead mouse in a doll’s box, and then to the corpses awaiting the box of the hearse), and finally a focus back on self, simple desires, and escape:

*Blue sky  
 beyond  
 barbed wire.*

*I wish I were  
 sky. (89)*

Miklos’s voice, an echo of I’s, is scattered, brief, and all too weak to provide any kind of satisfying song, but that is probably as it should be: nobody can make sense of this, nobody can find logic or unity or identity here; the only song that fits is the poetic voice of contraries.

This musical balance is sometimes disturbed, however, with elements that distract or enervate what can otherwise be so powerful. The first poem, for instance, shows Margit Zadok’s father, a shopkeeper who watches looters defile his business, in an image that is overfamiliar to the point of cliché: “He

stood in the street / still as a lamppost” (1). The same poem gives us, “Papa bowed his head / in prayer / or in despair,” lines that tell instead of show, Janeczko failing to trust the reader to sense the ambiguity of the evocative act of “bowing” one’s head, all, it seems, for the rhyme “prayer / despair.” There are also clumsily “poetic” moments, like in “Nicolas Krava,” describing the child actor playing Brundibár:

He sang!—  
such a voice!—  
marched around the stage  
beaming  
aglow with pride. (68)

The redundancy is troubling, especially emphasized with the line break “beaming / aglow,” and followed with the cliché of “Applause wash[ing] over him.” The line “until his number was called” almost saves it, though. Joseph was moved by the cliché “you’re number is up,” which was poignantly resuscitated by the literal, horrifying sense of Nicolas’s actual number being called. In the description of Nicolas being shipped out soon after the performance, “as Nicolas clattered toward death / we found a new Brundibár” (69), Joseph Thomas sees “clattered toward death” as a weak abstraction, yet Michael Joseph feels the unexpected verb would not let him go; it becomes, he explains, the insane sensation that crushes everything. Thus, like Blake’s angels and devils, we look upon the same scene with a different imaginative eye, but even in the flawed strains of Janeczko’s poetry we find a struggle toward a fitting music to express the horrors of the Holocaust.

Our second honor book locates the reader on the opposite pole of the emotional spectrum from the horror and helplessness of Terezín. Illustrated with reproductions of paintings by Peter Etril Snyder, Nan Forler’s *Winterberries and Apple Blossoms: Reflections and Flavors of a Mennonite Year* is a series of twelve poems that describe a year in the life of Naomi, “a young girl who has been raised in the Old Order Mennonite Community,” faithfully abiding by the rules of her church and living a “simple life with very few modern conveniences and worldly possessions” (7).

Between the first poem, “The Quilting Bee,” marked “January” in the margin, and the last, “Christmas Morning,” marked December, the poems trace a year of self-realization as embodied by the ordinary pastimes of a young adolescent Mennonite girl: shopping at the general store, tapping a forest stand for maple syrup, clearing the fields of stones, bike riding, playing baseball, eating ice cream, quilting, and so forth. Only superficially simple, these lucid and lyrical poems connect readers powerfully to the rich sensuality of the moment, and combine dramatic occasion with a sense of play and creative

improvisation. While their imagistic exactitude and directness may well speak to young readers, Forler's poems also possess mesmerizing ambiguities below the tranquil surface, flickering between innocence and experience.

The voice of the collection belongs to Naomi, and yet the poems occasionally see more than she does. When Naomi writes, "I close my eyes / and breathe in / the woodburning-maple-sweet air, / tasting spring through my nose" (12), we are aware of Naomi's innocence, that the sensation is as fresh as it is invigorating, but Naomi is engulfed by the momentary sweetness. Her pleasure is immediate, while ours is of course mediated and linguistic. This split vision is not always the case. Naomi ends "Ice Cream" knowingly with a metaphor: "tasting this moment, / drinking in / the melty sweet cream of this day" (18). Her emerging awareness of her poetic gift is an epiphany.

The poems rock tenderly but surely between affirmations of faith and explorations of sensual joy, between the common, quotidian world and intimations of poetic and spiritual (though not necessarily Protestant or Christian) delight. In the judges' discussion of "Picking Stones," Joseph Thomas dilated on the poem's depiction of earthy pleasures, on what he felt was a poetic meditation on the darker gods of the earth, which recalled for him Denise Levertov's "Hypocrite Women" and its "dark and wrinkled and hairy, / caves of the Moon. . . ." A poem about mud and dirt and clay, it participates in the sphere of Luna, not Helios (or, for Naomi, the Son). In its preoccupation with the earth (ground/boulder/stones/crops/bush) and its reference to seeds ("*Some seeds fell on rocky soil*") and illicit sexuality ("*Let the one without sin cast the first stone*" [14]) we saw an evocation of the body, and perhaps even a young girl's adolescent interest in carnal mysteries. (Here we might pause to note that Michael Heyman and Joseph Thomas wondered, even as they reveled in the carnal, sensuous imagery, if, like Blake's Milton, Forler was "a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (pl. 6)—that is, they wondered if their reading was too generous, or perhaps their eyes too experienced.) Yet even the sky in "Picking Stones" seems to savor of earth and body and ends with an almost naughty wink: "I stare up at the sky, wiped gray / with dirty clouds. / Manassah announces we'll head for the bush. / The best part" (14).

Balanced against this litany of embodiment are the mind's detached free associations with insubstantial scriptural passages: "We all help to pry the boulder from its bed / *Not a stone shall be left unturned,*" and (again) "Standing on the cart, / we throw / the stones into the trees. / *Let the one without sin cast the first stone*" (14). The balance strikes us as excitingly ambiguous. Are the quotations explanatory for Naomi for whom they have deep implications that a secular reader cannot quite grasp, or are they simply a form of playful association or a scriptural earworm? Are they intended to suggest that

religion (trite, shelf-worn phrases) cannot possibly address brutal physical, material existence, which somehow, miraculously perhaps, it does address? Are they *really* intended to suggest a preconscious sexuality? We think so. “Exuberance is Beauty” (pl. 10), and the judges find the quiet exuberance in these lines unmistakably erotic. And beauty—do we need remind you who said so?—is like unto sexuality: “The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands & feet Proportion” (pl. 10). Likewise, we found the exuberant celebration of the sensuous moment and imagistic precision of “Ice Cream” a ravishing intimacy of beauty and an invocation of sexuality: “Beneath a tree, / I stir my ice cream back to liquid / then tip the spoon up into my mouth, / tasting this moment, / drinking in / the melty sweet cream of this day” (18). Is Forler suggesting that in the life of a Mennonite adolescent, innocent sexuality is an indelible part of everyday life? Could it be otherwise?

In “The Ball Game” the tension, or what seems a tension, between ordinary life and ecstasy strikes a fine balance—a balance reflected in the tension between the image and the phrase or line. “Everyone starts to shout, ‘Naomi!’ / I hike up my skirt / and run. // Finally, / it is too dark to see the ball. / We sit on the fresh-cut grass / and sing songs of praise / below a pink sky” (20). The intense, surprising femininity of the sky seems again, on one level, to explode upon the humdrum scene, and yet, on another, to blend harmoniously with it: faith, sexuality, mortality, self, “finally” combine to infuse the moment with a palpable sense of the sacred. One is exactly where one wants to be.

Michael Joseph argued with great determination that *Winterberries and Apple Blossoms* deserved to be this year’s winner, but he agreed that, despite its excellences, the book contained too few poems, that the twelve recipes at the back of the volume diffused the book’s focus, and that, perhaps, the calendrical structure could be felt to be too rigid and static. There was also disagreement about the effectiveness of the artwork, which, while undeniably accomplished and beautiful in its own right, seemed to project a somewhat jarring Utopian vision that lacked the fluency, spontaneity, and somewhat scandalous originality of the poetry (Joseph Thomas loved the little cats—suggested warmly by but a dollop or two of paint—but little else). However, all the judges agree that *Winterberries and Apple Blossoms* is a superb collection, and they eagerly look forward to new work by Nan Forler.

This year’s winner, Arnold Adoff’s *Roots and Blues: A Celebration*, is similarly concerned with the rhythms of nature, the lives of those close to the earth, folks acquainted with mud and sweat. Adoff’s book, however, takes us down the Mississippi, away from Mennonite country and into the thick humidity of the South with poems as rich as Mississippi mud. Joseph Thomas, in particular, was pleased to see Adoff’s offering, for he has long been an advocate for his poetry. Joseph’s first publication, in fact, sings the

praises of Adoff's *Slow Dance Heart Break Blues*, arguing that *Slow Dance* is "polyphonic and polyvalent, in that most of [its] poems cannot be pinned down, for they . . . interact with one another to create complex webs of possibility." He continues, suggesting that Adoff "calls attention to the signifying nature of image, and, as a corollary, the signifying nature of words and systems of words as image. . . . Adoff makes the visual aspect of line, word, and even letter crucial to his poetic" (492–93). In *Roots and Blues*, Adoff stays true to the poetic sensibility that has informed his work for decades, but which *Slow Dance* exemplified. *Roots and Blues* is marked by a seductive exuberance. The poems individually and as a crew engage a disparate array of poetic devices and tropes: the poems are written in prose and in lines, all rendered in a kind of rough meter; and his poems use typography for a variety of effects: highlighting the morphological elements of words, their phonemic resonances, creating nonlinear possibilities for reading, a stacked syntax one can enter into improvisationally; that is, there's a melodic and a harmonic level to the poems (metaphorically speaking), as they—not all, there are some rather conventional numbers—become (as we'll see) a sort of linguistic matrix one can read horizontally and vertically and in diagonals, like a poetic crossword puzzle or one of Anthony Braxton's synesthetic, avant-garde jazz scores. They struck Joseph as the poetic equivalent of John Zorn playing the blues: traditional and heartfelt yet profoundly experimental, especially given the context of "children's poetry" and the kinds of work so commonly given to youngsters. *Roots and Blues* is a book that reminds its young readers that poetry is a visual *and* an aural medium, that poetry—even when serious—can partake of the ludic in ways that transcend fart jokes and cute puns. Admittedly, it's perhaps not as innovative as JonArno Lawson's sublime book of lipograms (*A Voweller's Bestiary*, 2009's winner), but it is of the same family: a fun, engaging book for children that is serious as poetry, infectiously so. And it's obviously written by someone who loves the *stuff* of poetry—the literary kind that lives silently on the page *and* the kind that is born when sung or chanted—and the stuff his poetry's *about*: music, the South, and the lives and traditions of those who lived and made the blues.

Now, this poetry isn't for everybody, certainly not those who prefer a more subtle poetic that hews more closely to traditional poetic forms (like our two honor books, for instance). Adoff has a masterful touch and a strong sense of craft, but one could argue that too often poetic beginnings thin out, perhaps the effect of material that can feel overly familiar. And, yes, there will be those that maintain that the poems too often rely on typographical effects to convey that which they don't expressly state. Yet the book is formally playful, bubbling over with an improvisational energy appropriate to its subject but grounded in the formal elements of the folk roots of the blues: from

repetition, call and response, and funky rhythms, to the reservoir of images and phrases it taps so beautifully. *Roots and Blues* is just, really, everything Joseph Thomas has been looking for in a book of children's poetry since the founding of our award back in 2005. Over the years we judges have asked for poems that engage with more than the history of literary nonsense, more than the mid-century nature poem; we've asked for books that cast a wider net, that understand that the book of poetry—as a printed artifact—is a *visual* medium, that words are *things* on the page, ink pressed to paper (a lesson Blake sought to teach us some two-hundred years ago, as he burned his words and images backwards onto copper plates). Adoff's *Roots and Blues* sings the blues silently, evoking sound with the conventional aural effects of poetry—consonance, assonance, rhyme, repetition, what have you—but also through typography: this is sound made flesh, frozen, like a blues man's voice etched onto a shellac 78. And sometimes, to read them aloud is to miss some of their more profound aspects, for these poems are images on the page fit to look at as well as recite.

Michael Heyman recognizes in *Roots* a poetry quite different from most of that which is crafted for kids. It's a kind of blues, and as such is built with a blues-based aesthetic. The pieces all speak to one another, are a part of each other to some extent. Individually, they sometimes are lacking, especially the last lines of any given piece that tend to tie things up a tad too patly (i.e., “the beats of freedom” [26]), but when we take into account the threads woven between (the birds that fly from piece to piece, spreading stories; the Mississippi mud beneath them all), the book as a whole becomes something else: call and response, the blues form repeating with variation, shout-outs to the ancestors and to the ancestor-artists, both musician and poet. For instance, in Adoff's lines Michael hears a bit of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, particularly the “Song of the Son”:

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,  
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,  
Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,  
And let the valley carry it along.  
And let the valley carry it along. (14)

Both Toomer and Adoff summon the African American folk traditions in their lines (repetition, simple but powerful language, rhythm, musicality); and Adoff foregrounds these traditions in, as we've suggested, profoundly visual poems. We don't have to look much further than the first piece to see Adoff working the above ingredients into something extraordinary:

*I look into the water and see my usual face bending out  
and under the ripples: bending as blue notes extend  
from finger tip to steel wire hit to air to ear to memory. (7)*

The judges were struck by the way Adoff “stain’d the water clear,” as Blake put it (*Songs* pl. 4), by blending human, nature, and art (face, water, music), motifs that repeat throughout the book. The arresting image of the face bending “under” the ripples delighted us: the first line of this three-line paragraph serving as the water’s surface, and each line below taking us deeper and deeper into both water and memory. The musical notes sound first in the repetition of the long vowels in “bend” and “extend” and the short sounds, coming from “ripples” and stretching out to “finger,” “tip,” and “hit.” We particularly like the alternating short string-plucking consonance of *tip*, *hit*, *to*, *to*, and *to* with the longer vowel sounds of *steel*, *air*, *ear*, and *memory* in the line “finger tip to steel wire hit to air to ear to memory.” Note also the parallelism in “finger tip” and “wire hit,” the space between “finger” and “tip” allowing both “fingertip” and “finger tip” (“tip” as in “hat tip,” that is, fingers *tipping* toward piano keys). The clumsiness with which we unpack this simple move—it’s just a space, for God’s sake—testifies to the density of meaning Adoff’s attention to typography achieves. And while moving to “memory” there at the end may border on the trite, the sound of the word after the quick plucks—the humming m’s and long vowels—resonates perfectly: a hit and a three-syllable decay.

The themes—musical as well as conceptual—evoked in this first poem echo throughout the book, and like the blues, these opening motifs return at the close of the book: we start on the tonic chord and end there as well. It’s hard to tell if this poem and others like it (a kind of block of text, like a prose poem) *are* in fact written in prose or lineated verse: they *look* like what Adoff has called “poet’s prose,” but the lines as laid out on the page are so perfectly sculpted and balanced, one is tempted to reproduce them exactly, marking breaks at the right margin as line breaks. Regardless, the first poem uses its provocatively strange typography to invite the reader to engage the work in unusual ways. Consider these “lines”:

makes tone makes sound and resonates: rings like rocks  
*hitting calm water. C i r c l e s o f s o u n d s r e a c h o u t (7)*

The polysemy of the word “rings” sets up a chain reaction, knocking around the words in evocative ways, moving as it moves: we have “rings” (as in rings on a finger)—recalling the dedication a page earlier to Adoff’s late wife, Virginia Hamilton—but these are “rings like rocks,” already an evocative and ambiguous simile even before we realize that, literally, “rings” is a verb: the hammer strikes of the poem’s piano “ring” like hammers on rocks, the chain gang’s ghostly form haunting the sentence even as it rushes on to the more pastoral image of a boy throwing rocks into a lake, the rocks ringing, making rings, concentric circles expanding outward until they touch the shore.

These rings expand concentrically to the book's penultimate poem: "Inside This Circle of Blue," where we read,

Inside  
 these  
 words  
 inside this repeating of  
 words this repeating of  
     this singing  
         circle of b l u e:  
                             i s  
                             t h i s  
         circle of living  
         h e r e o n moving  
         circle of moving  
         r o c k i n s p a c e. (83)

The horizontal and the vertical: the phrase, "Inside / these / words / inside / words," lies inside the phrase "Inside / these / words / inside this repeating of / words this repeating of / this singing circle of blue." The "r o c k i n s p a c e" recalling that earlier rock, the "moving" both to move forward (or in circles) and to move emotionally, to be moved by poetry, by music. And in the final poem, the piano hammers are replaced by "*Callused Fingers*," the ring of rocks replaced by the "*steel rim of s n a r e*" (lovely polysemy there: to snare, verb, and a snare drum, noun), replaced again by the rocks, "*rocksolid fourfour f o u r*," the words a chain of—forgive us for this, the poet practically begs for it—a chain of signifiers multiplying endlessly in concentric rings, whether of gold or stone or steel or water. "*Each word repeated*," yes, but, as Gertrude Stein asks: "Is there repetition or is there insistence." She answers, and I think Adoff would agree, "I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be," for in expressing

any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis. (100)

And here is the heart of Adoff's moving collection—a surprisingly Steinian offering, it would seem—a living heart of rings within rings and repetitions within repetition and movement and sound within cold, black, unmoving text.

As a whole, *Roots and Blues* brought to Joseph Thomas's mind the argument to *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—indeed, all three of our notable winners recalled the same lines:

Now the sneaking serpent walks  
 In mild humility.  
 And the just man rages in the wilds  
 Where lions roam. (pl. 2)

While we wish Kathie Lee Gifford would at least have the self-respect to walk “in mild humility,” our winning books, even *Winterberries*, with its understated but undeniable sexual energy, rage in the wilds with lions. Not satisfied with the banal four C’s (for “satisfactory”) Richard Flynn enumerates in his essay “Consolation Prize”—Classic, Comic, Cute, and Consoling (66)—these books are Blakean in that they hold true to the Satanic principle that “Energy is Eternal Delight” (pl. 4). Even the Godlier verses in *Winterberries* are *poetry*; they *do something* besides cram natural science into metronomic anapests or moralize between cutesy rhymes; rather, they suggest that those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained. And their publishers, who, if they didn’t *encourage* the exploration of the topics their authors chose, at the least didn’t restrain them. These are books that wear openly the lineaments of gratified desire, prompting their readers to find delight (or, in *Requiem*, a hard won wisdom) in the space between word and thought, to appreciate the redemptive possibility of poetic knowledge, to delight in the enjoyments of Genius (which to Angels look like torment and insanity) and to do so in the face of a world that seems increasingly broken and wrong. Surely the worst of this year’s offerings may bring to mind Blake’s woeful lyric, “Oh Rose, thou art sick!” (*Songs* pl. 39). Yet the best recall Blake’s Pretty Rose Tree. With a difference. While that jealous tree offers up only her thorns for her lover’s “delight” (*Songs* pl. 43), *Winterberries*, *Requiem*, and *Roots and Blues* delight—as the best Rose always does—with petal and thorn alike.

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*Michael Joseph is a poet, writer, and director of the New Jersey Book Arts Symposium, an annual conference about book arts and artists’ books. His most recent publications are Lost Light, poems set in a song cycle by the*

composer, Herbert Rothgarber, and hand-printed by Barbara Henry of the Harsimus Press (2011), and *Useless Tools: For Every Anxious Occasion, a collaborative work of fiction with photographs of sculptures by Sarah Stengle* (2011). Also in 2011 he published his first collaborative essay with Michael Heyman and Joseph Thomas, “The City, the Country, and the Road Between,” published in *The Lion and Unicorn* 35.3 (2011).

A poet and scholar, Joseph Thomas directs the National Center for the Study of Children’s Literature at San Diego State University, where he serves as an associate professor in the department of English and Comparative Literature. Newly appointed as *The Lion and the Unicorn’s* inaugural Poetry Award editor and a founding judge, Thomas is the author of a handful of essays and two books, *Poetry’s Playground* (Wayne State UP, 2007) and *Strong Measures* (Make Now P, 2007). He can be found on Twitter @josephsdsu.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>All references to Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* will be cited in-text with the plate number only.

<sup>2</sup>For more on this subject, see the trio of essays included in “The Books that Print Bred: The Materiality of Picture Books,” a special section in *The Children’s Literature Association Quarterly’s* Fall 2005 issue: “Letters to Children” by Joseph Thomas; “Narrative vs. Non narrative Demands, or, Comic Art and Fragmentation in Aliki’s *How a Book is Made*” by Charles Hatfield; and “The Performative Letter, from Medieval to Modern” by Michael Heyman.

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