

THE MAX HARRIS NATIONAL POETRY AWARD 2013

We thank all entrants for their submissions and congratulate the winner and those whose poems were specially commended by the judges.

WINNER OF THE 2013 MAX HARRIS POETRY AWARD OF \$3000

ODE TO EVENING, ON A THEME BY WALT WHITMAN

by Homer Rieth

COMMENDED POEMS

THIS IS WHAT WERE WE

by Dan Disney

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

by Anne Carson

GRANDMOTHER GOING GONE

by Andrew Slattery

JUDGES' REPORT

The Max Harris National Poetry Award 2013 was judged by Judith Beveridge and Kevin Brophy. They have provided the following notes on the winning and commended poems.

Ode to evening, on a theme by Walt Whitman: a poem that manages to be musical, receptive to the world, deeply metaphoric, and incisive about values all at once. The sustained rhythm, repetition and detailed imagery are beautifully alluring and hypnotic. The poet keeps the poem buoyant and elegant through use of long-breathed line that enacts time's cyclical movements. The poet demonstrates exquisite control of craft and subject matter.

This is what were we: a poem that does the kind of experimental, savvy and real thing Max Harris would have applauded. The language is fresh, playful, inviting, and the poet makes original use of the villanelle form, relishing in its use of repetition and resonance to remake the lines each time they recur. The poet has an admirable grasp of form, but balances this with verve, originality and experimentation.

Transubstantiation: a poem admirable for its imagistic control, use of form, line breaks and energy produced from the tension the poet evokes by juxtaposing the enduring with the ephemeral. The emotions are beautifully articulated. The sense of fragility and vulnerability set against love and human connection are beautifully handled. There are many memorable phrases and lines in this poem.

Grandmother going gone: a superb meditation, a tracking of the mind at a difficult moment in life. The language is fresh and the fractured grammar enacts the grief and the emotional disturbance so that the reader can feel the wrangling emotions. The imaginative reach of the poem is exemplary. The poem has been written with insight and integrity of feeling.

THE WINNING AND COMMENDED POEMS

ODE TO EVENING ON A THEME BY WALT WHITMAN

by Homer Rieth

The streets keep to themselves, calm, unperturbed, almost halcyon
you could say... they mirror the spirit of the moving-water silences
of Golden Plains, descending over Navigators in the slipstream, drifting into rain—
quiet as cloud-flecks above Brown Hill and Mount Helen, floating by (where the towers are watchers
of the clay pans)... quiet as the afternoon light turning alluvial.., quiet as the cumulus
milting over Mount Emu... and suddenly it is evening—

it puts the minds of ghosts to rest—the air being cool and clear and almost
windless.., you could call it a perfect evening (in its way) only now familiar things seem stranger than
strangeness itself, and that which was the wheat, has become the chaff—
and truly I would say, ‘hope springs...’ as if it were a mantra, were it not that the word ‘eternal’
(sounding more preternatural than it used to) catches on the tongue,
as unremitting as tomorrow—

and yet they are still there, Napoleons, Rokewood, the road to Cape Clear—
sequestered in time, like these trees, serried and canopied in their orders of stillness,
in the auroras of evening above Memorial Arch—where the dead are honoured in their stoic refusals—
yet, to trees it must seem that change is all—the irremediable vanity, and since all things
are things of rise and fall, can anything ever reconcile with itself, or leave its trace
in the dust of the sempiternal?—

only trees themselves, perhaps, the grace of their introspections, as seen among
the elms and maples of Windermere and Ascot Street—with their candelabras of perfect cut,
their leafy polyhedrons of shade—a life beyond the human world;
in the Botanic Gardens, the prime ministers seek leave to cross, on a point of order,
that last threshold of nostalgia—to become like these trees
(Ashbery’s or ours?) monumental, you might say—but as it is, they resemble

the 21st century on the make—and all the while on Webster Street
it is evening and it seems to me the streets are still keeping to themselves—
calm, unperturbed, almost halcyon, you could say... and now the lake water birds are coming
into their own reflection, and from narrow synclines and anticlines of bluestone
I hear young boys on their skateboards, curling the concrete,
cutting it fine, as intricate as the future—

I doubt not that Mount Disappointment still appeals, since it never fails
to disappoint—and English gardens, retreating into orders of virtue, are still orders
of obsession, for the idea of magnolias may at any moment again
take hold of the mind—perhaps it is not the words we cannot say, but the words
we cannot find, that undo us—and we shall be, like shadows
cast by shadows, what we have failed to become—and that is no small thing,

to watch the world we have known and loved, unraveling—
for now, in 'the bunker', day after day, I am a book that is being remaindered,
a periodicity in which the rarefaction of all elements has been arrived at, with zero resistance—
the linear accelerator moving with animal patience, rotates its tuned-cavity through routines
of high voltage waves—the light is 'Mariana Trench' rather than 'meadow' green,
unnerving lifelong symmetries—

thus you may understand how I am minded to dwell upon the moving-water silences
of Golden Plains, in the slipstream—for when evening falls, it is then you begin to see
what they mean, the words in the line, 'Night'—as Walt hymned it—'sleep, death and the stars.'
In 'A Clear Midnight', their mysteries are unending, their origins are spoken for
and were, before the world began—in a way that we may never fathom—they are calm, unperturbed,
almost halcyon, you could say.

THIS IS WHAT WERE WE

by Dan Disney

it's the empty future
you want to impress

John Forbes

(i)

there can be no question: a decision between illusory things

scatters any technicolor republic of friends; dusting off their sorrow, the
history of creation is

large as a legion of phantasms moving slow

scouring junkyards for a slap of happiness, but there can be no
question: a decision between illusory things

can't be whistled without the bony throat of etiquette

renovating those little ears of the *petit bourgeoisie* ... the history of creation is large
as the history of soap

or more: furniture bolted to the floor

this year it is money the capitalists are importing (again) for their vaults
but there's no question: a decision between illusory things

cannot contrive for soldiers to abandon their shoes

for disorderly caresses with ancient sculptures of protest; no, there's history
to creation, that large roaming melancholia

of unarmed creatures yoked to the scriptures of necessity

surrounded by handmade thought; there can be no question of a decision
between illusory things and
the history of creation is larger than the real

(ii)

all that matters is that the thing be the thing of the thing, the

marvelous, primitive head of an inter-world aviator asking

'could you give me a light I ain't got no

flowers, though your kitchen's reasonably orderly, hell

I'm creating a total social future'

where all that matters is the thing be the thing of the thing, the

swampy goo of television like a slot machine of yeah yeah, stomping

the air like a big-footed creature

'could you give me a light I ain't got no

sleeping notions and I'm beaten as a rare bird'

hero of the present retreats to Homeric grass

where all that matters is the thing be the thing of the thing

about midday (and justice reigns amid the flowers) the sun

attentive as a broken heart

'say, could you give me that light I ain't got no

big eighteenth-century problem, but I'm in a chasm' where monkish men walk

half-scared to death, and where

all that matters is that the thing be the thing of the thing

'could you give me a light I ain't got no light'

(iii)

either you're initiated into the code, or you're not

chainsmoking deadlines, watched by fatherly creatures blinking

as you get to your feet; try keeping

dry-eyed as a summertime in this violent polis of state machines

(amid grim historical traits, remain

firm as cheese): either you're initiated into the code, or your laughter

is not yet clustered with white-haired confidence: try

gargling sunlight and your voice will be apple trees in blossom

they will nod as you get to your feet, try to keep

sane as an undisturbed pool

within the spheres of memory: gather the ripples of yourself, for either

you're initiated into the code, or you are

bits of stick in the bare wire deserts of consciousness

unsteady as antiheroes with a fetish for the muck of truth ... do not

blink, get to your feet (keep going)

for the unifying moulds of the *mauvaise foi* frats are bleepers

in the heart of daydreaming, where traders

comb the air and initiate those nodding few into their codes; if you're not

get to your feet: now get going

Notes

These villanelles derive from 'The Art of Poetry' interview series run in *The Paris Review*—(i) originates after reading the interview with Pablo Neruda (No. 51, Spring 1971); (ii) originates after reading the interview with Charles Olson (No. 49, Spring 1970); (iii) originates after reading the interview with Seamus Heaney (No. 144, Fall 1997).

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

by Anne Carson

Lake Frome, South Australia

It feels like the edge of the world. We've been flying
for hours, in metal as flimsy as foil. Three of us
squashed into proximity, strangely solitary

in cocoons of raucous silence. The engine whine
is constant, bone-juddering. Our disembodied voices
crackle with headphone distortion—keeping talk

to a minimum. Wind rushes my legs from a hole
in the fuselage, arctic cold, the outside brought
inexorably in. Seatbelt's cinch and discomfort

pin us into the inescapable present moment, forcing
what is essential to the fore. Flying over Lake Frome,
on our Lake Eyre honeymoon; I never imagined it

like this. The lake stretches to the horizon, mostly dried
to salt, liquid in places, like an enormous Miro canvas;
long, languid brushstrokes, vivid, pleasing shapes.

They seem intentional, chosen for balance, juxtaposition.

Below us are two finely etched scimitar curves
of sand, the larger poised over the smaller;

warm cocoa and ivory, against light lapis; harmonious,
muted colours the like I've never seen. The further
we go the less substance. The parallel is not lost

on me; already your cheekbones foretell your fate.
We fly into thin cloud cover with the same lacy texture
as the saltpan, the same bridal white.

The horizon disappears; now we're inside a Miro
painting—shape, line, light made three dimensional.
I swallow vertigo at being so unanchored,

without the usual safe parameters. The landscape
mirrors our predicament perfectly; extreme
and beautiful at once. There is no choice but to proceed.

It is gallery of light exhibiting variations on a theme—
radiance, luminosity, incandescence. The space
opens into something grand, dazzling and terrible

with the capacity to take everything. Instead of falling
off the world we're in danger of melting into it,
leaving all expectation of substance, certainty,

continuance behind. We are the only solid matter
amongst the ephemera of salt and cloud.

All the shadows have been swallowed, leaving

pure aesthetics; pristine, solitary splendour
existing mostly outside human ken.

I hold what is most precious up to that presence:

my wedding vows, the kind of companion
I hope to be to you, come your end, let them be
transfused by that simple illuminating truth.

GRANDMOTHER GOING GONE

by Andrew Slattery

This, the first year the sagebrush hasn't bloomed.
She sits on her porch, still waiting for suitors.
Mint and basil in the pot
opposite the pot of marigolds which the rabbits do not eat.

Our bones are soft and yellow. Upon a time
there was a once. The twentieth century
put a rift through your brain.

The two deck chairs warm themselves
above the squash blossoms' slow machismo
and the watertank is three storms full.

Take anything,
whatever is transfiguring, refined,
foolish; take the thing, effaced from a man's soul
what his ancestors have most constantly done.

Hearing-aides sit behind her like commas.
Your arms bruised like a forceps baby,
and the little mountains at the back of your head.

She coughs
like balloons past.
Some of us are losing a leg to diabetes.
Some don't know what they went downstairs for.

There are two skies but *one* hawk.
We are uncertain, like in the brouhaha of waves
that only my fellow Pythagoreans could decipher

The consequences seize us by the throat, indifferent
to the fact that we have meanwhile reformed.

Talk much of yourself and so conceal of yourself.

She sips at her coffee, as she does every morning,
watching the light walk down the hill.

Behind her, a dead tree is fruiting with cockatoos.

We bear our workhorse backs.

We bear the sea's wretched age.

Let the low orange moon
and its rabbits
come to mean mortality.

You keep old roads open
by driving on the new ones.
If there's a Hell, little is made of it.

I keep meaning to study up
and find out what it is we have inside us.
It seems there is a lot to forget and a lot not to do.

And by that oldest instinct of subjection
which breaks forth in her.

The vanity of others—
counter to our taste when counter to our vanity.
Stars are built on plates. I keep forgetting
this isn't my world.

Tell me how it's been a strange world.
That I could lean against the bookcase
and a secret panel open up.

The books said "get what you can,
try to keep that, and add to it if possible,"

and they searched hard for the word
to convey that what is gone is gone forever.

It began with an amoeba, singing
against the fear of separation,
an act of volition,
a love of what time is gently not doing.