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Contest Winners:

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Ivy Schweitzer

Ambition

The answer is no from the poetry editor,
the answer is no from the national grant.
My snarky response—dies on my lips,
self-esteem plummets.

ivy schweitzer 

All my failures
clamor at my heart, like unhinged souls
on the far bank of the river Styx.
Psychic bedbugs gorging.

The answer is no from
my children
bustling into newly grown-up lives,
no from my husband, plugged into his
virtual toys. No from my balky knees
grumbling at every mile I run, every
delirious slope I ski.
No from my sciatic nerve, achy
hips, hair-line eczema, vaginal dryness.

It's time, Soul, to transmigrate as a toad.

Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc

Response to Werner Herzog's "Cave of Forgotten Dreams"

First we draw and then we eat
intone the elders
urging us from thin sunlight
ice-glinted
into the dark heart of the cave.

We young ones mind fires at the mouth,
fires that flare torches
and char the tips of the long
drawing sticks
the inspired among us brandish.

Bird sounds from flutes of
hollowed bone.

In the great cavern everything
romps in the flickers-
lithe horses, wooly rhinos,
long-horned ibex, aurochs, and thundering bison
all so tasty when roasted
hunting fighting
coupling

scenes of plenty and power
fill us
fill us full

and everywhere on the walls
our palm prints
like storied stars in the dusky
bowl of the sky.

Michelle

Five red trees flared by the road
their wicks dipped deep in
the earth
kindling mud and air
each leaf a perfect fiery handprint
waving waving

The trees flamed
the day you died
your shoulders drooped
bald head on its bending stem
rattling chest
bloody tissue at your nose
oxygen machine chugging
to fill fill fill

defeat was a strange new knowledge
in eyes
that would not delight in
five flamboyant trees
announcing autumn
that a week later
became barren trunks
cushioned by
carpets of palest red

Awful Beauty

For me, kneeling over their carcasses is like looking into a macabre mirror.
--Chris Jordan, "Midway: Message from the Gyre" 2009

One warm spring day we lunched and shopped
in town with a woman of passionate soul
from the West who writes about deserts,
refuge, and beauty in a broken world.

Then she showed us the photographs, large
format taken from the height of a crouch,

decomposing albatross stuffed with garbage from the North Pacific Gyre's patch

of pelagic debris. From Midway Island they forage, feed their young who die, bloated on plastic. Their bodies splayed against grass, sand, and shingle reveal a fantastic mosaic

of lighters, bottle caps, spoons and fishing line, blazing red, orange and especially turquoise blue as if a master hand, flourishing ancient skill, set sacred stones willfully

in patterns beyond our grasp. The colors pulse against sick gray and white of feathers lifting off bone. Beaks dark as dried leather pointing away from the indigestible jumble—

so many, her hand turned endlessly through images burdened like heavy charms or self-made curses as we sat wordlessly trying to glean some sense from awful beauty.

Interview with Ashley Bortolotti

AB. Your poetry seems to either stem from a deeply personal experience (like being a mother) or is a response to an event or another writers' work; do you see these two types of inspiration as closely related or vastly different?

IS. I think these types of inspiration are related but require different treatment. I think we all write from places of deep emotion and experience. We write to understand what we feel and do and to communicate this to others. We write to put our experiences and feelings into order and language, to make music out of it, to find out what we think, to find the beauty in it and the meaning. I am sometimes completely surprised at what I write, at what comes out (if I let it). I don't see a big difference in the inspiration that produces writing about motherhood, for instance, and writing about politics, but the writing, the treatment is different.

AB. You play around with line breaks and enjambments a lot in your poetry, why is that?

IS. Enjambment is one of the great tools of poetry and what differentiates poetry from prose. When we turn the line, something happens there, energy is released or suppressed (so that it gains more pressure more effect). Enjambment works with and against the grammatical shape of sentences so that line breaks allow you to signal to readers where the important and explosive stuff is. Falling off into the white space of the page, wondering will catch you on the next line; it's a bit like alpine skiing, rocking from edge to edge, never in a straight line down the mountain but also heading down. I get critiqued often because my line breaks are not always coordinated with natural breaths, but sometimes that what I want, to pull the reader out of his/her normal reading/speaking pattern in the world of the poem.

AB. Who are some of your favorite poets? Who has influenced your writing style the most and why?

IS. I have to say I grew up on the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and though I now loathe his conservative politics, I still recite the poetry to myself: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and lines from “The Waste Land”. I also adore Keats—there is no more lyrical and beautiful poet in my mind—and have several of his poems memorized that I recite over and over. Also love John Donne (no poet more passionate and intellectually playful) and George Herbert. In graduate school, I became a Wallace Stevens fan, my favorite of the high modernists, though I also like William Carlos Williams. Other favorites, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich, of course, Marilyn Hacker for forms, Sharon Olds for controversy and writing about the family, Li-yong Lee for a lyricism rivaling Keats, Henri Cole for courage and elegance, Lucille Clifton for chutzpah, and how can I forget Emily Dickinson for the whole universe, Walt Whitman for the whole person, and Shakespeare for love.

AB. Many poets, and artists in general, have different ‘periods’ in their work (for example, Picasso’s Blue Period, Rose Period, African Period) reflecting different times in their lives. Do you feel as though your work can be broken up into different periods? If so, what would you name them and why?

IS. Good question and hard to answer. I certainly think my earlier poetry could be described as thoroughly self-involved and immature, I have had a dark period (when I didn’t write much), and an apprentice period, which I might call my social awareness phase.

AB. What is the first poem you remember that truly affected you? How were you exposed to it?

IS. I know I was writing poetry very early in my life, and so I must have been exposed to poetry through children’s books, but I don’t really remember that. I do remember studying poetry in junior high school, but one of the first poems that I really remember affecting me was Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” I am sure I read it in 9th or 10th grade along with Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” and Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” (the greatest [male] hits). It was the height of the New Criticism, and Eliot was its darling; and this had somehow trickled down to junior and high school teachers, especially those in the advanced track, in which I was (I was in a “special progress” class and skipped 8th grade). I must have had enough knowledge of traditional poetry and its forms to understand, really feel in my gut not just my head, how edgy that opening line was:

“Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;”

I felt the pathos of this, the numbness, the dreariness, the startling image that falls so flat and crushes the emerging, deceptive lyricism of the end rhymes of the first two lines. It was also the age of emerging feminism, the women’s movement, and I must have recognized Prufrock’s failed masculinity: “I have heard the mermaid singing each to each/I do not think they will sing to me.” I appreciated Eliot’s manipulation of rhyme, singsong, couplets, his troping on other poems (another favorite: Marvel’s “To His Coy Mistress.”) All the learned allusions made me feel in the know, part of a special club. It was heady, though now I see it as excluding and somewhat arrogant. But perhaps youth is always a bit arrogant.

AB. On your faculty page for Dartmouth College you state that your “fields of specialization are American literature, especially early American studies, women's literature and culture and feminist studies.” How do you think your interest in these has impacted the way you write?

IS. My specialization in Early American literature, especially poetry, has allowed me to read widely in early poetry, poetry not written in the US, and to really learn how to teach traditional forms and metrical poetry, to understand how to explain it to students and thus really grasp it myself. This has been a great expansion of my poetic tool kit: I feel comfortable in metered poetry and free verse, in traditional forms (I just finished a villanelle and like writing sonnets). I think this has given me an appreciation for the music of poetry—no one is more musical than Keats, for

sounds and making beautiful sounds in language. It has also given me a strong background in the themes and motifs and tropes of earlier poetries, and in theories of poetry and the poet (for example, Emerson's essay, especially "The Poet," Poe's essays on "arts for art's sake). It has made me feel comfortable with poetry saturated in ideologies (like Protestant Christianity) and written in unfamiliar styles.

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