

2019 Anna Davidson Rosenberg Award

Winning Poems

Award Committee:

Alan Toltzis

Daniel Pravda

Michal Mahgerefteh

David King

FIRST PLACE

Love in the Diaspora

By Miriam Flock

Tweed skirt, laced boots, my hair domesticated
in that exacting bun—I remember
not you but what I looked like when our eyes
first met: a poet, not emoting, but sober,
with just a whiff of Vilna before the War,
where separately we had imagined ourselves
more truly at home than there in the dead center
of Ohio, a city whose excuse was latitude.

“Can Jewish culture exist outside the land?”
someone was asking the speaker, and the indignation
on your face braced me to raise my hand:
“Such a question! Grade, Sutzkever, the Gaon.”
Later, you advanced on the knot of women
wrangling with me. I’m sure you did not bow,
but you are bowing now in memory,
kissing my hand like a man might kiss a prayer book.

That night, you unbuttoned my high collar.
I peeled your knit vest, your no-iron shirt.
Love was a form of rescue: “Sheynkayt, Liebling,”
terms even your father had forgotten
lulled me into sleep. Old words: new words.
Eventually I learned that Yiddish boasts
eleven ways to name the fool I was.

SECOND PLACE

From Rechavia

By Bruce Arlen Wasserman

There is a scent somewhere here between hay / & the must of pressed grapes & balsam / & the cats that shake themselves through the bins / & the moist of winter runoff & what passes for ice / in Jerusalem that erodes all 48 steps to my flat / & the one bold feral cat who sidled all the way / to the door before vanishing like a magician's hat / & why are there no screens in Jerusalem & why / do the doors face walls of stone the same stone / that lines the streets & alleyways & the tiled / havens for dud shemesh tanks white as misfits / of clusters of footprints on the moon / there seems to be a pattern to the ups & the / downs of the hills & the streets climb to make / ancient off-angled passages to places like / the Kotel & the footfalls of the oldest alleys & / the pockmarks where they missed or hit in former wars / like the heart-rock I found near my grandfather's grave / leaving time on my fingers & chalk as a remnant / like snail gloss these things say soul differently / than James Brown imagining low stone inscriptions / & there is more to give it all up for in the memories / of a child than the fan of palm leaves setting a border / for my garden & the kumquat & the tangerine trees / comparing tiny fruits & the way the lemon looks on / in the tartness of the breeze but the pomegranate sways / its seeds in an undertone like hot breath after a quick one / & these things I think took place upon the stones laid when / Rechavia was rural & bordered by farms & the monastery / where the Romans cut the cross & the slog of that walk that / must have been truly painful & why do fallen leaves never chase / the winds & why is dirt undisturbed as if sanctity is beyond / what's already known & why is the doormat always backwards / as a tribute or a view to a future pretending to be past or / the list of the lost repeated in an ancient mother tongue? / I pay at the post office in a guttural I can barely comprehend / from the consonants in my throat & I realize I still can't / say my name right & my immigrant state is more real than / the 5,779 ways to count the years to devolve from a snake / & all the incense burned in the desert made the air / a little sweeter & the day I arrived with three bags & / my guitar a stranger stopped to help me roll them up / the street then shook my hand & the sweetness of one / day's travel ended like a blues riff & the lack of assurance / let my notes flow into the Jerusalem wind & the voices / inside the Souk are just enough to roll along the centuries of stones like the backs of rushing rivers / or the dates I bought that taste like caramel dipped / in honey then burned & the hummus like an evening spent / dreaming of something tearing my heart out & when I am / forced to give it all away these travels & my struggles / slowly fade like early rain like water's rising to mist a world / away from here & one thing I have discovered is how to have / Hebrew dreams after the DMV & the gifting of beggars / as all charity speaks Hebrew & anything I lack feels fuller / in Hebrew & this is where I've learned yom tov & this / is where I understand bevakasha means you're welcome / as well as please & I ease into some sense of letters & / this is where worries of never knowing the feeling of Shalom / finally give guttural breath to the sounds inside my name.

3rd PLACE

Don't Change My Name

By Sarah Sasso

changing Ethiopian names
is an old immigrant story
my grandfather
and his brothers
were known
by different last names

don't tell me who I am
a piece of paper
curled into a cigarette
smoked up
in one puff

so we argue over my grandfather's grave
was his name Nachum Shalom
or David Nachum
or Ben David
or Hacham
I only knew him as Abba Nagi
the singsong saying
over any scroll
didn't really matter
to me
to him now

you learn as an immigrant
that home is in your heart
so beat that drum song strong
and smile
welcome the birthland people
they have no idea
they're strangers to themselves
they've never had to know their heart
it takes crossing borders for that

1st HONORABLE MENTION

Polar

By Michele Rappoport

Sturdy and silver colored like her
Polar
is stamped on the long handle
grandmother's spoon
so strong you can see her digging
out of the blizzard with it
snow twirling like puppies
as the coal runs out
Polar, stiffer than bedsheets
caught on the frozen line
Polar hiding somewhere
in the house like her mother
saved by the Polish couple
during the pogrom
Polar moves with her
digging in the dirt of different houses
a child trapped
in the lock of a failed marriage
two opposites tugging, Polar
stirring broth for her husband
dead before dead
in the bed where I never saw her rise
Polar scraping the ice, cracking the earth
lifting a stone to join the others
at the head of his grave.

and who knows those frayed edges
better than one
without a passport
or a parent's grave to visit
or a birth certificate
or a bank account with all those verified official paper facts

I look for the heart whispers
that call my name
and my grandfathers and his fathers
and those before him
and I know that I am at home
in the embrace
of what cannot be named

2nd HONORABLE MENTION

Our Country is on Fire

By Anna Jacobson

Each year the Rabbi asks me to photograph
Chanukah in the City. Each year
Security tells me to delete the photos
they appear in. This year I get a lanyard saying:
'Official Photographer' from the Rabbi's wife.
I capture falafel vans, klezmer bands, doughnuts
and latkes stands. Acrobats sail on stilts, trail
bubbles through sky. The giant menorah watches
men laying tefillin as children spin dreidels.
Dignitaries make apologies for ministers
who couldn't be there. The Rabbi is carried skywards
in a cherry picker—I twist my lens to capture him
lighting the menorah, six-feet high. Once
there were fireworks. Now our country
is on fire, burning far longer than eight days
and eight nights. Our Prime Minister doesn't believe
in climate change. He wants to silence
protestors. Our country is on fire.
And as the festival of lights begins— I let
my menorah radiate survival and hope, even
if I have to blow its candles out
before I go to bed.

3rd HONORABLE MENTION

BEATRICE

By Gloria g. Murray

my mother kept two sets of dishes
one for the Passover, the high holy days
the other for our daily meals

then there was that one setting...
segregated in saran wrap in the cupboard
just for Beatrice, the black cleaning lady

who came every two weeks to polish
and purify our tiny apartment and for whom
my mother served scrambled eggs

with kosher salami, a cup of lemon tea
and small piece of halvah for dessert

I didn't wonder why my mother kept
them separate or why she even had
a special sponge to wipe the table

I would just sit—my head on Beatrice's
skinny lap while she told me stories
her mother had told her

of a place in the south, in a time
when her kind had nothing, not like now
when she had a job, a nice meal

and the worn clothes my mother gave her
for the two children she was raising alone
in a cold water flat in East New York

when we moved from there to Canarsie
with two cartons of dishes carefully wrapped
in newspaper, I didn't ask about the one

my mother left in the cupboard
as if she had forgotten what I vowed
always to remember

4th HONORABLE MENTION

Horseradish

By Scott Kinder-Pyle

It's a big mistake to make sauce of it. (Some would say a profound One.) A sauce would malign the vegetable. A sauce would masque The true nature of the thing in a malaise of dairy, apple cider and chives, Finely chopped. Please make them stop before it's too late.

A root like this must be wrenched, and crow-barred from the soil as if You were exhuming the petrified-sinew of a child's forearm, as if it were Your moral obligation in life to lift this root high into sea-salt air And shout, 'Proof! Proof! Proof of being put in place!'

The horseradish will do this for you by singeing the hair-follicles Of the nostril closest enough to get a whiff. It won't take much. You'll merely bring the shredded pelf to your face with some innocuous Utensil, and although you expect a sting of salt & pepper—Zzzaapt!—

An entire swarm of gnats will be consumed before you have a bite Of roast beef, and you'll breathe 'haste' and perhaps the pungent aroma Of refugees, fleeing persecution in dust and fear! But this will be here! And you will be stuck like the perfect specimen of a labor-camp Jew.

Or maybe you'll be the die-hard Atheist, who hates religion, but who Plants a flag where the root grows mythically. If that's you—the free-floating Astronaut, who hovers above the fray—the fumes alone will land you on One particular crater and you won't get away from the scent of burned-out

Campfire. It'll be as if you just missed the sacrifice of the lamb, slaughtered In stead of Isaac, and the embers will nest adjacent to your tastebuds, in the cleft between those various climes of sweet & sour pleasure—so that A flare of bitterness will always find you at night—Rescued!— or barely

Saved!—and you may even take a relaxed gander at the moon, sip an Imperial Pale Ale, and think nice thoughts about your family & friends, the joys of Meaningful work, and the state of the nation state—but it won't help you Ignore for long the terrestrial tinge on the tongue. Savor it, lingering