

2018 UNDERGRADUATE CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS

FICTION

Paul Pedroza, this year's judge, is the author of *The Dead Will Rise and Save Us* (Veliz Books), finalist for Texas Institute of Letters' Steven Turner Award for Best Work of First Fiction. His work has appeared in *Rattle*, *MAKE: A Chicago Literary Magazine*, *Palabra*, *BorderSenses*, *Confluencia*, *Inquiring Mind Buddhist Magazine*, and in the following anthologies: *Our Lost Border* (Arte Público Press, 2013), *New Border Voices* (TAMU Press, 2014), and *Mezcla 2* (Tumblewords, 2013). He received his MFA in Fiction from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Fifty-three writers submitted stories. Below are the winners and the judge's comments.

John L. Rainey Prize, \$1,000 (sponsored by Alpha Delta Phi Fraternity): Michelle Chang, "Audrey and Austin."

The pacing and language are what create the magic of the contrasts between near-archetypal characters that might've fallen flat if not for the writer's ability to characterize with strong detailing and patience. It's a writer story that isn't really about the writing. We feel the sting of mundane injuries and insults these two absorb, the monotonous self-flagellation of distracting oneself with thoughts and blank walls in order to deal. These two achieve a quiet sort of victory in shared books and late night comfort drinks. The layering effect of the narrative is finely done, achieving a great melding of opposites effect.

Josephine M. Bresee Memorial, \$400: Allison Neggers, "The Bachelor-Bachelorette Mail-In Application Girl Questionnaire."

Something like this can so easily fall into the trap of wit for wit's sake alone, and yet the writer unfolds a deep subtext of loss and grief beneath a genuinely funny and unique epistolary-type story. It also works as a send-up of the reality TV trope, which is quite an accomplishment in 2018. Like the best of these stories, this piece's strength is in well-crafted details that succeed in the flow of the narrative. By the end, readers feel for the narrator, a woman trapped in the pit of her loss, desperate for a path towards reconciliation.

Leah Trelease Prize, \$300: John Baker, "Martyr."

Loss and desire are at odds in this story, and the writer avoids the clichéd trappings of sentiment with vivid flashbacks that flesh out the focal character and Lucy, his long-gone former partner. The subtext is heavy: addiction, abandonment, recklessness. These effects are empowered through a well-paced story that flips from diner/bar scenes to flashback and back. The writer's use of details to express and redefine pain reminds me of Elizabeth Ellen. The focal character's obsessive detailing and rating of women in the establishment leads through his history into an inevitable failure to regain all that's been lost, and it works well.

POETRY

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, judge of this year's contest, is the author of the poetry collections *Personal Science* (Tupelo Press, 2017); *a slice from the cake made of air* (Red Hen Press, 2016); and *But a Storm is Blowing From Paradise* (Red Hen Press, 2012), chosen by Claudia Rankine as the winner of the 2010 Benjamin Saltman Award. Her other publications include the chapbook *cutthroat glammers* (Phantom Books, 2012); the artist book *Grand Dessein* (commissioned by Container Press), a mixed media artifact that meditates on the work and writing of the artist Paul Klee; and *Tierra Fisurada*, a Spanish poetry chapbook published in Argentina (Editoriales del Duende, 2002). Among her many honors are a 2017 Harvard University Woodberry Poetry Room Creative Grant and a 2014 National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship. An Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, where she teaches in the UMass Boston MFA in Creative Writing Program, Bertram was recently named the new director of the Chautauqua Institution Writers' Festival. She received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Fifty-six writers submitted poems. Below are the winners and the judge's comments.

Folger Adam, Jr. Prize, \$1,000 (sponsored by Alpha Delta Phi Fraternity): Eric Pahre, "How a Dog is Lost."

What drew me to these poems is a sense of lyric subjectivity that attempts to locate the self in emotional and physical place. In "Discovering Houses," the physical space of a house (and consequently the emotional space of the home) is explored through destruction: "Someone stepped on it. Someone/must have stepped on their house." In this poem a destroyed rabbit burrow is discovered by children; in a fit of anger a mother defaces the walls of a house with splattered paint, leaving her children to "make sense/of the shapes"; the wall of an improbable igloo is stabbed through with a father's machete with the statement "People live like this." Perhaps it is no wonder that the speaker of these poems wants to be lost. I kept returning to the poem "How a Dog is Lost" and was drawn in by the speaker's subtle emotional displacement. In it, the speaker desires to vanish: "I want to be lost/how a dog is lost: slipping collar/into dusk, leaving nothing behind." Yet the speaker does not want to vanish out of the world, but rather into a knowledge: "I want to know what the lost dog knows./The sound of parks at night/...what a house looks like/in the morning." Being lost is instrumental in order to find a place to return to, a fixed place of belonging, a home where the signs of journey, the "long hair thick with burrs,/all thorns," can be "brushed away." With all these different distortions of home and displacements, there is poignancy in the speaker's desire to be lost so that they can be missed, welcomed back, and loved.

Charles and Susan Shattuck Prize, \$500: Miranda Sun, "Centuries later and she has so many faces."

With the title and the first line "Centuries later and she has so many faces" this poem introduces the problems with princes and princesses and the repeated stories girls are told about what they should hope for—a prince: "you wonder how the prince could pick her/out at all. Her body a frame for story--/yarned in cloaks, catskin, clothes of coin/and

moonlight.” Yet these opening lines remind us that the stories are so often the same, the girl as instrument for the prince’s rescue in a story where mothers are evil crones and not caregivers. What is interesting is how the poem transitions away from the prince, an obvious focal point, to think more about the relationship between girls and mothers in these stories: “In this tale her mother/gives birth to a gourd and leaves her/in the woods, seed that she is, for a crown/to take away.” The poem invites us to ponder why, in the stories of princes and princesses, mother figures are absent or at odds with daughters. This poet writes not only with a strong sense of literary history, but also with notable attention to the sound of each line, as in the playful alliterative description “yarned in cloaks, catskin, clothes of coin/and moonlight.”

American Academy of Poets Prize, \$100: Autumn Schraufnagel, “Girlhood is Formed on the Playground with an Invitation to Play Double Dutch.”

What first struck me about this poem is its deceptive simplicity. Like the best poems, it rewards close reading and rereading. The poem tells the tale of a playground maven, the girl who knows how to play Double Dutch and dominates the court. She’s the one to teach—initiate—other girls into the game of jumping rope, the game of becoming girls and women. She knows a thing or two, or at least looks like she does with “peaking fuchsia bra straps/sticky smacker lips,/perched lazily on a hot bench.” It’s as if she is there at the peak of girlhood getting ready to transition into young womanhood and she knows the ropes: “she will show you the ropes,/show you the rhythm/and the way to weave body/through quick whipping cords.” Suddenly, it becomes clear. This girl, perhaps, knows more than she should. The playground seems less playground and more danger zone where a girl has to weave her body through a lifetime of oncoming threats. The more you play, the more inseparable you become from the game’s endless cycle: “grow/bound to the run and the ropes.” The grown girl initiates the final instruction: “Don’t stop now she says/Jump.” Double Dutch presages the reality of girls growing into women—the endless dodging and weaving among dangers, unable to stop, always jumping. It seems fun at first, but the game becomes one exhausting leap after another.

Honorable Mentions: John Baker (“On Fathers”) and Autumn Schraufnagel (“Softer”).