

CPS 2020 Lynn DeCaro Poetry Competition Results

Judge: Julie Choffel

**FIRST PLACE*

I'm Already Out

By, Allison Kijanka

I try to tell you
make it all the way out to the worn green couch
sit down next to you
you're watching the Red Sox

you ask me a question maybe or show me a play on the TV
but I can't hear you
I am watching a ball strike a bat
imagining how I too worry about being hit away from home

my chest tightens
and my mind races
I feel like I'm running the bases
but I'm already out

for some reason I can't step up to the plate

Glenn Burke was the first openly gay major league baseball player
his career ended at age 27
as homophobia crept into the clubhouse
onto the field
as he heard his own manager call him a faggot

there are days when I believe that you will still love me
those are most days but
I sit on the worn green couch
and you say how all of TV is so gay these days
and complain about how there is marriage equality now

can't they just be happy?

and I feel like Glenn Burke
watching the person who is supposed to support me the most
digging away at my identity
but you don't know that

I watch Pedroia swing and miss
wondering if you will strike out
when I throw you this curveball
hoping
like I have my entire life

you will be my biggest fan

Judge's Commentary

I was struck by the wonderful ways this poem uses time and language. So much coexists here: history and present tense, the repeated tension of waiting between them. The author uses the word out not only as a poetic device, a metaphor, but as an entrance to a conversation layered with implications of meaning. To be out in this poem, to be "hit away from home," is to be struck like the ball, to risk the unknown; but also, to fly, to be free, to be seen. The setting is the couch and the field, both of them "worn" and "green," tired but full of possibility. The conversation is conditional, hinging on try and maybe, between "I try to tell you" and "you ask me a question maybe or show me a play on the TV / but I can't hear you." So that for the speaker, it may be happening now or it is about to happen or it is always about to happen. The conversation is imagined, but also very real, or must be imagined in order to become real, which is the magic of self-actualization and also the magic of poetry. The beauty of this gesture, this layering of possibilities, allows them to all exist within the same moment. But there is a journey in this poem, too. At the end of this scene, the speaker is not the ball, but the pitcher at the heart of the play.

***SECOND PLACE**

Dream Fetish

By, Fiona Mucaj

In an office, some man plays God and knits.
(Replace office with stage, dance studio, childhood bedroom
and the story is the same, it's just someone else's.)
It doesn't matter which man—CEOs, vice presidents, representatives have all tried
their hand at making something awful.
Where one gives up
(a few deposits, a few drinks, a few women later and the company budget's already shot),
another takes over until it's long and crooked and ugly and
someone has to say *what the hell is that thing*
the way they say *what the hell are these numbers*
and tug until the whole thing's unraveled,
bills slipping shamefully out of pockets to turn themselves in.

The man throws his needle like a dart through the heart of a hummingbird,
its blood splattering on a boy's face.
They call in a specialist to read the splatter, find the dream in all of this,
but all she knows is physiognomy.

Your face, it's like a...like a peach blossom! Do you know how lucky you are? There's this celebrity with a face like that, I'm sure you know her...

A month later, the celebrity is found dead in her apartment. A suicide, naturally.

He tries to eat a peach that night, but he can only crush it in his hand.

In a dream, he drowns in the juice, winking his way into death.

He sleeps with one eye open from then on.

What a useless dream this one is, the boy thinks.

The man knits again, huffs, rips out the stitches, knits again.

What a meaningless dream this one is, the man thinks.

They seem to make eye contact through the open window,

but faces get too warped in dreams to ever really know.

Judge's Commentary

This poem surprises at every turn. Like a dream, it feels both authentic and strange, a paradox of meaning. It calls out our world, as "some man plays God," and throws wild shade to that world's tyrannical gestures, "like a dart through the heart of a hummingbird." But in the poem the waking world is also undermined by the more powerful logic of the dream, which is always more inventive. One thing conjures another, like the images of blood and peaches, shape-shifting and evasive. We are left with more questions than answers, perhaps, and the questions beg us to open our eyes. "Do you know how lucky you are?" the poem's "specialist" asks in the midst of a veritable nightmare, reminding us to be wary of the world we have been handed.

***THIRD PLACE**

river to river

By, Lauren Young

from the land which calls itself
the middle kingdom
to the land which blesses
shining seas.

in between those spaces,
i have laid my body.

sounds of two languages wrap
around my mouth—
do you understand?
translate until paragraphs become words
until words become letters
until it all
loses meaning. i've
forgotten how to
write my name with eastern brush ink,
already erasing tradition,
forsaking old blood.

my tongue becomes twisted by warped
tones, ribcage pierced
with the scent of herbal soup.

but there are things which cannot be put into words—
i do not lose those.
like the wrinkle in ancestors' hands
as thick lines of calligraphy are pressed into paper,
like the repeating clicking noises of chopsticks
when a family eats together,
like the gold and red embossed on envelopes
given to future generations.

i balance the duality,
weigh the hyphen in skin and hair,
and learn from both homes.

there are two rivers that lull lovers to sleep
and catalyze the growth of nature.

one lies across the ocean,
the other is only a few minutes away.

Judge's Commentary

This poem's meditation on identity starts off like an epic, crossing the globe from one land to another, before settling "between those spaces" its humble "i." The lower case puts the speaker on equal footing with the other unnamed places in the poem, beloved countries, rivers, and homes, creating a tapestry of belonging. What is informal stays malleable, open. The speaker shows us that they hold the tension of the "sounds of two languages," that their tongue "becomes twisted," but also that there are "things which cannot be put into words" that they "do not lose." We are left with this wonderful moment of peacemaking.

***HONORABLE MENTION**

Framed

By, Lucy Chomowicz

The best room at the Goodwill
is the one with the frames.

Thick tarnished brass frames,
shiny mirrored metal frames,
and dull splintered wooden frames
sit in piles and lean against walls.

I imagine the old puzzle woman

pulling pieces out of her hair and placing them
gently in the framed Monet landscape
amidst the passive sighs of her dogs.

The faded picture of the old bearded man
reminds me of my grandfather
after he left the war.

The poster of the first moon landing doesn't have a frame
at all. Instead, it sits crumpled in the corner,
the edges frayed and the ink fading.

On the top shelf is a canvas
with two blue handprints:
one big, one little. I smile.
Our childhoods must have been
very similar, I think.

The pictures in frames come and go.
Every week there are new ones to look at
and investigate.

Of all the frames my favorites are the ones
without anything inside.
No photo, or puzzle, or art
they sit, empty,
waiting to be taken home.

Judge's Commentary

In the unexpected setting of a Goodwill store, this poem takes up an essential task of poetry, elevating the mundane and overlooked. We see anew not only the frames themselves, but the images once deemed worthy of attention, and even their admirers, "the old puzzle woman / pulling pieces out of her hair." With fresh eyes on these subjects, the speaker does something marvelous and makes the poem itself a frame, helping us to see what's almost been a secret, that such things just "sit, empty, / waiting to be taken home."

***HONORABLE MENTION**

self portrait as anyone but myself

By, Maggie Munday Odom

as *her* in all her glory

as *him* in the midst of a hurricane

as *they* in the tattoo parlor, all the ones in between,

unapologetic inked into their tongues

as all of us

in the morning,
opening our eyes
to pronouns
the color of the sky at dawn.

I kiss
myself
goodbye,
for in this dictionary of a world
with more language than we can ever hold,
which of us
can fit
Inside
the box of

ourselves?

Judge's Commentary

Great poems are always ways of seeing, and the self may be the hardest thing to see differently; yet, that is the tremendous task of this poem. What makes it possible here are its small but fabulous leaps, in the shifting focus from "hurricane" to "tattoo parlor" to "pronouns" to "more language than we can ever hold." That last bit of it, with its emphasis on impossibility, challenges the reader outright to consider how else we could see, speak, be. The title at first may at first look like a rejection of the self, but we soon see it's a rejection of the one self, the static singular, and rejoicing in the dynamic 'we.'