



2018 poetry contest

passager

BELATED

All through the war
a silent understanding,
Daddy was away but
he'd be coming back,
they'd all be coming back,
and so we could play on,
enemy soldiers falling
by the dozens in our side yard
and when the lady at church
turned away with red eyes
it was some grown-up thing
we didn't need to notice.

And it came true
for a while, we were whole again,
riding the forever wave
but the boy in the next block
forgot and chased his ball
into the street. That year
I started to believe if I searched
faces carefully enough
there would be a sign
that would tell me
beforehand
which ones would be lost.

Michael Harty

CINDERELLA

It still has power to charm us and surprise:
the pumpkin coach, the glass or silken shoe,
the gala ball, the sternly warned curfew,
the vengeful doves that pluck out sisters' eyes.
Although they're ballet slippers that I hold,
I am no fairy coming at your call,
and you're no young girl eager for a ball,
instead a woman nine plus decades old.
Though kneeling at your feet much like the prince,
I have not sought a foot to fit the shoe,
but like the mother, who would hack and hew,
I cram your swollen foot until you wince.
And as by force I wedge your foot in tight,
I hear the clock begin to strike midnight.

Elizabeth Keyser

THE DEAD MUST BE EXHAUSTED

from all their conversations with us –
telling us how to cope in lines three cars deep
at the drive-thru bank or
when the boss barks at us
and the report was only an hour late.

My oldest says his granddad
rides along on his commute
advises him on workplace woes.
Says Don't get your dauber down.
Rome wasn't built in a day.

His brother says that same granddad
plays golf with him every chance he gets,
advises him on every shot.
Yells Adjust your grip!
Carry the clubface through!

Their sister, mired in grad school,
says her dad talks to her 24/7
Tells her *Trust yourself.*
I am proud of you.
Do it the easy way.

Even my mom is in on it,
whispers in my ear
about housekeeping, aging, life.
Says *Slow down.*
Don't just drop it; put it away.
Don't slouch!
Let your hair go gray.
Set a good example.
Say the right thing.

Pat Hurley

DON'T SWALLOW THE FLOODWATER

Something blew my mouth open in the Acme today
A Gucci bag on the checkout belt didn't want to donate
Not to Puerto Rico
Too faraway a hurricane
I saw the same thing happen on the news once
The wind ripped a pink roof from its shanty place
Corrugated metal hut
Walls leaning into each other just to stand up
House of cards
A typhoon in some tropical hell hole
The camera's eye followed the roof
Until it tumbled into the stream with everything else
Live news footage, dead dogs floating with diapers
You don't really want me to pen made up dream stuff
About a girl who ate flowers just to change the colors in her head
One bright turquoise window frame
One black bucket
One soccer ball
Green trousers
A flowered shirt
Moving clothes with water limbs

A little boy standing in a Nike shirt of gold
His village floating away behind him
Just Do It
Waving at a man with a beer gut
Standing in the middle of the appliance department of Sears

Virginia Watts



2018 Passenger Poet
Ginny Lowe Connors

A GIRL OF MAIDUGURI

*In Maiduguri, Nigeria, a place at war with Boko Haram,
people are afraid of girls and young women.*

The girl walks in silence. She doesn't want to kill anyone.
Walks toward the crowded market, but doesn't want to kill anyone.

She resisted the fighter who tried to marry her. Rape her. No!
You'll be sorry, he spat. No! She doesn't want to kill anyone.

Everything so heavy. Her memories. The heat. Explosives
wrapped around her. She doesn't want to kill anyone.

People fear young women now, especially those
who walk alone. They wonder, will she kill anyone?

Childhood games not long ago. Tinko Tinko, clap clap.
Fire on the Mountain, the circles move. No need to kill anyone.

She was a daughter, a sister. Who is she now? Captive? Cipher?
Almost-flame? Almost-ghost? Girl who doesn't want to kill anyone.

In the market, laughter. White teeth flashing. Baskets piled high
with yams, plantains, tomatoes. She doesn't want to kill anyone.

Her name began with G, but it's falling away. She's just a body
wired with a bomb. Who will help her? She doesn't want to kill anyone.

OH SAY, DID YOU KNOW

oh say, did you know
that katharine lee bates wrote america the beautiful
while on a cross country train trip in 1893
By the dawn's early light i read about this 33 year old english teacher
and i began to think about
how every school child learns francis scott key wrote the star spangled banner
but here I am in my seventh decade and never heard of katharine lee bates
and i realized that the reason we have
a "bombs bursting in air" and "rockets red glare" kind of song
instead of a "spacious skies" and "purple mountain majesties" kind of song is this:
how many women do you think were members of congress in 1931
when they voted on which kind of song we prefer?
And now which song we esteem
cleaves us wrong and right down the middle
splitting our fruited plains and alabaster cities
We watch and work and wait
at the twilights' last gleaming
for the man, not crowned with brotherhood, but peaked with an orange tiara
to crumble onto the amber waves of grain
and tumble into the shining sea

Ellen Schmidt

TELL ME

Tell me: does the mountain remember
being larded with blasting powder?
Is there caught in the throats of tapped-
out mines memory of the grind of iron claw
on granite, the throb of engines with their haul,
trod of oxen, grunt of men?

What of the weird and waiting silence
when the mineralogists had gone back home?
The rusted cranes, their bent and broken
backs, abandoned. Stone pylons hollow,
with their fire gone cold.
Is there, from these, no breath at all?

Tell me: does the river remember what is gone?
Night laughter from long-leveled shanties,
paddys, guineas, hunkies, polaks, and squareheads.
Some died, some stayed, most of them moved on.

As for the forests: do the killed wolves sing?
Do they mind their wild-haired beauty feared,
their good not jotted down?

Tell me: does the land remember what is gone?

Julia Carter Aldrich

WHEAT PENNY

Lincoln's young again on my oldest coin,
a 1919 penny, his profile smoothed
by decades of fingering. Oil and dirt

have tanned him like the farmhand
who raised the twin sprigs of grain
on the flip side. It's fitting to touch Lincoln

and those born that year, like my father-in-law,
another country boy, a big laugher
and a straight plower in the delta

wheat fields of Missouri, later, a pipe fitter
in St. Louis, hands always pressing metal
or else hiding peppermints deep in their grip

for grandkids. On a newer, brighter penny,
Lincoln is so war-wrinkled and sober
when I peer through a magnifying glass.

A coin that can't buy candy anymore
is its own lustrous world, saying all the right things,
like *liberty*, citified now, the back forty

amber waves succeeded by the Lincoln Memorial.
I spy him enthroned at the top of the steps,
waiting for tourists. I want to walk up

and pat his log-splitting, emancipating hand.
Abe was never meant for a temple,
but rather, a pants pocket, jingling

a loose-change tune for my wife's father.
At eighty-four he still gives us talks
on when to scatter grass seed,

and sharpens our mower blade with long
sparking strokes of a hand file, knuckles bulging,
so the stalks fall quick and clean.

Robert Lowes