

Poets & Writers

2019 Amy Awards

and

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Father as Adolescent, Smoking

It's early afternoon when you take
to the streets after school.
In this memory, your mother is home
smoothing the creases in your uniform
after sweeping the hen's bloodied feathers
from the kitchen, waiting until you're home
to crush the garlic for the mulukhiya leaves.
The block not too far from here
always smells of bodies—
the small hamama cooing,
beak breaking from insistent pecking,
rabbits hanging by their hind legs,
skin taut and burning orange,
and your own body, stifled by cotton,
by the ash already starting to spit out
its grey teeth in your lungs,
smoking behind the market again, sun-bent
fingers twitching like dust trying to forget
how your mother was crying
of a dream in which the hand
of every person you ever loved
was reaching for you from a river
whose current surged, their fingers swelling
in the progress, palms barely recognizable,
African Tigerfish swarming again and again.
In this memory, you watch the children yell
at each other as the women clip
shirts to the clotheslines, clouded suds
touching your shoes as the butcher across
from you chops a leg, holds it down by its ankle
on the board, saving the feeble bits of wet fat,
pressing between two joints he can't name
but knows how to crack apart in one breath,
the thought of which keeps the cigarette

still between your fingers, suddenly overthinking
the motion, hands hardening at the fact
that any bone can wither, fracturing under
the proper tool and with the right wrist motion
no matter its name. In this memory, you never
put the cigarette out, it hangs from your hand,
insubstantial, as small as the space between
two bones, between two dusty lips left open.

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Falling

Snow is falling to the earth, though here where I live
it is Spring. Outside my window, a man pushes his bike
across ice. I think I know loneliness
but then I feel it again—sharp like a knife that enters me
clean. I have never been stabbed, but once I came close.
On the subway, in the night, a man showed me his knife
to tease me. He reached for my bag. He reached
for my hair. I pretended he was not there, though I held
my backpack to my chest like a shield. In Prague
there are no fences at the ends of cliffs or the tops of hills.
Drunk at the edge of a beer garden at night, I let my feet dangle
in the air, then my calves, then my thighs. It was sensational, to look
down over a river cutting through the city at night, lights on the castle,
every small, winding street—I've loved men who bit me. My body
in their mouths—how many times have I seen the under layers
of my skin? In my former life, I was an octopus. Before that,
a priest. In this life, I ride the elevator up and down and up again
on my back so that my whole body can feel the feeling of falling.
It's true when you fall—the heart rises, physically, into the throat
as if to counter the doomed body.

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Mechanical Lake

Summer is for skipping stones, or at least, learning how to.
My mother teaches me how to flick my wrist to send stones sailing
over the silver sheen atop the blue water—or is it the other way
around? I never knew the difference, but mother did. She taught me
how to breathe deeply and how to remember the smaller things;
how to salvage the life left in them before they faded away.

Even though lakes aren't very deep, the life in them make it hard
to gauge the depth of the shore when the water's no longer clear.

The cattails arch low over shore, rustling with whispered sighs—
as if the catfish sloughing through the lake bed could hear them.

The lake bottom is a screen of shadows moving against sepia,
silent movies winding through film rolls that never seem to end.

There's never an obvious rhythm of ripples as the lake surface
shimmers with sunlight; the day is going to wane soon. So it goes.

I remember last spring when the forest around the lake was
cleared for a town too small to have a name on a map but

large enough to erect a factory that groaned with metal bolts
squealing, broken windows glittering, and pipes gurgling with

residue sloping into the river downstream. I tried skipping
stones the way that my mother taught me how to years ago

before the skies turned darker than the depths of the lake. They
sank into the water without so much as a splash. Life persisted.

Last winter, the silver slick of the lake iced over, fish frozen,
cattails bobbing still in the frigid air; but the factory kept

rumbling, kept sloughing residue into the grass instead.
The whole scene as quiet as movie reels ticking through a
black and white series—before you remember that it ends.
Last week, my best friend and I found twelve catfish
belly-up, eyes rolling backwards, whiskers twitching from
the current, floating into the lake. Their bodies so still
you would have thought they were mechanical, the cattails
so silent you would have thought it was a dream.

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About the Winners

Nadra Mabrouk is a poet from Cairo, Egypt. She is the author of the chapbook, *How Things Tasted When We Were Young* (Finishing Line Press, 2016). Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *RHINO*, and *The BreakBeat Poets Volume 3: Halal If You Hear Me* (Haymarket Books, 2019), among other publications. She is the recipient of the 2019 Brunel International African Poetry Prize. She is a content intern for the Academy of American Poets and is a graduate of the New York University Creative Writing Program, where she was a Goldwater Fellow. Her website is nadramabrouk.com.

Megan Pinto's poems appear or are forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *Indiana Review*, *Four Way Review*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. She is a Playmakers Playwright and Resident Artist at the Purple Rose Theatre Company, and an Artist in Residence at The Tank NYC. She has received scholarships from Bread Loaf and the Port Townsend Writer's Conference, and holds an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson.

Stephanie Tom is a Chinese-American poet and undergraduate student at Cornell University. Her poetry has either appeared or is forthcoming in *Rising Phoenix Review*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, *Sine Theta Magazine*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Porkbelly Press*, among other places. In addition, she has previously been recognized by the national Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the International Torrance Legacy Creativity Awards, and the international Save the Earth Poetry Contest. Her debut micro chapbook, *Travel Log at the End of the World*, is forthcoming from Ghost City Press in 2019. When she's not writing, she can be found exploring the great outdoors, dabbling in the performing arts, or drinking copious amounts of caffeine.