

2017 FINALIST FOR THE BRAM STOKER AWARD FOR SUPERIOR ACHIEVEMENT IN A POETRY COLLECTION ANNOUNCED

by David E. Cowen, Author of The Madness of Empty Rooms and The Seven Yards of Sorrow

The HWA has announced the finalist for the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in a Poetry Collection:

Frazier, Robert and Boston, Bruce – Visions of the Mutant Rain Forest (Crystal Lake Publishing)

Manzetti, Alessandro – No Mercy (Crystal Lake Publishing)

Simon, Marge and Turzillo, Mary – Satan's Sweethearts (Weasel Press)

Sng, Christina – A Collection of Nightmares (Raw Dog Screaming Press)

Wytovich, Stephanie M. – Sheet Music to My Acoustic Nightmare (Raw Dog Screaming Press)

There is an elegant mix to these works from poetry legends to legends in the making. I've asked each of the authors to share a poem from their books and thought this would be an excellent way to introduce these poets to those who may not have had the pleasure of reading their works. In order of the list above the nominees and their chosen poems are as follows:

Frazier, Robert and Boston, Bruce – Visions of the Mutant Rain Forest (Crystal Lake Publishing)

RETURN TO THE MUTANT RAIN FOREST

by Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier

Years later we come back to find the fauna and flora
more alien than ever, the landscape unrecognizable,
the course of rivers altered, small opalescent lakes
springing up where before there was only underbrush,
as if the land itself has somehow changed to keep pace
with the metaprotean life forms which now inhabit it.

Here magnetism proves as variable as other phenomena.

Our compass needle shifts constantly and at random,
and we must fix direction by the stars and sun alone.

Above our heads the canopy writhes in undiscovered life:

tiny albino lemurs flit silently from branch to branch,
tenuous as arboreal ghosts in the leaf purple shadow.

Here time seems as meaningless as our abstracted data.

The days stretch before us in soft bands of verdigris,

in hours marked by slanting white shafts of illumination.
At our feet we watch warily for the tripvines of arrowroot,
while beetles and multipedes of every possible perversion
boil about us, reclaiming their dead with voracious zeal.

By the light of irradiated biota the night proliferates:
a roving carpet of scavenger fungi seeks out each kill
to drape and consume the carcass in an iridescent shroud.
A carnivorous mushroom spore roots on my forearm
and Tomaz must dig deeply beneath the flesh to excise
the wrinkled neon growth that has sprouted in minutes.

We have returned to the Mutant Rain Forest to trace
rumors spread by the natives who fish the white water,
to embark on a reconnaissance into adaptation and myth.
Where are the toucans, Genna wonders, once we explain
the cries which fill the darkness as those of panthers,
mating in heat, nearly articulate in their complexity.

Tomaz chews stale tortillas, pounds roots for breakfast,
and relates a tale of the Parakana who ruled this land.
One morning the Chief's wife, aglow, bronzed and naked
in the eddies of a rocky pool, succumbed to an attack
both brutal and sublime, which left her body inscribed
with scars confirming the bestial origins of her lover.

At term, the massive woman was said to have borne a child
covered with the finest gossamer caul of ebon blue hair.
The fiery vertical slits of its eyes enraged the Chief.
After he murdered the boy, a great cat screamed for weeks
and stalked about their tribal home, driving them north.
His story over, Tomaz leads our way into the damp jungle.

From base camp south we hack one trail after another until we encounter impenetrable walls of a sinewy fiber, lianas as thick and indestructible as titanium cables, twining back on themselves in a solid Gordian sheath, feeding on their own past growth; while further south, slender silver trees rise like pylons into the clouds.

From our campo each day we hack useless trail after trail, until we come upon the pathways that others have forged and maintained, sinuous and waist high, winding inward to still further corrupt recesses of genetic abandon: here we discover a transfigured ceiba, its rugged bark incised with the fresh runes of a primitive ideography.

Genna calls a halt in our passage to load her minicam. She circles about the tree, shrugging off our protests. As we feared, her careless movement triggers a tripvine, but instead of a hail of deadly spines we are bombarded by balled leaves exploding into dust—marking us with luminous ejecta and a third eye on Genna's forehead.

Souza dies that night, limbs locked in rigid fibrogenesis. A panther cries; Tomaz wants us to regroup at our campo. Genna decides she has been chosen, scarified for passage. She notches her own trail to some paradise born of dream hallucination, but stumbles back, wounded and half mad, the minicam lost, a disk gripped in whitened knuckles.

From base camp north we flail at the miraculous regrowth which walls off our retreat to the airstrip by the river. The ghost lemurs now spin about our heads, they mock us with a chorus as feverish and compulsive as our thoughts. We move relentlessly forward, as one, the final scenes of Genna's disk flickering over and over in our brains.

In the depths of the Mutant Rain Forest where the water
falls each afternoon in a light filtered to vermilion,
a feline stone idol stands against the opaque foliage.
On the screen of the monitor it rises up from nowhere,
upon its hind legs, both taller and thicker than a man.
See how the cellular accretion has distended its skull,

how the naturally sleek architecture of the countenance
has evolved into a distorted and angular grotesquerie,
how the taloned forepaws now possess opposable digits.
In the humid caves and tunnels carved from living vines,
where leprous anacondas coil, a virulent faith calls us.
A sudden species fashions godhood in its own apotheosis.

Manzetti, Alessandro – No Mercy (Crystal Lake Publishing)

A Dream of Milk and Blood

Mr. Grillet closes his eyes
and sees a padded red leather door,
covered with small glass rhombuses
that don't reflect anything;
all you need is to get close,
to already be on the other side.
Jesus Christ, but what...what...
Mr. Grillet stutters, jaw dropping,
the last words fall from his lips,
crashing into crumbs around his bare feet.
But where are my shoes? And my toes?

What the man is seeing now
is nothing but the staircase of an old palace,
with an ancient wrought-iron spaceship in the middle:
the intricate cage of an elevator,
its sliding door a metal bellows

decorated with sharp bay leaves,
clanking back and forth, inviting him to enter.

Mr. Grillet, hesitant,
crosses the threshold of that strange cage
for birds without wings,
which promises to take him to Paradise.
However, he needs a coin
to start the elevator and discover his destination.

The man searches in his jacket pockets
and finds something tinkling at his fingertips:
A ten-cent piece from 1963,
bronze and aluminum,
with the engraving: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.

Mr. Grillet looks at those coins
instead of Marianne's profile, with her hair in the wind,
the French Republic in flesh, bones, and tits;
the rough face of his father appears,
the mustachioed collector who spent hours
cleaning his fucking antique coins.

You, bastard...even here?

The elevator swallows the coin
through its narrow bronze slit
like a thin, hungry Charon,
and suddenly starts, sinking into the bowels of the building.

The yellow light of the lamp explodes,
freeing a dense dark between the wet walls
of that infinite concrete groove
that runs like a train toward the lower floors,
passing them quickly, one after the other,
making the lit doorframes run uphill
as if they had a rocket tied to their backs.

The brakes of the flying cage are glowing
the same sparkles of a sad New Year's Day,

a sharp midnight of the past
awakened in the mind of Mr. Grillet,
who is held at the bars with his skin drawn upward
from the suction cup of speed.

Jesus Christ, stop...stop, please!

The light turns on again
and the elevator slows down, creaking,
with its wrought-iron floral decorations
warped, incandescent.

Mr. Grillet raises his eyes to the ceiling of the cabin,
and bites his lips until they bleed...

Hell, this is just a damn bell.

He saw that it isn't the lamp light now, up there,
but a big nipple from which
torrents of whitish liquid begin to gush,
like a living fire-fighting system.

Mr. Grillet, with his stomach in his throat
and his bowels twisted like a candy cane,
can take in his hands some drops
of that dense stuff that is dripping
from the luminous areola above him;
he tastes it, dipping his finger...*it's milk...*
it's filling the cabin and won't escape
through the openings and metal grids:
it remains there, against all logic,
and the level rises more and more.

Mr. Grillet feels the cold, pasty milk,
gurgling on his lips...

No, no one can die twice. So where am I now?

Then a face emerges suddenly in front of him,
a rancid, half-eaten face
decorated with tufts of red hair and algae braids,
with two stones buried in its orbits
and a moray eel nestled in the throat,

which bites the air, just above the surface
of that milky mass spreading over both.

No, you're not...Mom. You're coming from down there, right?

But there is no time for a response,
the moray eel, the new tongue of the woman,
charging the springs of its slimy coils,
dotted with small purple balls,
snaps to attack the man,
but the cabin arrives at the end of its race,
crashing at 120 miles an hour
on the hump of the slope.
The cage crashes, deforms,
folds down on itself like a steel leghold trap.
The hideous creature, back from the sea,
where it had been buried alive,
screams with laurel leaves and wrought-iron spears
stuck inside the eyes,
grinding bubbles and dissolving into a whirlwind of milk.

The elevator widens hips in an obscene way
and spits out all the damn liquid,
together with the body of Mr. Grillet
who slips inside that white current
like a whirling tadpole
until rolling in a dry, warm place
and slamming face-first into an old Persian carpet.
Then, he raises his eyes to see:
A poor furnished room in front of him,
and the silhouette of a nude man,
whose purple skin is decorated with thick veins,
who handles coins,
drooling all over them, giggling.

That kind of monster has a transparent belly,
inside it there is an orange liquid eldorado.
Southern Comfort, the same color,

the same sparkling glow of an anger so ancient.

Those bottles in a row, half empty,

on the table in the kitchen...

when Mr. Grillet was nine years old,

that was his usual landscape.

Then, behind his father's dirty tank top,

he sees a smaller face beaten to a pulp,

that red hair, the sadness and fear on her lap,

two invisible monkeys that pull down

her lips and the corners of her mouth.

And yes, she absolutely is

his mother, still alive, in a hot, dry place.

The Coltrane saxophone playing,

the creaking spine of his father,

of the springs of the double bed,

the statuette of the Virgin Mary

with a blue mantle on her shoulders

and a porcelain tear on her cheek.

That is the home of his childhood;

this must be Purgatory or Hell;

this is where the elevator brought him,

Mr. Grillet thinks.

The monster, the anarchist mutation of his father,

turns and stares at that man, his son

still floating on the marble floor.

The he gets up from the chair grunting,

and approaches him with his stomach

full of orange eldorado.

He kneels before his son,

watches him as a curious animal,

with his horse eyes and flies buzzing in his closed mouth;

he touches his hair, then grabs him by the jaw,

pulls a ten-cent coin from his pants

and inserts it into a thin slot on Mr. Grillet's forehead.

A cold crash in the brain.

Memories come back all together, lined up in the front row,
like a long frost, a napalm of snow that covers everything,
preserving what has passed, forgotten,
under the ground and under the water.

The sea, that day, fishing all together,
the bucket full of eels
and the heart that pinches of happiness, for once;
the smiling mother with red hair in the wind,
who empties the orange bottle in the sand.

What were you thinking, bitch, doing this?

The puddle dries while she spits blood everywhere
with her skull split in two...
by a stick encrusted with fossils and cerebral matter
next to her, tight in his father's hands,
who now is dragging her by the feet along the shore,
to the rotten pier,
and the sun that is floating down there.

A stone tied to her neck,
and the moray eels waiting for fresh food
in their underwater holes.

After the crash of memories,
Mr. Grillet's chest starts to open slowly.
The coin of the Monster has worked fine.
His flesh slides away, his muscles let go of their grip,
and his ribs are rising;
his chest opens like the shell of a mollusc
until the heart shows, there in the middle,
and continues to beat without a shield.

The monster opens its mouth, drooling,
releasing the flock of white flies
imprisoned between its curved fangs,
which fly away suddenly
in an explosion of dust.
Mr. Grillet can't move now.

He feels the fast-paced bites of his father,
up and down, inside his open, disarmed chest...
tongue slips like a brush,
licking the juice between his heart's valves,
and those old lips sucking his ventricles,
murmuring, during the short breaks:
Delicious.

Simon, Marge and Turzillo, Mary – Satan's Sweethearts (Weasel Press)

Dr. Linda Burfield Hazzard (1867 -1938)

Broth and an Occasional Teaspoon of Orange Juice

Dr. Hazzard had a clinic
administering audacious,
forward-thinking cures.

Cancer? Obesity? Hair loss? Mini-penis? Mental fog?
All healed by Dr. Linda's miracle regime.

The cure? So simple: starve!
Live on veggie broth just twice a day.

hair loss will happen anyway and cancer,
why that's a natural thing as well,
you get it fat, you get it thin –
A man's endowment is enhanced by starvation,
genitals appear much larger than they were -
as for mental fog—no common sense?
that's why you're here.

If you lacked the moral strength to fast,
Dr. Linda ran this sanitorium.

She locked you up
she took your cash
she stowed your jewels
she censored mail outgoing.

She only asked
about your bank account and deeds.

That only happened to my sister.
She lost more weight than I,
though both of us were under sixty pounds,
she was the first to die, but at least she got the treatment
that she was hoping for,
being able to squeeze into her burial gown,

the same dress she wore as an infant,

And if you tried to run
(that's if you had the strength),
a bullet to the head became a final cure.

It wasn't very sanitary
yet it did complete the job
to stay on diet: there are nutrients to be found
in the soil of one's grave,

To prove her panacea worked,
in the bathtub
of Wilderness Heights
her miracle cure resort,
which some called just Starvation Heights,
she did her own autopsies.

And confirmed her own diagnoses
just before cremation.

The process?

First: dehydration:
glucose used up
after just six hours in Dr. Linda's sanatorium.
You use ketone bodies to run your brain.
And so, as self conserves its fats:
eventually: delirium.

(However, if you'd ever used your brain
you wouldn't be in Dr. Hazzard's sanitorium.)

Yet it was beautifully advertized
with impressive credentials
even if she didn't have a medical degree,

Then, once your fats are all used up,
it's time for autophagy.
Think what that means:
auto=self
phagy=eat.
Self-cannibalism!

You're eating your own body!
(From within.)

I preferred not to think of that
when I noticed my eyes turning yellow
and I started pissing blood.

Next, marasmus: loss of energy, then putrefaction.
Kwashiorkor: oh, sure, you've read the news.

So, until the Williamsons got wind of her
and tried to rescue sisters Claire and Dorothea,
Dr. Linda's scheme worked like a charm.

It did indeed, but only one of us was saved
by smuggling a telegram beyond the gates of hell

From our detached and lofty vantage
it seems that Dr. Linda was a quack,
or even worse, a predator.

But then, she chose to cure her own complaints
by the same anorexia she prescribed
to her unwary invalids:
and died a withered, bloated husk.

Justice for all who perished, if such a thing can be.

--Mary Turzillo & Marge Simon

Christine Sng, A Collection of Nightmares (Raw Dog Screaming Press 2017)

EXQUISITE

You're exquisite.

Stony-white and frozen,
Parched lips curled
In a delicate snarl—
Medusa caught you
Unexpectedly
That day in her town.

Like the snow queen,
You stand tall, beautiful,
A lone figure, still,
In the rage of winter's furor.
Corpuscles flash frozen, all
But oblivious to time's spiral.

Ten millennia later,
You stand proud
In the heart of my garden,
Immune to hail and rain,
The hatred in your eyes
Wilts the flora in your plane.

Yes, you'd inherited that
From her gaze.
Very formidable,
I must admit.
And today,

I offer a gift.

See my enemies before you
Silent on the ground,
A nail in each crown.
Beneath you,
They blacken and shrivel,
Fading into the ground.

Gorelets ooze,
Swirling beneath your feet,
A pink milky pool, seeping
Into your stony flesh.
Corpuscles revived
In an amalgamated alchemic mesh.

And then you take a step.

Wytoovich, Stephanie M. – Sheet Music to My Acoustic Nightmare (Raw Dog Screaming Press)

When I Promised Him Murder

Whiskey stained my notebook, he stained my lips
I pushed my hair behind my ear, thought about pulling it up,
 About letting the ravens out
But I sat there, legs crossed, stockings ripped
My curls settling on my shoulders
While I played with the ring I won in a bet
Two years ago from a bar down the street.

And

The lights were down
The people were watching
 And yet I couldn't stop remembering
 Couldn't stop seeing how this would play out:
 Him pressed against me: my hand on his cheek.

But

Music filled the bar, his tongue, my mouth
I wrote poetry to the sound of his vocal chords,
 lyrics to the melodies he'd strum on my body
And when he walked away, hair down, body tense
I'd smile with the vibrations that danced in the room
My words searing, my phrases piercing, him unknowing
As they slid down his throat like a reverse-siren song

And

The lights were down
The people were watching
 And yet I couldn't stop remembering
 Couldn't stop seeing how this would play out
 Breathless and panting: my hand on his cheek

And

Death stained my fingertips, his blood, my hands
I smoothed out my dress, reapplied my lipstick
 Careful to get the perfect shade of red,
The bar was closing, but I was already gone,
My venom toxic, a well-hidden drug.

And

The lights were down
The people were watching
 And yet I couldn't stop remembering
 Couldn't stop seeing how this would play out
 Stiff and sorry: my hand on his cheek.
