

**POETRY**

- First prize: *Parallax*, by John E. Tranter
- Second prize: *Tar Flowers*, by Terry Larsen
- Third prize: *Student House*, by Sally McInerney

**SHORT STORY**

- First prize: Not awarded.
- Second prize: *Miss Jackson*, by Peter Ross
- Third prize: *Ants and Elephants*, by Jon Clarke

**martin johnston's  
notes  
on the  
union recorder**

**PARALLAX**

in the frenzy ward, where words are flinted air  
the loony hops about, lip-strung  
trying the taste of light, clutching his hair —  
all electric in a bathe of fright, the lash  
of self helps his lips stumble out a song  
his face boils up into a rash

here the knowledgeable doctor slips around  
knocking his deadly bag against the walls,  
fingering the nurses, hearing the sound  
of scrabbling murder in the corridors  
he would love to flee the lawn, the calls  
of random birds, hawk of mangled whores

left here in a reference of unease,  
trolling the spare parkland for an easy lay.  
the loony swelters in the kitchen, shelling peas  
the daylight rapes him everywhere, he goes  
lank and white from room to room, stuttering gay  
homage to peas spelling their linear mystic prose

lock me up, he wishes, in the thick  
dark of insulin, spangle my limbs with shock;  
how long I know the solemn slumber of the sick  
prick stuck in his own brainlock trap,  
riddled with spirochetal clap, the knock  
and bubble of the greasy water's slap

slap against the sandstone block—  
all the signals tangle in the knotted brain,  
for all the sweaty sleep, for all the cock  
spews a raucous warning to the sun, the faulty loop  
wheels and whistles in the rusty mind. pain, pain,  
hold off back a little, let me drink the clean sloop

tilting the water like a pale  
and wholesome lady. memory whispers through:  
someone visits me, I know, who loves me well  
whose eyes are rich with fear, whose lips lead  
part of me out of this night, hear, forgive, true  
my eyes bleed truly from the broken head.  
pity me in the kingdom of the dead.

# LITERARY COMPETITION

**is the loud lament of the disconsolate chimera**

Over the past week or so I have been obtaining some relief from my own troubles by the salutary expedient of tiptoeing stealthily through the sad, twilight world of the stricken wan-faced throngs of university poets.

It has been a chastening experience, and in all humility I can only promise never again to consider myself distressed, society hostile, or the fates importunate.

Consider:

A malicious Power has so ordered their existence that the only emotional range permitted these unfortunates is that contained between the extremes of being sad on the beach and being sad at home. Within these limits, the more moderate engage themselves in being sad in the street, while two or three of the rebellious sort are even sad elsewhere. It is rarely clear what they are sad about.

What does seem clear is the reason for the paucity of sadness outside certain clearly defined areas: it is that this lachrymose world is flat. Somewhere near its centre is a large cluster of sordid little rooms, many adorned only with a flagon of wine, long sour; between these urban humpies curls a tracery of lanes and alleys (cats, weeds, garbage cans) leading eventually, should one find the way, to one vast perfectly circular beach, beyond which a large expanse of water stretches to the edge of the world, contriving however, owing no doubt to its almost perpetual centripetal turmoil, not to fall over the edge. Beyond the edge itself, stretching infinitely in all directions, is an opaque greyish fog (known to the illuminated as the **angst**; the word, however, is tabu to the laity) which periodically sweeps violently over the sea and through the cracked windows of all the little rooms. This makes the poets even sadder than they were before.

The traveller through this dismal land will frequently observe huddles of writhing bodies upon the beach; but should he deem himself the lucky voyeur at an orgy, he will be disappointed to find most of them with their backs resolutely turned to each other, scribbling vers libre in the sand about the fact. One hears the occasional pop of coitus interruptus. Here and there one does observe a couple, thickly wreathed in a covering of wild verbiage (part of the local flora) that hangs about them in a noumenal sort of way, ostensibly making love: to confirm this, one of them eventually emerges with an eldritch howl of "Fuck! Seaspray; Dawn! Life! Blood! Beaches!" and scampers, gibbering, off to the nearest typewriter.

Otherwise, and when not moping at home, the denizens of the Poets' Earth tend to spend the greater part of their time wandering through the streets in a vague and disconsolate manner, pausing frequent-





THE POET LARSEN  
AU NATUREL

### TAR FLOWERS

Tar flowers is what grows best in Newtown  
tar flowers in concrete gardens  
where we draw our best pictures  
with bits of tile that fell  
off Mrs. O'Leary's toilet roof  
And we even draw real grass  
to walk on  
and lie in up to your ears  
But ladies wash away the gardens in the mornings  
So we have to grow them again to nite.

an original idea in their heads, nor an original turn of phrase in their conceptual vocabularies, a great many of the entrants in this competition write quite passable verse. A fairly cursory study, however, of what happened to metaphysical verse towards the end of the eighteenth century, or Victorian verse when it turned Georgian, ought sufficiently to indicate that this isn't nearly enough.

What seems to be lacking is any sort of sense of what poetry is all about. Behind the fibro facade of the neograveyard school, which still pokes out a maggot-ridden finger here and there among the papier-mache cypresses, or the Night Piece group (wriggling on a Procrustean hammock between Kit Smart and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night") there lurks, like something out of a Japanese monster movie, the stimulus-response concept of poetry: something sends you emotionally, so of course you write poetry about it. Which may be all very well in a cathartic way, but doesn't come within spitting distance of making the poetry poetry.

A literary competition (for example) is not a convenient means of measuring what Fred feels about Madge as against what Ethel feels for Ocker; or even against what Blue feels about comparative religion or ontology. It is, ideally, a means of working out which of them has best transposed an experience (any experience) into a particular, and very difficult, mode of expression. Poetry is, among other things, a craft.

### iii: revision (re-vision)

In other words, a poem must be more than a Pavlovian transcription into verse form of the quivering of one's brain patterns during some emotional moment which is in itself irrecapturable; or of one's disgruntlement with society or individuals, or of an interesting ambiguity or a groovy image that happened to come to mind. This is one of the cruxes of the matter. A poem is (once again, among other things) a formal verbal approximation (and not an equivalent: language is too highly connotative for that) of a whole complex of things, whether one so intends it or not. With its individual properties (as opposed, I mean, to prose: assuming that the term "poem" actually means anything, which is, I concede, a contentious point), its particular para- or meta-logical structure, through connotations, allusions, the inter-relationships of its elements, all the processes, the twists and turns and agonisings involved in the thinking and in the writing of it, a poem is an unique object which

ly to consider such natural phenomena (mostly storms, rain, mist, caverns, ruins, corpses, trees looming or, again, threatening, and items of livestock) as the area has to offer. Every now and then, both outdoors and in, they languish—a technical term denoting the state of emotional detumescence which is regarded, for ritual reasons, as being most conducive to the writing of verse.

Storms, as implied above, thud and blunder their way from stanza to cringing stanza; it is very rarely day, and the only seasons known are winter and the end of spring.

Such is their dispensation.

### ii: mumbo-jumbo will hoo-doo you (?)

And what I would dearly love to know is just exactly why does it have to be? Why is it that the prodigious majority of student writers of verse (doubtless quite unexceptionable people in all other ways) labour so painfully under the curious misapprehension that certain things are inherently poetic?

And, should one be forced wearily to accept that this, for some abstruse reason, just can't be helped, then why has the general opinion as to what these things are, been formed apparently, under the influence of "The Sorrows of Young Werther." American lady poetasters with three names and a penchant for howling genteely at the moon, and the more flowery sort of desk calendars?

I would be the last (well, almost the last) to claim that good romantic poetry can't be written nowadays, or even that good poetry can't be written (a la Middle English lyrics) by the judicious manipulation of stock elements. What worries me is the presumption that good poetry can't be written any other way.

Two things about computers: they can't play chess very well, and they're unlikely to get into the anthologies. But I'd be happy to bet Sydney Harbour Bridge against the selected works of Shadwell that a halfway decent computer, programmed with a few simple formulae and a repertoire of fairly simple verbal tricks, could have written between seventy and eighty per cent. of the entries in this poetry competition with half its circuits tied behind its back.

In parenthesis. Marianne Moore has written superbly about steamrollers and flower catalogues; Rilke was, and Ted Hughes is, able just to look at animals and think a bit; closer to home, Andrew Huntley has written for the Recorder poems of great gusto and elegance about absolutely nothing. And why not?

It is not, I feel, a question of lack of talent. A geneticist would have to be pretty hot stuff to convince me that there is a good biological reason why one group (chronological, topological, anything) of poets writes better poetry than another. And, granted that there appears to be not



ought to express whatever it expresses (and of course the expressed can, here, be the expressing: that is the poet's privilege) in the only possible, the ineluctable way. I see no reason why one should settle for less. And I don't mean the critic. I mean the poet. In-at-one-end-out-at-the-other just won't do.

Many of the poems entered for this year's literary competition contained excellent lines. Some (but far fewer) embodied genuinely interesting ideas. Neither of these implies a good poem. To my mind, about half-a-dozen of the many scores of entrants actually wrote poems. For the rest: nobody seemed to understand the importance of sound as a technical device in poetry. This may derive from year after tedious year of being told about alliteration and assonance in Keats' "Ode to Autumn," but it's a pity all the same. No-one seemed capable of qualifying or particularising a statement or an image except by heaving in great ungainly clumps of adjectives. Very few seem to regard the verb as anything other than a disagreeable grammatical necessity. Most of those who wrote in rhyme appeared to be unaware that one can use rhyme rather than being used by it. It was a common delusion that a metaphor needs, for God's sake, to be explained somewhere else in the poem. The most prevalent concept of free verse must have been that it consists of writing a hefty slab of prose and then dividing it into lines by means of sticking a pin into the text here and there. Most of the entrants I take to be of the opinion that there is such a thing as poetic language; those who escaped that booby-trap tended to say "fuck" every second line, with "cunt" interspersed in between, presumably as counterpoint. And, on the same subject, it seems to have occurred to almost no-one (there are one or two honourable exceptions) that the word "fuck" is a legitimate part of the English language, and is a perfectly valid way (indeed, according to Wayland Young, the only valid way) of speaking of the activity which seems to have precipitated about half the poems in the first place. It need not always be used as punctuation, or, in R. P. Blackmur's phrase, "as gesture." Finally, granted that there may well be only a few things that the poet can talk about (cf Seferis: "I am a tiresome old man who keeps talking about the same thing"—but oh for our very own Seferis!), there is still, quite literally, an infinite number of ways of talking about them. Cavafy, Lowell, Borges, Po Chu-i, Morgenstern, Trakl, Akhmatova, Rilke, Davie, to take a particularly heterogeneous set of good to great poets, have essentially the same preoccupations—time, loneliness, alienation, love, futility, and so on—but though the hand of cards is the same, the bidding and manipulation aren't. One need not accept other people's patterns of being.

#### iv: beyond the community of dreams

Concerning the best poems in the competition. The poem that most appealed to me personally was Terry Larsen's "Tar Flowers"; nevertheless there seemed to be

no question that first prize had to go to John E. Tranter.

Mr. Tranter was by far the most rounded, the most complete poet of the lot: he has an extraordinary technical mastery but manages not to be controlled by it, and the poems he submitted showed a remarkable range of expression. Although "A Voyager Returns / Psychomimetic Paraboloid" was both the most ambitious and probably the most flawless of his poems, I have awarded first prize to his violently powerful "Parallax." Here he has managed to sustain a difficult rhyme scheme, a metre that tempts towards facility and a diction that just manages to be successfully flexible throughout, while still creating a poem/object/experience that batters at the mind. I am not sure that he doesn't overdo it here and there, in such lines as "... for all the cock / spews a raucous warning to the sun," and I think that such rhymes as "sloop" in the same stanza are forced, but overall I feel (and such criticisms are minor, anyway, even carping) that "Parallax" is a fine enough poem not to be damaged by comparison with such poems as Lowell's "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" and Anne Sexton's "Ringing the Bells" or "Music Swims Back To Me."

Despite all which, the one entrant whose poetry I wish I could emulate is Mr. Larsen. His achievement is too uneven to justify first prize, but "Tar Flowers," to which I have awarded second prize, strikes me as being a near-perfect poem of its kind. What Mr. Larsen seems to have is a rare (perhaps an instinctive) feel for connotation. To analyse a poem as seemingly simple as "Tar Flowers" is an immensely difficult task: critics are still struggling over Blake's "Tyger, Tyger" and "The Sick Rose." Mr. Larsen has somehow contrived to "break bitter furies of complexity" and create a beautiful, evocative and genuinely sad (and joyful) poem with the sparest of means.

Third prize goes to Sally McInerney's "Student House." Frankly, having seen earlier poems of Miss McInerney's, I was disappointed. Not that this is inferior; but she seems to be stagnating, manipulating the same images, the same themes, round and round in little circles. One of the ghosts in all her houses is Walter de la Mare; another is the rest of Miss McInerney. Nevertheless, "Student House" is a well realised poem, with moments ("We felt their life was stored inside a bulb, / we were ephemeral as flowers") so good as to justify the over-mutedness, and the reliance upon familiar themes, of the rest. Miss McInerney is unquestionably an excellent poet, but perhaps if she stretched a bit...?

Of the other poems, Angela Giblin's "Fuschia," Mark Goodsirra's "Long since ago . . .", Siri Lane's "The Meeting" and Jon Clarke's "All without a wisp of smoke" came very close to the prizewinners. Behind these there was a sort of continental shelf of six or seven other poems and then, alas, the abyss. □

## SHORT STORY

There were only four entries, and the standard didn't seem nearly high enough to justify the award of a first prize. Both the prizewinners were quite competently written; Jon Clarke's "Ants and Elephants" degenerated rapidly after a promising opening into gratuitous cleverness and gimmickry, but displayed a good deal of wit and was always urbane and cleanly written; Peter Ross's "Miss Jackson," while frequently awkwardly expressed and overwritten, and too prone to lapse into Laurentian life-and-deathism, had more depth of thought and was less pretentious; also far more unified in tone and subject. I felt it to be slightly the better of the two. Both of the remaining entries were very disappointing. □

[SEE OVER]

## STUDENT HOUSE

### Wood fires in winter.

We had no light, the globe had gone; and so in that high flickering room we were surrounded by a company of ghosts whose scraps we found — vases of pink glass, lace crumbling at a touch. They never left us. In the wild garden I planted bulbs, and a thousand more came up. A dead stick flowered, and wizened citrus trees offered us small dry lemons. Remember the tiny room with its hospital bed, its fibro walls that let the wind and rain in. Down on the harbour the ships called out, all night floors creaked, wind tried the doors, a ragged curtain moved against the moon, we heard the tall grass breathe outside the window. We were always interlopers in that house. Shadows moved on the stone verandah, the ghosts winding old clocks and watching over the blind frangipani limbs of winter. We felt their life was stored inside a bulb, we were ephemeral as flowers. We left, and heard inside the house a door blow shut forever.