



It Could Be Verse: The 2005 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry

Richard Flynn, Kelly Hager, and Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

Winner: Marilyn Nelson. *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem*. Asheville, NC: Front Street Books, 2004.

Honor Books: Helen Frost. *Spinning Through the Universe: A Novel in Poems from Room 214*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.

JonArno Lawson. *The Man in the Moon-Fixer's Mask*. Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2004.

Walter Dean Myers. *Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices*. New York: Holiday House, 2004.

Allan Wolf. *New Found Land: Lewis and Clark's Voyage of Discovery*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2004.

In her introduction to the 2004 edition of *The Best American Poetry*, Lyn Hejinian makes clear that she doesn't "believe in 'bestness.'" She initially resisted editing the collection, only agreeing after she had come to see her job as a cartographer of sorts, one responsible for giving readers a taste of the "dynamic, ever-changing" terrain of poetry as "a site of perpetual transitions and unpredictable metamorphoses." She writes, "there is no end point in poetry. Indeed, American poetry has always been so full of energy and inventive that it is impossible to define poetry once and for all or to delimit its space. What is or isn't a poem? What makes something poetic? These questions remain open" (9). Her anthology—like all the collections in the *Best American* series—completely ignores children's poetry. Even the most radically inclusive poets and critics of poetry tend to ignore children's poetry and leave it outside

the world of “real” poetry, that is, poetry for adults. So it is especially heartening—and crucial—that 2004 marks the inauguration of *The Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry, a continuation of *Signal*’s venerable award, which, sadly, ended in 2001 shortly before the journal ceased publication with its one hundredth issue in 2003. Unlike *Signal*, which considered only books of poetry published in Great Britain, *The Lion and the Unicorn* Award focuses on North American poetry. But like Hejninian’s anthology and the *Signal* poetry award, this new award similarly resists the idea of “bestness” and focuses instead on excellence in children’s poetry. We are not choosing the “best” book of poetry for children. We would find it hard to choose between Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust* (1997) and Stephen Mitchell’s *The Wishing Bone* (2003) had they had been published the same year. Both are excellent, but which is best?

In reading the North American poetry for children published in 2004, we were faced with similar questions, though we did arrive at a winner: Marilyn Nelson’s *Fortune’s Bones: The Manumission Requiem*, a moving collection that we unanimously selected as the most interesting and complex of the books we received from publishers. The four honor books are not ranked, for they are all so different, so satisfying and impressive that ranking was impossible. These books suggest how diverse and multiple poetic expression can be as they participate in an array of poetic modes and traditions, each working from quite different aesthetic assumptions: there are lyrics, elegies, narratives (two call themselves “novels”), historical narratives, literary nursery rhymes, and, of course, light verse. We did wish there were more formally experimental works. The one collection of concrete poetry (*Technically, It’s Not My Fault*, by book and magazine designer John Grandits) wasn’t an especially interesting example of the form. Our list of finalists is heartening, nonetheless. The state of children’s poetry in North America isn’t as depressingly limited as most of the seventy-seven books we received might lead one to believe. However, while we resist easy notions of “best,” we still find pretty useful the notion of “bad.”

Our winner, *Fortune’s Bones*, and our four honor books forecast a promising and stylistically diverse future. We have Helen Frost’s *Spinning Through the Universe: A Novel in Poems from Room 214*; JonArno Lawson’s *The Man in the Moon-Fixer’s Mask*; Walter Dean Myers’s *Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices*; and Allan Wolf’s *New Found Land: Lewis and Clark’s Voyage of Discovery*. One could also say that we have *only* five excellent books of poetry. Frankly, as book upon book arrived and we began our discussions, we initially despaired. Reading the

bulk of what publishers consider poetry worthy of consideration for this award, we feared that the world of children's "poetry" was in serious trouble.

Again, the year's best books—the *real* books—are impressive. Too many of the books we received suggest that publishers often don't even know what poetry is. Our favorite misguided submission comes from Maple Tree Press: *Are You Psychic? The Official Guide for Kids*. Aside from this informative, self-help title, we also received a number of "novels-in-prose" (a new term that we might adopt to distinguish such texts from the increasingly popular genre of novel-in-verse), picture books whose lined prose somehow must have looked like poetry to the junior editors who sent them to the awards committee, collections of folktales, you name it. What we weren't receiving were many collections of poems that looked like serious contenders.

As we have suggested, we did receive several collections that, in different ways and to varying degrees, embrace the hybrid genre of novels-in-verse. The popularity of this genre is worth noting, not only because it continues a vibrant tradition of poetry that can be traced from the epic to the encyclopedic contributions of the Victorians (Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* [1857] and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* [1868–69]), but also because much poetry written for children today attempts to continue this tradition. Too often the YA equivalent of Lifetime Television for pre-teenagers (a category into which Linda Oatman High's *Sister Slam and the Poetic Motormouth Road Trip* and Kathi Appelt's *My Father's Summers: A Daughter's Memoir* regrettably fall), they fail to heed Ezra Pound's dictum, "Go in fear of abstractions. Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose" (5). Two notable exceptions to this tendency are Helen Frost's *Spinning Through the Universe*, subtitled "a novel in poems," and Allan Wolf's *New Found Land*, proclaimed as "a novel" on its dust jacket.

The poet who chooses this form fashions an over-arching narrative, making explicit the links between the individual poems and foregrounding the teleological structure of the whole. By highlighting the paths that lead from one poem to another, verse-novelists draw attention to the book as a constructed whole, with a pattern and a logic to its design. Similarly, verse-novels guide the reader from one poem to the next, privileging the plot of the collection and celebrating the way in which one poem leads (or doesn't seem to lead) to the next. It could be argued that novels-in-verse formalize the way we read a book of poetry: highlighting themes and motifs and articulating the connections between poems and the

patterns at work in the book. It could, however, also be argued that the form teaches us only how to read a collection of lyric poems arranged as a chronological narrative and not the many collections that are arranged otherwise. We all know how crucial—and exciting—it is to find poetic connections and patterns. Harold Bloom defines criticism as “the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem” (96) and Robert Frost reminded us fifty years ago, in “The Prerequisites” that “a poem is best read in the light of all other poems ever written” (815). Novels-in-verse encourage you to look for those connections. While *Here in Harlem* and *Fortune’s Bones* are not, it is true, verse-novels, Myers and Nelson do, in their explicit emphases on the formal and thematic kinship that exists among the poems that make up their collections, reveal the narrative inclinations of their books.

This genre is, unfortunately, too often abused; this year’s examples by High and Appelt, along with earlier attempts by Mel Glenn, Sonya Sones, April Halprin Wayland, David Levithan, and Steven Herrick are almost entirely made up of verse that seems to have been composed according to the principle of “chopping your composition into line lengths” (4), which Pound so scathingly warns against. It is also true that the vast majority of teen novels-in-verse seem to exist in profound ignorance of what is excellent in “all other poems ever written,” that while they draw attention to the connections between the poems in their own individual collections, they do not enter into conversation with the tradition outside the narrow confines of that textual world.

We also received many collections in the distressingly popular genre of parody. Sometimes such efforts even win recognition, so who can blame the publishers for trying? John Scieszka and Lane Smith’s *Science Verse* is neither good science nor good verse, and yet it has won a Parents’ Choice Award and has been named a New York Public Library Title for Reading and Sharing and an American Library Association Notable Book. It does feature a version of Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees” that is a marked improvement on the original:

I think that I ain’t never seen
A poem ugly as a spleen. (n.p.)

Funny, yes; irreverent, true; but why the second line doesn’t read “A poem *as* ugly as a spleen” escapes us. Perhaps the goal is to make the meter as ugly as the spleen. However, if the rest of the book is any indication, it’s just sloppy. But it does come with its own CD (as did several of the books—including the wonderfully titled but ultimately disappointing *When Cats Go Wrong*, written and performed by Norm

Hacking: “Life with a naughty kitty / Isn’t very pretty / So I sing this mournful song / About when cats go wrong” [n.p.]).

Some of the books are so bad that they’re good. *Limericks from the Heart (And Lungs!)*, for instance, did not make our short list. But it is, nonetheless, one of the most delightful—sometimes confusingly so—books of poetry we received, a mammoth collection of 335 anti-smoking limericks by former wrestler Lanny Poffo. The book is terribly ugly. The cover features a cartoonish band of bodily organs dressed in Renaissance costume (though one is, oddly enough, holding a turn-table) as they walk away from a castle and toward a sign that reads, “Welcome to Ye Hamlet of Freshaire / ‘no butts about it.’” The poems inside the book are just as tacky as the cover. What makes the somewhat hit-or-miss limericks so interesting, though, is their shameless morbidity. Poffo revels in the suffering of smokers, gleefully describing their slow, painful deaths:

A smoker could not pay his rent,
His habit took every last cent.
The money this whacko
Has spent on tobacco
Has bought him an oxygen tent. (102)

It’s enough to make you reach for a cigarette.

The amount of bad children’s verse published in 2004 has us worried that publishing operates according to Gresham’s law (the bad drives out the good), and we are quite certain that it operates according to Sturgeon’s law (ninety percent of everything is crap). Much of the innovative poetry for adults—poetry like that championed by Lyn Hejinian—is published by small, independent, or university presses. Unfortunately, few small presses publish children’s poetry. As a result, the most important small press distributor (aptly named Small Press Distribution) does not even distribute children’s poetry. As our list of honor books suggests, the best books of children’s poetry, too, often come from independent houses or employee owned and operated houses such as Candlewick: Lawson’s *The Man in the Moon-Fixer’s Mask* is published by Pedlar Press; Myers’s *Here in Harlem* is produced by Holiday House; Wolf’s *New Found Land* is a Candlewick book; and Nelson’s *Fortune’s Bones* is one of Front Street’s always impressive creations.

The judges this year tend to privilege musical poetry, poetry that feels good in the mouth, on the tongue, and in the ear. Lawson’s *The Man in the Moon-Fixer’s Mask* is eminently satisfying, more musically pleasing than anything else we received, although Nelson’s verse has a subtle

music that works to a different effect. Lawson's poetry demands to be read aloud, like the best (and most whimsical) poems by John Ashbery and A. R. Ammons and James Tate. But there is also the music of a less frenetic Dr. Seuss, a less outrageous Edward Lear—though the latter's touch of melancholy is still there—coloring the verse darker shades of purple. *The Man in the Moon-Fixer's Mask* (especially its animal poems) is reminiscent of classic mid-century American children's poetry, and of Theodore Roethke and John Ciardi, in particular. The book even looks like a mid-century collection; many of the poems have no illustrations, and those that do are tastefully complemented with Sherwin Tjia's simple yet bold line drawings.

"The Purpose of the Porpoise," for instance, needs no illustration, for it is as lovely a little poem as you can imagine, its name recalling Ciardi's first book of children's poetry, *The Reason for the Pelican* (1959). The language, too, suggests the craftsmanship and playful energy of Ciardi, particularly in its comic use of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme. It's a veritable case study of aural effects:

The purpose of the porpoise?
Its preposterous propensity
for spinning on its nose odd props,
regardless of their density. (33)

This preposterous, nose-spinning beast immediately calls to mind a creature from Ciardi's *Someone Could Win a Polar Bear* (1962): the "Hairy-Nosed Preposterous" that "looks much like a Rhinosterous." (52). The lineage is direct, as Ciardi's "Rhinosterous" anticipates perfectly Lawson's "Rhinostrich." Similarly, "To Catch a Witch" recalls Roethke at his most devilish. In "Some Remarks on Rhythm," Roethke quotes his favorite nursery rhyme:

Hinx, minx, the old witch winks!
The fat begins to fry!
There's nobody home but Jumping Joan,
And father, and mother, and I. (63)

Similar rhythms and subjects come easily to Lawson, who writes

To catch a witch,
first make a wish,
then quietly go put a dish
of dandelions in a ditch.

Rub some ashes on your chin,
tie a feather to your shin.

Draw a circle with some chalk
 (that will give a nasty shock
 to any witch who wishes to
 cast a nasty spell on you!).

Invite her for a glass of sherry
 then offer up a magic cherry.
 When she eats it, take her shoe
 and give it to a dog to chew. (32)

Roethke insists that “some words, like *hill, plow, mother, window, bird, fish*, are so drenched with human associations, they sometimes can make even bad poems evocative” (71). Lawson has learned this lesson well—and if words like these can make a bad poem better, imagine what they do throughout Lawson’s understated and suggestive book of poems.

This book, more than any of the others, seems like it was written for children (as opposed to for or about some reductive construction of “the child”). It evokes in us the exhilaration we still find in reading Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885). But *The Man in the Moon-Fixer’s Mask* is not a step backwards; its rhythmic certainty, lyric playfulness, and magical associations give the book a freshness that self-consciously “contemporary” poems will never have. We hesitate to use the word “timeless,” but there is something of the folk-rhyme in Lawson’s verse. He’s definitely listened carefully to Mother Goose and to the rhymes and chants of the playground.

Helen Frost’s *Spinning Through the Universe* is also a wonderful example of craft. Yes, it’s an ugly thing (though take off the somewhat garish dust jacket, and underneath is an elegant little black-bound book), but the verse is excellent, and the voices ring true. It is not as good as her wonderful *Keesha’s House* (2003), but *Spinning Through the Universe* is definitely one to keep around. We did notice what might be characterized as a too-easy approximation of the adolescent voice (along with distracting tricks like double punctuation: “!?”), but in many of the poems Frost manages original characters who speak distinctly, and she uses traditional poetic craft to give those voices depth and complexity. In the unfortunately titled, but otherwise wonderful, poem “Crying,” Natalie rails against adult euphemisms for death:

Mrs. Williams told us, *Monique lost her father*. What?!
 You don’t *lose* a person, like Ryan lost his cat.

Monique’s dad got killed, is what happened.

She continues, insisting that

I'd rather say things straight out. [...]

[...]

I don't even

Want to talk about it. (43)

These lines contain a rich irony, as the poem is an acrostic, spelling out “MY MIND WORKS THAT WAY” down the left edge. Despite her insistence, Natalie is not saying “things straight out.” The enjambment above gives us the line “Want to talk about it,” suggesting that Natalie *does* in fact want to talk about it, despite her words to the contrary. After all, she *is* talking about it, or we wouldn't have this poem to read. Many of the poems in Frost's book contain these multiple levels in which she sharply describes the ambivalence and contradiction that mark us as human. Finally, the notes on form at the end of Frost's book are also quite good, resisting as they do the condescension usually found in such explanations for children. These notes encourage readers take another look at the poems, to explore how form might inform and complicate their initial reading. Thankfully, these are not models for writers, but rather explanations for readers.

Walter Dean Myers's *Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices* is similar to *Spinning Through the Universe*, as it is a collection of persona poems, each spoken by a different character, in the explicitly invoked tradition of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1916). It is almost entirely successful: the voices ringing true, the form of the poem and the tenor of the voice working synergistically. But sometimes it does fall a little flat. The book picks up toward the end; the high point is a series of poems by veterans, beginning with “Homer Grimes, 83 / *Blind Veteran*.” The precision of language in these poems is striking, and they are all quite moving. “Lemuel Burr, 81 / *Veteran*” is perhaps the most powerful, opening with the image of soldiers freshly home from combat,

Full of ourselves, bursting with pride

We had Red-Balled across Europe

And had triumphed, not merely tried. (77)

The poem turns in the third stanza, when a white girl, noting that she's “glad the Negroes did their part,” (77) kisses the appropriately named Homer, who becomes Lemuel's tragic muse. The understatement with which Myers describes the outcome of this encounter crystallizes a moment of horror and crushing spiritual defeat:

We had saved the world from Hitler

But on that dark road they snatched our prize

They pounded away Griff's courage
 And they tore out poor Homer's eyes

"What can you see?" the Negro doctor
 Asked as he tried to ease the pain
 Homer said he'd been away awhile
 Now he saw he was home again (79)

Like *Here in Harlem*, *New Found Land* does not begin in an especially compelling manner; indeed, the first dozen poems left us a little cold. However, it works differently than most books of contemporary poetry, and certainly it works differently than our other runners-up. *New Found Land* works like a fugue, building in complexity as you read. It is certainly not compression (the tome is a hefty five hundred pages long) that makes the book desirable, nor is its success due to the musicality of its language. Rather, *New Found Land* is most impressive in terms of its thematic development, and it is more of a novel than most "novels-in-verse." Its narrative scope is impressive, as is its use of multiple registers of language and multiple types of text: dramatic dialogue, an academic glossary, maps, a bibliography, narrative poetry, lyric poetry, and embedded prose of various kinds, including historical writing, diary entries, and epistles. Like most Candlewick books of poetry, *New Found Land* is an attractive book. It does lack energy and linguistic play. That is, as poetry, the texture of language (or even the absence of that texture—perhaps willful prosiness) just isn't engaging. For instance, the lines of verse Wolf fashions for Sacagawea come across as flat:

Yet here I do not belong.
 The Mandans and Hidatsa are a tall people
 and their skin is fair.
 I am small. My skin is dark.
 And my heart is broken forever. (41)

Nevertheless, the book is an achievement. At times it is a real joy to read, not only because of its bold combination of prose and poetry, but also because of the comprehensive historical vision its generic inclusiveness makes possible.

The poems in Marilyn Nelson's *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem* are perfect for reading aloud and profoundly moving. As short as it is, it achieves the scope *New Found Land* is aiming for. The language is textured, the poems are formally compelling, and the content is politically, historically, and socially relevant. It's accessible to the engaged child reader without being condescending; and, external to the

poetry, the book is wonderful to handle. It's a beautiful book, with archival photographs from the Mattatuck Museum exhibit dedicated to the skeleton that inspired the requiem, intelligently and clearly annotated by Pamela Espeland. Simply put, it's an excellent book of poetry.

What sets *Fortune's Bones* apart from the rest of the verse published in 2004 is its music. The verse itself is distinguished; Nelson is an excellent poet whose work for children and adults has won many other well-deserved awards. But this particular poem, inspired by the poet's listening, in the days after September 11, 2001, "to classical composers' requiems . . . on public radio," adapts elements of the "traditional funeral mass," the requiem, and combines them with the joy of manumission—the freeing of the slave. As Nelson puts it in her author's note, the poem sets "grief and joy side by side" (9). She likens the music of the poem to a "New Orleans Jazz Band Funeral," which begins as a dirge on the way to the funeral and ends with the jubilation of the "second-line parade" on the way back. This seeming paradox is brilliantly echoed in the construction of the book itself. Helen Robinson's stunning book design combines Pamela Espeland's notes and illustrations from the Mattatuck Museum's exhibit, verso, with the uncluttered text of the poem recto. How heartening it is to have such a multi-layered book that still manages to respect the text. On page eight, for example, is a tiny reproduction of a page from the preliminary score for the poem, composed by Ysaye Barnwell (a noted composer and member of Sweet Honey in the Rock). While we very much hope that a recording of this setting becomes available, the music of the poem is apparent from the language and construction of the poem itself.

The shape of the overall poem—the movement between the sections—also has a musical structure. The table of contents specifies the roles of choir and soloists. The "Preface" is scored for spoken word and is written in some of the most skillful blank verse we have ever seen in writing for young people; indeed, it is accomplished poetry for any audience:

Fortune was born; he died. Between those truths
 stretched years of drudgery, years of pit-deep sleep
 in which he hauled and lifted, dug and plowed
 glimpsing the steep impossibility
 of freedom. Fortune's bones say he was strong;
 they speak of cleared acres, miles of stone walls.
 They say work broke his back: Before it healed,
 they say, he suffered years of wrenching pain. (13)

The metrical integrity of this opening verse paragraph is rare in children's verse. Many poems that purport to instruct young people about form are

usually clueless about the way English meter works. Nelson's verse, however, is above reproach. Nelson's first line (a blank verse line with a trochaic substitution in the first foot) establishes the metrical pattern while at the same time syncopating that music with two well-placed caesurae. "Fortune was born; he died. Between those truths" prepares the reader for a kind of no-nonsense, factual, at once halting and emphatic speech with a minimum of rhetorical flourish. The grammatical connection between "born" and "died" sets up a binary that resonates throughout the book, even to the title—a requiem for the dead, and manumission for one about to be freed. Death is a sort of freedom, and through the poem Fortune is reborn, albeit only in the imagination.

The second line's shift in tone surprises, as the oration becomes more poetic in the second metrically regular line: "stretched years of drudgery, years of pit-deep sleep." "Pit-deep sleep" seems plausible as speech, but it also strikes us as an original turn of phrase. Notice how it anticipates the internal rhyme two lines later: "the steep impossibility / of freedom"—lines that also demonstrate Nelson's command of effective enjambment. The poem's use of irony and understatement chills. The litany of facts ("His wife was worth ten dollars"), conjecture ("A white priest painted water on his head / and Fortune may or may not have believed"), and the stark admission that we know very little about Fortune ("His bones say only that he served and died, / that he was useful even into death, / stripped of his name, his story, and his flesh.") provides a kind of ostinato over which the choir and soloists will take flight in the later sections.

Immediately following the preface, the contralto lament by Fortune's widow, Dinah, employs iambic pentameter *abab* stanzas, with subtle African-American Vernacular English inflections. Nelson deliberately avoids ballad or blues stanzas here; her metrical choices connect "Dinah's Lament" to the "Preface" and lend power and dignity to Dinah's understated outrage as she is compelled to clean her husband's skeleton:

To dust the hands what use to stroke my breast;
to dust the arms what hold me when I cried;
to dust where his soft lips were, and his chest
what curved its warm against my back at night.

Through every season, sun-up to star light,
I heft, scrub, knead: one black woman alone,
except for my children. The world so white,
nobody knows my pain, but Fortune bones. (15)

Here, we need to interject a word about line integrity. In too much of what passes for young people's poetry, the line breaks bore: prose is chopped into lines unimaginatively, usually according to phrase. Nelson, who published her first collection, *For the Body* in 1978, understands the importance of the poetic line (and how to break it). Consider this brilliant bit of enjambment: "I heft, scrub, knead: one black woman alone, / except for my children. The world so white." Dinah, who has been imagining Fortune's flesh, the muscular body she used to knead/need and love, is now alone: "except for my children" because of "The world so white." Nelson's attention to line integrity reinforces that sense of a black woman alone doubly. The scrubbing also eerily recalls the bleached and boiling bones—the horrifying "thought of boiling human broth"—earlier in the poem.

As Nelson moves to Dr. Porter's baritone solo, she employs free verse as he describes his dissection of Fortune, with utter disregard for Fortune's humanity:

Herewith begins my dissection of
the former body of my former slave,
which served him who served me throughout his life
and now serves the advance of science. (17)

The ironic refrain of this poem is haunting: "*And I am humbled by ignorance / humbled by ignorance.*" In contrast to Dinah's memory of her husband as a flesh-and-blood human, Dr. Porter's automatic assumption that Fortune is a thing that exists only to serve him demonstrates a profoundly willed ignorance. The Frankensteinian hubris of the poem's final stanza ("In profound and awful intimacy, / I enter Fortune, and he enters me") is so close to Dinah's memory of physical intimacy that it makes us uncomfortable to be privy to this unspeakable violation. The doctor—a wholly believable persona—speaks of this unspeakable violation unaware of its ideological implications. Nelson suggests that the racist is often ignorant of his racism, just as we—her contemporary readers—may be ignorant of our own.

The *Kyrie eleison* continues in this ironic vein (and it is appropriate that Dr. Porter sings the first stanza), as Fortune's bones become ever more divorced from the human person that was Fortune. They are playthings in the attic, museum curiosities. As with the refrain in the previous poem, the prayer for mercy stands in stark contrast to the soloists' account of the bones:

1890 [soprano]
We played in the attic on rainy afternoons:

Parcheesi, checkers. Or we took the skull
out of its wooden box, and with a leg
rolled it around the dusty floor.

[choir]
Oh, Lord, have mercy.
Gentle Jesus, have mercy.
Have mercy, Lord. (21–23)

“The high point of my requiem,” Nelson writes, “is ‘Not My Bones,’ which I imagined Fortune singing in his own voice” (9). As successful as the whole poem is, Nelson’s command of music reaches its high point in this section (“not part of the traditional funeral mass”) in which Fortune’s song becomes a true manumission, his freedom occurring not in the moment of death, but in what transcends his “brief incarnation”:

We are brief incarnations,
we are clouds in clothes
We are water respirators,
we are how earth knows.
I bore light passed on from an original flame;
while it was in my hands it was called by my name.
But I am not my body.
I am not my body. (25)

Formal, yet deftly syncopated, this is verse of impressive technical skill. But technical skill does not by itself make poetry. This is fresh language: the brevity of our common corporeal existence is made fresh in unsentimental metaphors: “We are clouds in clothes;” we are “We are water respirators.” Fortune’s song of joy is all the more effective because of his freedom as his soul “roams the night sky’s / mute geometry” to sing a joyful song out of what is essential:

You are not your body,
you are not your bones.
What’s essential about you
is what can’t be owned. (27)

If the poem ended here it would be incomplete. As magnificent as “Not My Bones” is, to end with this poem would be to end on a false note. The brief, but necessary, final poem, “Sanctus,” combines the hard-nosed observation, “Each and every one of us is Fortune / for a brief, mortal time. / Then we are compost” (29) with the calling home. What could be a falsely transcendent moment in a lesser poet’s hands becomes a moving appeal to the “Eternal source of all identity.” (29) Such an abstract

concept succeeds—Nelson avoids its obvious potential for grandiosity—because she uses concrete and unsentimental imagery that is specific and compelling:

Magnetic center of the universe,
make us iron filings. (29)

is juxtaposed with a more organic metaphor:

be to us what south is to autumn geese. (29)

Bones, body, voice, and soul. Even “autumn” is right, a time for harvest and a sign of approaching winter—approaching death—a call to migration, a move to warmer climes. Through the poem, Fortune is no longer “stripped of his name, his story, and his flesh,” (13) while all the time the poet acknowledges that he was stripped of these things in life as much as in death. Such a deeply ambiguous and ambitious poem is refreshing and inspiring. It shows us—readers, poets, and, hopefully, publishers of children’s poetry—just what a book of children’s poetry can be: a delight to the ear, the eye, and the mind. It reminds us that children’s poems can be works of art. And that is no small accomplishment.

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