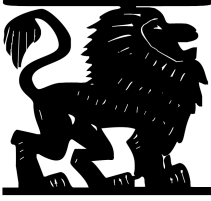




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## Lively Rigor: The 2009 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry

**Michael Heyman, Angela Sorby, and Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.**

**Winner:**

JonArno Lawson. *A Voweller's Bestiary, from Aardvark to Guineafowl (and H)*. Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 2008.

**Honor Books:**

Helen Frost. *Diamond Willow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

William New, *The Year I Was Grounded*. Vancouver: Tradewind Books, 2008.

Serve as a judge on a poetry award like this for many years, and you will start to notice patterns. Most books we receive fall into several neatly-bound categories. We see books emerging from the light verse tradition of Robert Louis Stevenson: sweet, well-crafted poems, generally concerning nature and children frolicking therein; we see collections of metrical nonsense, obviously inspired by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, or, more recently, John Ciardi and his former student and later collaborator Edward Gorey; and we watch our collections of the so-called “verse novel” grow and grow. Also, much more common these days—perhaps as a result of Marilyn Nelson’s success—we find a goodly number of collections emerging from what Charles Bernstein calls “official verse culture” (246), collections composed of conventional voice lyrics that would be as at home in *Poetry* as they would in an anthology of children’s verse. These are MFA-school, well-wrought urns of greater and lesser quality, some suggesting what Donald Hall memorably called “the McPoem” (“the

product of the workshops of Hamburger University” [7, 9]), while others display a mastery of conventional poetic technique and trope that puts many mainstream adult poets to shame.

Another common group of submissions emerges from the nursery and folk rhyme traditions. These books often recast old chestnuts in slightly modified form, such as Anna Grossnickle Hines’s counting book *1, 2, Buckle My Shoe*, or, similarly, *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Shell!* by Lucille Colandro, which knocks off without improving upon the folk-rhyme original. Neither is badly written; they’re just unnecessary. Judge Angela Sorby speaks for the rest of the judges when she says, *save a tree: embrace the oral tradition!* Yes, we always welcome another skillfully illustrated collection of nursery rhymes, but what we still await is a book that riffs on playground poetry to good effect, books by adult poets as daring as their child counterparts (and a publisher courageous enough to print profanity in a humorous context). Children are all too willing to shove a piece of glass right up Miss Susie’s “ask me no more questions,” but adults? We’re either too prim, too proper, or too frightened to touch the language any playground poet worth her salt wields like a master (or like a poet?). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Christina Rossetti took the nursery rhyme tradition—largely oral—and reimaged it, refigured it to work in a *literary* milieu. We ask: where is this century’s Rossetti, the intrepid poet who will rework the oral traditions of contemporary playground poetry into literary poetry for children? As of yet, she is nowhere to be found.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, the horizon is dishearteningly cloudy when it comes to collections inspired by the insights of the historical avant-garde. Of course, we do have the ubiquitous “visual poem”—generally in calligram form. In fact, the last forty or so years have seen more visual poetry for children than you can shake a mouse’s tale at. Visual poetry (or “vispo” as current practitioners tend to call it) is an approach responsible for some of the most face-slappingly obvious children’s poetry imaginable (vispoo, perhaps?). Last year we called for a moratorium on mirror poems featuring backwards text—and this year, thank Apollinaire’s ghost, not a single one made its way to our mail-boxes. But visual poetry aside, there’s not much out there exploring the trails blazed by proponents of literary Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, or Lettrism, movements well-suited to the world of children’s literature (if you need evidence, check out Gertrude Stein’s unforgivably neglected children’s book *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, or perhaps Kurt Schwitters’s *Lucky Hans*, newly republished in *Lucky Hans and Other Merz Fairy Tales*, edited by Jack Zipes’s and out this year from Princeton UP).

We also wonder at the absence of poetry influenced (or written) by contemporary avant-gardists<sup>2</sup> (and yes, we're aware that some have argued—like Ron Silliman—that “avant-garde” is a term ill-suited to today's experimental poets: we'll leave the issue of nomenclature to others). For instance, sound poetry for children is all but silent (Paul Fleischman is a nearly lone voice; his award-winning *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*—now two decades old!—is a master-class unattended by his contemporaries). Other poets have nodded toward experimental traditions: Robin Hirsch's uncommon *FEG: Stupid Ridiculous Poems for Intelligent Children* references New York School poet Frank O'Hara alongside “18th-century poet and lunatic” Christopher Smart (no mean experimentalist), Gertrude Stein, and even Oulipian Georges Perec (by way of turning his child readers on to both Perec's “5,000 letter palindrome” and his lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition*, “an entire novel [composed] without using the letter e”) (10, 20, 22–23). But Hirsch's inclusive frame of reference is a rarity indeed. The “constraint-based” methods of Georges Perec and his Oulipian *amis* are not commonplace in the world of children's poetry.

Sure, abecedarian verse—a constraint so amenable to children's poetry that it was old hat even in *The New England Primer*—remains as widespread as grass. Wynton Marsalis's 2006 *Unicorn* award-winner *Jazz A•B•Z*, for instance, contains some of the most exciting abecedarian poetry we've seen in years (Marsalis's “abstract” poem for free jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman is a marvel). Other constraints pioneered by the Oulipians are less common, even when they ought not to be. In fact, this polemic on the paucity of children's poets conversant in the more radical twentieth and twenty-first century poetic traditions serves as an introduction to a collection proving that the most rigorous experimental constraints can produce poetry within the hearing of children: JonArno Lawson's *A Voweller's Bestiary, From Aardvark to Guineafowl (And H)*, this year's winner of the *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry. Lawson illustrates the book himself, his scratchy, amateurish doodles recalling Edward Lear's purposefully crude drawings. They exist in stark contrast to the lively rigor of the poems. “Lively rigor” may sound oxymoronic, but it's an apt phrase, as the poems fairly crackle with energy, even as they never depart from the onerous lipogrammatic constraint summoned in each poem's title. A lipogram is a work that systematically excludes words containing a certain set of letters. In *A Voweller's Bestiary*, each lipogram is determined by the title, so the poem “Opossum” excludes any word containing vowels other than “o” and “u.” As an added difficulty, Lawson burdens himself with the requirement that every word he employs contains all of the vowels in the title. Thus, each word in the poem “Fireflies, Spiders, Crickets,” for

example, must contain both an “i” and an “e,” but no other vowels, occasioning such lovely lines as “Pines line rivers, / fireflies flicker, / river replenishes evening whispers” (28).

Choosing Lawson as this year’s winner wasn’t easy—especially considering he won the award in 2007 for his *Black Stars in a White Night Sky*, a more conventional but no less remarkable collection of light verse and nonsense. Yet the uncommon success of Lawson’s daunting experiments sets his book apart from the rest of this year’s offerings. *A Voweller’s Bestiary* is not just a fine book of poetry; it is also a benchmark, a signpost gesturing toward the future of the genre. Indeed, Lawson’s *A Voweller’s Bestiary* is not just this year’s best book of children’s poetry; it is one of the year’s best books of poetry, period.

The competition was fierce. We faced an embarrassment of riches that prompted Angela to ask whether North America’s failing economy was working to separate the wheat from the chaff, children’s poetry-wise. This year, there were no lurching rhymes by Jamie Lee Curtis, no natural-history lessons tortured into iambic pentameter, and not a single heavy-handed ode to the Montgomery bus boycott. One marked trend was the continued evolution of the verse-novel, and both of our honor books—Helen Frost’s *Diamond Willow* and William New’s *The Year I Was Grounded*—are outstanding examples of this subgenre. Indeed, we received many fine verse-novels that underline both the pleasures and the perils of narrative verse. *Minn and Jake’s Almost Terrible Summer*, for instance, is another solid, lively effort by Janet S. Wong featuring real-ish tweens: they play a lot of computer games and don’t undergo any spiritual transformations, which is refreshing. However, the convoluted setup (who is living where? who moved?) lost us at times, and overall seemed to beg the question: why a verse novel, and not a plain old novel-in-prose?

As an advocate of beneficial child labor, Angela handed Melanie Little’s *The Apprentice’s Masterpiece* over to her eleven-year-old son, who wrote: “About three-quarters of the poems are amazing, but the rest are deathly boring.” Angela tends to concur. This book is well-written, and Little is bold enough to complicate the storytelling with different narrative poetic voices, including the unflattering portrayal of the stupid and smitten Ramon, who is a *converso* (a Jew who has converted to Christianity) and must navigate medieval Spain in a time of terrible oppression for Jews and *conversos* alike. Ramon is presented as the initial narrator, only to be supplanted by Amir, the Muslim slave, setting up a convergence later, through Ramon’s wiser voice, with Amir. The shifting voices nicely complicate the historical moment, and it is clear that Little meticulously researched her material; we wonder, however, if it doesn’t bog down in the juvenile verse-novel

genre, which may be ill-suited to this level of historical complexity. At a certain point, it may work better to simply write a novel. (On the other hand, Allan Wolf's doorstep of a verse-novel *New Found Land: Lewis and Clark's Voyage of Discovery*, a 2005 *Unicorn* honor book, handled historical complexity quite well, so who knows?)

Marilyn Nelson and Tonya C. Hegamin's *Pemba's Song* solves some of the problems inherent in the verse-novel form by interspersing lyric poems with plain old narrative storytelling—although this may disqualify them for the award proper. The murder-mystery element (who killed Phyllis?) drew us in, and the best poems (like the last one, “Force of Present Existence”) added depth and dimension. At times we thought the language was a little jarring: an eighteenth-century slave anachronistically uses the word “diapers,” for instance, and at one point Pemba, a twenty-first century tween says, “Those girls were just some haters who couldn't afford their own bling.” This latter sentence probably sounded dated three days after it was written. Nonetheless, we are sure that preteens will be riveted by the story of Pemba and her ghost-friend, and it's nice to see poetry and prose mix so seamlessly.

Another pair of verse-novels, *Keeping the Night Watch*, by Hope Anita Smith, and *Grow*, by Kate Sibley, tackle urban social issues. *Keeping the Night Watch* fills a much-needed niche: it's spoken in the voice of C.J., an African-American teenager who is blindsided when his long-absent father returns to the family. We just wish it were better poetry. It's okay—not awful—but the metaphors feel forced: the dad is like crazy glue (he sticks); he's like a black gem (his value is appreciating); and he's like a mountain climber (crossing the chasms that divide him from his family). The message is positive, but too often C.J.'s fresh voice gets drowned out by Smith's formulaic wisdom. *Grow* depicts an urban family with more consistent success. It recounts, in Kate Sibley's convincing (and convincingly vulnerable) preadolescent voice, the emergence of an urban garden. The garden's reigning goddess is one Berneetha, a large unemployed teacher who teaches the neighborhood children to mulch, plant, and weed. The story touches on issues of body image, juvenile crime, parental abandonment, and death—all with a light hand. One nice detail is when Kate and her friend Harlan “transplant” a dead cat, in a scene that manages to be simultaneously gruesome and affecting:

Harlan beams the light,  
dirt all over the fur,  
one eye missing.  
I close both of mine,  
and feel-dig

until I can scoop under,  
 lift her out,  
 into the box  
 that Harlan closes quick  
 before my curiosity  
 can make me peek  
 to see what a cat  
 been buried for six weeks  
 looks like. (112)

The only false note is the inclusion of a pack of special education children, who seem shoehorned in for sentimental purposes. But mostly, *Grow* depicts a hardscrabble urban world without getting too heavily didactic, which might be attributed to the lightness of the language and to the jagged but delicate illustrations.

Marilyn Nelson's *The Freedom Business* is in a class by itself, less a "verse-novel" than an historical excavation of the highest order. On the left side of each two-page spread, the complete autobiographical 1798 text of *A Narrative of the Life & Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa* unfolds, while Nelson places her pieces on the right side, corresponding to Venture's narrative. This volume is extremely well put together, from the facing page format and longer book shape, to the lovely abstract paintings of Deborah Dancy. As Michael noted, however, the danger for him as a reader was that he was so enthralled with the original Venture story that he was less engaged with Nelson's reimaginings. Venture's narrative is spare, full of holes, and lacking in the sensational and psychological material we might expect—all of which makes it fascinating. Nelson is there to fill in the gaps, and yet her efforts felt like something of an imposition. Of course it's hard to stand on the same stage as a brave, successful, articulate eighteenth-century slave, but his story was so compelling that it sometimes seemed redundant to read the plot, again, as retold in Nelson's verse. However, this doubling is necessary to ground the poems, and Nelson's technical ability is admirable. As Michael commented, "I could write more in praise of the many fine poetic moments, but I admit I was often left feeling a bit empty—wishing for Venture's real voice again and my own imagination. The more I look back to this, the more I see the black spots on its soul—and yet there is much admirable here." Indeed there is. Nelson is an accomplished poet, after all, and her poems—unlike those in many so-called verse novels—are much more than plot delivery systems. Throughout the book she explores various forms, including work songs and blues, and, in "Two Masters," gives us a sestina to rival any written in the last twenty years.

Verse-novels (and historical verse-reconstructions) continue to be popular with preadolescent readers—and who can argue with that? However, since the verse-novel seems to have emerged as a form closely associated with children’s literature, we hope that its practitioners will continue to push the boundaries of the form—as Nelson does, and as both Frost and New do, too.

We also received a fair number of picture-book entries this year—none dreadful, but many with illustrations that outshine the accompanying verses. Sue Van Wassenhove’s quilt-work in *The Seldom-Ever-Shady Glades* is especially fine, as are the illustrations in David Elliott’s *On the Farm* and Julie Larios’s *Imaginary Menagerie* (artwork by Holly Meade and Julie Paschkis, respectively). Lois Ehlert’s deceptively simple illustrations to her verse in *Oodles of Animals* are also stellar, outshining her serviceable poetry. The image of a colorful, serrated “Crocodile” looks out at us with his slightly dopey, tri-toothful stare alongside this largely superfluous poem:

Swimming and sunning  
a crocodile’s happy.  
But when he meets humans,  
he tends to get snappy. (n.p.)

Ehlert makes great collages and should stick to them. We are reminded of how, at an art opening, we often wish the artists would be prohibited from writing “statements” to accompany their art. It’s art. Let it be art.

Somewhat stronger is David Elliott’s *On the Farm*, with Holly Meade’s gorgeous examples of woodcut and watercolor. Some of the poems are charming, like this little lyric meditation on the turtle:

The turtle  
lifts her fossil head  
and blinks  
one, two, three  
times in the awful light.  
In her house,  
it’s always night. (n.p.)

However, the bulk of the poems just aren’t charming enough. As Angela notes regretfully, there’s just not much *to* it, and the farmyard has been done to death. Michael was especially disappointed in Elliott’s “The Cow,” particularly its tired pun on the word “utterly,” which just doesn’t work as its grand conclusion. Besides, judge Joseph Thomas reminds us that Theodore Roethke already wrote this poem (without the clumsy pun), demonstrating, as Roethke so often does in his classic *I am! Says the*

*Lamb!*, how a simple idea well-executed can pay dividends far beyond the number of lines:

There Once was a Cow with a Double Udder.  
 When I think of it now, I just have to Shudder!  
 She was too much for One, you can bet your Life:  
 She had to be Milked by a Man and his Wife.

Still, *On the Farm* has a few great moments: “The Snake,” “The Bees,” “The Bull,” and the final, untitled piece that ends with an endlessly listening rabbit, are by themselves worth the price of the book. If only there were more poems of their quality.

Another notable volume with excellent use of woodcut and overall design is Anushka Ravishankar’s *Elephants Never Forget*, a delightful twist on the ugly ducking tale. Christiane Pieper’s roughly hewn, lively one-color prints jostle and play with the illustrative typography, following the life of an elephant amongst a herd of buffalo. Although just the tip of the iceberg, this volume is a fine example of Indian publisher Tara Books’ excellence in design and bookmaking. Houghton Mifflin tries with some success to imitate the Tara originals, yet it does not (nor can it) meet the sheer craftsmanship and artistry of beautiful handmade Tara editions like the screen-printed *The Night Life of Trees* or *Hen-sparrow Turns Purple*, in a stunning folded-scroll format with scenes resembling Indian miniature painting. *Hen-sparrow*, like *Elephants*, also bravely offers an iconoclastic anti-ending, defying both traditional folklore and typical children’s literature, yet another way Tara Books breaks the mold both outside and inside of India. Purely as poetry, however, *Elephants* can’t quite stand up to our award winners, let alone Ravishankar’s stronger poetry in *Excuse Me, Is This India?* or *Today Is My Day*.

Tony Johnston’s *Voices from Afar: Poems of Peace* means well, but to write of “peace” is a tall order. Many of the individual poems in *Voices from Afar* are gorgeous (“Vagabond,” “Plastic Shoes”), and we admire the way Johnston is not afraid to depict violence directly. As a whole, though, we found this collection dilute: it takes violence out of context, de-politicizing it and making it *too easy* to condemn. For instance, a Belfast soldier (taking a cue from Little Eva) whispers, “Mother?” We are sad for the dying soldier, but who shot him and why? And did he return fire? The poems invite empathy but not understanding, and we’re not sure that this is enough. We may not be the only ones out there who, from the first piece onward, hear Sally Struthers saying, “child in some otherwhere, / standing in your little torn shirt / I am calling . . . and hopefully the good people watching this television show right now will also be calling to sponsor a child!”

*Becoming Billie Holiday* is another remarkable book that raises some thorny issues. Although there is soaring poetry to be found here, we note with dismay the striking omission of Billie Holiday's many struggles and personal demons from her adult life—especially since it seems clear that these demons also acted as her muses. While Weatherford gives vivid details of her childhood struggles and racism both within and without the black community, such as her description of an incident when Holiday was considered “too light-skinned, to share / the stage with black musicians” (100), we are denied much of the later personal struggle that made her life and her music what it was. One brilliant stroke, however, is Weatherford's explanation of a long-standing complaint against Holiday, that she claimed the song “Strange Fruit” was written “for her,” when in fact it was not. In the final poem, Weatherford gives an explanation so convincing and moving that critics should forever be mute. In retrospect, the entire book becomes a part of this same justification.

On a lighter note, all of the judges found some value in the knick-knack poetry of John Frank's *Keepers: Treasure-Hunt Poems*. The premise is promising, a magpie's collection of poems on notable objects excavated from natural and domestic settings, and there are indeed some poetic treasures in this noteworthy collection. “Geode,” found in the “mountains and desert,” has a lyrical and even revelatory quality, creating a striking image:

crystal yolk  
 as purple as  
 a sheet of sky  
 pulled over twilight's  
 closing eye. (37)

Joseph was especially taken by the line “as purple as,” the adjective “purple” bracketed neatly by the usually unremarkable “as,” just as the “crystal yolk” is bounded by its rock shell. Despite some of these flashes of imagistic brilliance, however, many of the poems are not very surprising, nor in the end do they have the depth we might hope for. Other poems simply describe objects without transforming them linguistically:

Once you were  
 just broken glass,  
 but years of  
 sea on sand  
  
 turned you to  
 the teardrop jewel  
 I now hold  
 in my hand. (12)

To which one is inclined to say, *And?* Frank's sense of rhythm and line is exceptional, bringing to mind William Carlos Williams or, perhaps, Robert Creeley. Even in the above poem lines like "but years of" and "turned you to" suggest Williams's variable foot, the enjambment providing a productive counterpoint to the sentence's syntax. Joseph is reminded of Angela's book *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917*, particularly her chapter on Dickinson, in which she discusses Andrew Lang's disapproval of Dickinson's irregular meter. Frank does not write like Dickinson, of course, but his poems' metrical irregularity might prompt someone like, say, Andrew Lang, to write that if Frank "had only mastered the rudiments of grammar and gone into metrical training for about fifteen years" he might be a poet of note (181). Form functions in some of his poems, in some of his lines, but, in the end, there are just too many misses, too much "filler," for the award.

One of the books that came close to the top of our list was Calef Brown's *Soup for Breakfast*, a lively volume that—like Lawson's book—contains real poems, not just lessons or descriptions in rhyme. Many of these poems invite physical activities, like "Tongue-Tester" or "Painting on Toast." We appreciate the cheekiness of "Donuts," which asks, "Why do all grownups / like donuts so much? / They rave about flavors / and fillings and such. / They praise all the glazes. / They savor the dough. / Donuts are tasty. / We get it! / We know!!" (n.p) and the lyrical, mesmerizing "Young Moth" and "The Mark"—both examples of Brown at his best. "The Mark," in particular, demonstrates Brown's exceptional ear:

The mark of our intelligence  
is how we treat the elephants,  
the ocelots, the malamutes,  
and other fellow residents.  
We must protect the bandicoots,  
orangutans, and pelicans.  
The mark of our intelligence  
is how we treat the elephants.

Brown's unconventional tendency to center his poems can be a bit distracting (unless greeting cards constitute the extent of your poetic experience), but these are poems best experienced aurally. Sure, the visual dissonance accompanying rhymes like "intelligence," "elephants," and "residents" is part of their charm, but the poem's chief pleasures lie in working your mouth around delightful words like, "ocelots" or "malamutes," "bandicoots," or "orangutans," words as exotic and beautiful as the animals they signify. "The Mark" may be didactic, but the poem's interests come before those of the lesson. If only there were more poems of this quality in *Soup for*

*Breakfast*, it would be counted among our honor books. Certainly Brown's prosody is not as mathematically elegant as JonArno's (although "The Mark" is as regular as regular can be), but he never seems out of control, hewing his rhythms with a Kandinski-like grace and quirky geometry matched by his colorful, faux-naïf illustrations.

Still, Michael can't help but lament the lack of *gusto* in *Soup for Breakfast*, especially when compared to some of Brown's earlier books, such as *Polkabats and Octopus Slacks*. Among his many talents, Brown has shown himself to be, over the years, a fine nonsense writer. He is often brave enough to present unfiltered nonsense to children and is a master of a distinctly Learean inconsequential circularity—as in the old, much-maligned style of limerick. He even sometimes dips a toe into scatology. In the present volume, however, he seems to have lost his nerve. Gone are the eccentric characters from *Polkabats* like the Kansas City Octopus, whose "fantastic plastic stretch elastic" pants fit "like apple pie" (n.p.) or the Funky Snowman who struts to the beat, even (and explicitly) without pants. The characters in *Soup* are replaced with a muddy first person perspective, or a vague sense of grandpa behind an admittedly glorious mustache. The brilliant circular inconsequentiality of old slips into banality, as in "Oilcloth Tablecloth" or "T.P.L.T.T.F.," the latter of which can't even be saved by a somewhat rude-sounding acronymic title. The wonderful nonsense of *Polkabats*, written with a wink and a nod, changes to the forced "One to Ten (and Back Again)," which must carefully point out the nonsense, rather than let it just happen. All of this being said, however, even weaker Calef Brown is enough to kick sand in the face of most ninety-eight-pound poetic weaklings. *Soup* just seems a shade wimpier than his edgier, more muscle-bound efforts.

Helen Frost's *Diamond Willow*, our first honor book, is another Frost tour-de-force—like *The Braid* but faster-paced and less bound and gagged by prosody. Here Frost plays with typography, laying out each verse in a diamond shape, rather than using more conventional formal constraints. This enables the narrative to unfold more organically than it did in *The Braid*. *Diamond Willow*, a part-Athabascan girl, dog-sleds alone through the Alaskan interior to visit her grandparents. Her adventures are told via the diamond poems, interspersed with brief prose monologues spoken by animals—some of whom, like "Spruce Hen" and "Red Fox"—are reincarnations of the girl's Athabascan ancestors. The chorus of voices animates the wilderness and generates an atmosphere this is not so much magical as uncannily historical, advancing a sense of "the self" as both individually-forged (via the mushing adventure) and collectively-maintained (via language and stories).

One danger arises in Frost's trying to pull off almost an entire book with the same structural conceit. But she uses just enough variety, in terms of the actual diamond shape and the interspersed prose sections, to keep us intrigued. The shape, of course, has significance in terms of Willow's character and growth, but it also functions beyond such plot-related and thematic reasons; Frost, without being a slave to it, uses the diamond to shape the flow of the poem, beginning with a shorter concept, expanding, and then coming back to a pointed, and often more lyrical end, as in the verse marking Willow's leaving on her first dog sled trip alone, when she imagines her parents watching her slide away:

And I can picture Mom,  
standing beside Dad,  
her arms folded tight,  
like she's holding  
me, wrapped  
up inside  
them.  
(15)

Like the tiny inclusions that make each diamond unique, the hidden "poems" within poems, in bold typeface, provide an exploration and complication of voice. Each one is not just a "secret message"—it is an eerie telescoping into the heart of the narrative voice, or even better, an implication of onion-like layers. If we zoom in further, do we find another "poem" within the poem within the poem? Just as the animals represent the different layers of generations, from the present to Willow's great-great-great grandmother, so the diamond form implies narrative within narrative, going back indefinitely.

We begin our discussion of William New's honor book *The Year I Was Grounded* with a poem:

Many verse narratives  
are not actually verse  
but just prose chopped  
into lines like this  
often with iffy punctuation  
to underline their supposed  
poetic qualities.

*The Year I Was Grounded* is different, because it is composed of poems that play with language as they reflect—playfully, but deeply—on the life cycle. Narrative unfolds, but not in the linear, dare we say *prosaic* style of the ever-popular verse novel. William New, a venerated Canadian edi-

tor, scholar, and writer, uses a variety of forms—the concrete poem, the handwritten journal entry, and even the often mishandled (but here well-managed) haiku—to depict a year in the life of a boy, Geordie, a year that—tragically—brings the death of his grandfather. The narrative relies in part on a poetic progression of sorts, in that Geordie moves from the lighter, more inconsequential poems like his contemplations on air (these almost lost us—we’re reminded of the 2008 *Lion and Unicorn* award question of “why?”—and Geordie’s poems on “air” began to sound a little like the fairly inconsequential “Arctic science” or “guinea pig” poems mentioned by the 2008 judges) to his more “grounded” pieces as we go through the story. New also fearlessly presents different vocal registers, including some more challenging material in the grandparents’ pieces, within which, in the wintry beginning of the story, “the earth does not sleep, / it churns with dreaming” (n.p.). Though each piece is distinct and successful on its own terms, they speak to each other; for instance, after the death, Geordie jots down some facts about dust:

This week I’ve been finding out things I’m  
not sure I wanted to know. Stuff about dust.  
What it’s made of. How dust turns into dust. (n.p.)

Then, a bit later, a more fully-formed poem echoes and expands upon his thoughts; it begins:

I figure dust is what you don’t see  
until the sun shines through a window  
  
or what you don’t notice  
till a helicopter stirs up the ground  
  
and under the blades a small cyclone  
rages

Geordie’s earlier notes, and the context of the grandfather’s death, give emotional weight to the central metaphor of invisible/visible dust while also demonstrating how the creative process “rages” and evolves.

One of the wonders of this volume is Geordie’s awareness of the sheer materiality of language, as we witness him manipulate it as both plaything and scientific experiment. Language and poetry are the natural, physical tools with which Geordie explores the world; they are utility, and he slides in and out of verse, playing and exploring, sometimes blurring the lines between the two. Poetry seems a part of the fabric of life—notice that the grandparent verses (typed on grandpa’s old typewriter, creating an interesting separation) are “said”—not written—according to Geordie. The themes

meander like a long summer; they weave around the environment, being “grounded,” and the understated, delicate treatment of the grandfather’s death. The ending, however, doesn’t grind out the morals, and we are left with the enigmatic directive, “Hold on to the rain.”

Michael and Joseph have noted that Geordie’s voice doesn’t always ring entirely true—he’s a bit idealized, but perhaps it’s just that some of the psychological insights might not be put so clearly in *journal* form. Yet even though the book has a few tonal missteps, on the whole it is an adventurous collection with a striking voice. Consider “Thinking Fast,” for instance:

Some days my brain turns somersaults  
and ideas tumble head over heliotrope

Whirlwinds rampage,  
and if I happen to be thinking of a field of cows,  
suddenly they’ll all be running,  
the brown ones in front of the black-and-white ones,  
running towards a purple hill  
with a purple lake on the far side

and all the cows will turn somersaults  
except one, who will travel by whirlwind  
down to the pebbly lakeshore,  
and be already sipping lemonade  
by the time the others roll up breathless

grass-covered,  
grinning,  
and green

This tight little lyric reminded Joseph of the quiet surrealism of Kenneth Patchen’s “Magical Mouse,” or, more generally, the controlled syntax and diction of Ron Padgett’s more childlike lyrics. However, New’s book is one to be seen as well as heard—typographical experiments—some simple (the changing of font or the bolding and underlining of certain words and phrases), some more complex (as in “Spider Games,” which arranges its lines in web-like patterns). The close of the unremarkably titled “My Journal, July 15th” immediately summoned to Joseph’s mind Jackson Mac Low’s 1938 typewriter experiment “HUNGER StrIKE what does lifemean.” We don’t know, of course, if New is familiar with Mac Low’s experiment, but the poems are definitely of a piece, both testifying to the possibilities of visual poetry, possibilities too often unexplored in children’s poetry.

JonArno Lawson's *A Voweller's Bestiary*, this year's unanimous award-winner, demonstrates a mastery of the lipogram form. Despite Ross Eckler's insipid, conspicuously un-lipogrammatic "clue" verse on the back cover, Lawson's lipograms are fresh and foreign, restricted and free-wheeling, exhibiting a striking sophistication of language brought on by the demands of the form combined with aesthetic virtuosity.

*A Voweller's Bestiary* makes explicit its debt to the avant-garde. On the back cover, Language Poet Charles Bernstein blurbs the book extravagantly:

Good golly gosh! Go gobble book! Got lots of raccoons, moose, loons,  
but—oh—look, no lox! Yoo-hoo! Moo for word zoo!

Bernstein's lighthearted endorsement positions the book in the world of the contemporary avant-garde, as does Lawson's "Afterword," a marvelous piece of writing that is neither esoteric nor condescending, but, rather, a smart and personable statement of poetic intent, pointing its young readers to a variety of recent constraint-based and experimental works for children and adults. Lawson nods to the late bp Nichol, also a Canadian, and long a darling of the "post-avant" and "vispo" communities.<sup>3</sup> He notes the influence of Dr. Seuss's *On beyond Zebra* and Richard Wilbur's *The Disappearing Alphabet* (for playing "beyond the restrictions of the A-is-for-Apple, B-is-for-Bee type of alphabet book" [87]), just as he observes "the direct inspiration" of Christian Bök's *Eunoia*.<sup>4</sup> Lawson, in his own way, goes in a different direction in terms of abecedarian tradition: while his title implies adherence to an incomplete alphabetical order "from aardvark to guineafowl (and H)," hence "A" through "H," we are instead faced with a text that does indeed start with "Ants and Aardvarks," but then skips to "Deer," whips back around to "Cliff-diving Birds" and then leapfrogs to "Frog or Loon," (whither "E"?). "Gulls" come next, but then to the "Fly" and "Beavers" . . . at which point we begin to get the idea that this is not our father's alphabet. Despite the title's explicit reference to standard alphabetical order, particularly with "H" coming consecutively after the "G" of "guineafowl," we learn in Lawson's "Afterword" that his is an abecedarian of vowels and vowel combinations only, hence: a, e, i, o, u, ae, ai, ao, and so on, going through all possible combinations. And "H." Apparently, "H" has a "strange transformative function" (88)—as if the progressively permuted vowel combination lipograms are not strangely transformative enough. Lawson's opening genre-defying gambit anticipates the volume's radical playfulness and inventiveness.

At their best, these poems are reminiscent of a less-pedantic Marianne Moore:

Opossum's monotonous stupor  
clouds opossum's thoughts (36)

We are also reminded of Thurber's *The Wonderful O* for pure lipogrammatic inventiveness. Indeed, in Lawson's poems, as Thurber's Littlejack proclaims, "The alphabet has taken over. . . . What was the letter of the law is now the law of the letter" (38). Lawson adheres strictly to such "laws," but goes beyond Thurber in both formal rigor and pure linguistic inventiveness. He bypasses simple (or not-so-simple) lipogram-cleverness to reveal poetic beauty:

Whenever we freeze,  
then flee—  
Whenever we're tender,  
then severe—  
we resemble deer. ("Deer" 10)

Lawson is also happy to revel in the pure fun of the form, as in his "aeio" piece, "Cacomistles, Prairie Dogs," wherein "Melodramatic, able-bodied cacomistles / antagonize companionable, / cooperative prairie dogs" (60). He elevates his verse to the plane of numinous nonsense, with the "ai" verse, "Fatalistic Snails":

Fatalistic snails trail  
panicking African  
lizards.

Placid snails,  
Maintaining snailish fatalism,  
Await rain.

Lizards transmitting panic,  
radiating pain,  
facing nightfall, vanish again.

Practical snails, spiraling inward,  
discarding disdain, craving nirvana  
Advancing, attain. (22)

Down to the snails' visible inscrutable bemusement, Lawson echoes some of the world's great mystical and ancient nonsense, such as that of the fifteenth-century Indian poet-saint, Kabir:

Who can follow the antelope of doubt  
 through the jungle?  
 The archer takes aim, trees catch fire  
 in the water, the fish go hunting today.

The wonder of such knowledge!  
 Whoever hears it will go flying  
 wingless to heaven, says Kabir, and never die! (5)

Each of Lawson's poems is a tightrope walk, but he rarely falters (with, perhaps, a wobble or two). His chosen form leads him progressively on a path of linguistic abstraction, a quality that can be problematic (also reminiscent of Moore). "Iguana burial rituals" may indeed "languish," but forming an image of such a scene is challenging, at best. Yet the poems aren't first and foremost about forming images (although many do, as we've demonstrated); they're about forming language itself into an object, a thing, a poem; they're about radical artifice, reaffirming what Marjorie Perloff calls "les droits du significant"—"the rights of the signifier" (55). Thus it's hard to blame him for the occasional unwieldiness, considering the vowel-boggling task of, for instance, creating a poem that includes *all* the vowels in *every* word—which he does remarkably well with "Guineafowl's Questionable Reputation" (the title, of course, also following Lawson's strict rules):

Vexatious maliciousness!  
 Unconscionable!

Uncongenial guineafowl's  
 somersaulting behaviour  
 discourages eunomia. (70)

Such a heroic effort is not without dangers however, and the judges admire all of Lawson's efforts, even when the pictures are somewhat hazy.

Lawson's own Thurber-esque pictures are fresh and playful, envisioning an imaginary garden with real toads (and aarvarks and guineafowl) galore. The black-and-white line illustrations collaborate with the verses' sparseness and quirkiness, adding jokes and occasionally the sense of mystery seen in Lear's limerick illustrations. In "Unicorn," the joke occurs as a very real, if nonplussed, unicorn pokes his head through a window to observe the disbelieving unicorn scholar, staring at a book's drawing of a "dubious, fictitious" (58) unicorn. The verse implies a kind of "uniform confusion" among the players, yet the joke within the joke is created purely by the interaction between text and illustration. In "Peruvian Firesticks," we see neither what is "mercurial" about the bug, nor how it

might “simulate disturbances” or “circulate, inexhaustible” (68). In fact, contrary to these descriptions, the illustration shows the firestick simply perched, quite still, on the concerned fellow’s chest, as they stare at each other. Neither does the room, with lamp and tidy bed, show a sign of the firestick’s imputed chaotic behavior. Only the toes sticking out from the short-sheeted bed indicate anything amiss. What *is* clear is the “universal uneasiness” guaranteed by the verse, a state of mystery deepened through the picture/text relationship.

Lawson’s verbal and visual pyrotechnics generate a delightful tension when paired with Frost’s cut-diamond narratives and New’s *Grounded* multiverse. Taken together, our winner and our honor books inspire us to imagine a world of children’s poetry that sends us, as Kabir puts it, “flying/wingless to heaven.”

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*Angela Sorby is associate professor of English at Marquette University. She is the author of a critical study, Schoolroom Poets (2005), and two poetry collections, Distance Learning (1998), and Bird Skin Coat (2009).*

*A libertine of unimpeachable taste, Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. is an assistant professor of English at San Diego State University’s National Center for the Study of Children’s Literature. He is the author of two books, Poetry’s Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children’s Poetry (Wayne State UP, 2007) and Strong Measures (Make Now P, 2007). Poetry’s Playground was named a 2009 honor book by the Children’s Literature Association.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We wonder, however, if Wendy Cope, Grace Nichols, or Carol Ann Duffy might apply for the job.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, if the Los Angeles experimental poetry scene is any indication, we may see more radical poets writing for children in the coming years. Stan Apps

and Joseph Mosconi, two younger experimental LA poets, have recently begun writing formally experimental poems for children. Mosconi, who also edits the LA arts journal *Area Sneaks*, is currently working on an as yet untitled book for children with collaborator/illustrator Scoli Acosta. Their project involves found/appropriated language (generally harvested from Internet spam) recast into repeated sentence structures:

Ah! That manta ray is more positive than some intimate rat.  
 Ugh! This sober mastodon indiscreetly awakened that dramatic hippopotamus.  
 Goodness! The dreadful python tediously twitched past the festive raccoon.  
 Whoa! A dolorous husky remotely touched a watchful iguanodon.

Often associated with the so-called Flarf movement (alongside Nada Gordon, K. Silem Mohammad, Gary Sullivan, and others), Stan Apps has for sometime been producing work that engages the world of children's literature and culture in surprising ways. While for adults, two of Apps' books in particular, *Princess of the World* (Cy P, 2007) and *Grover Fuel* (Scantly Clad P 2009), sound at times like the children's poetry of some alternate universe. Consider these lines, for instance, from *Grover Fuel*, a work strongly influenced by Sesame Street:

Humans whose humanity has been removed by humans  
 Tear away their human skin and discover the soft blue fur of Grover  
 Like a carpet of safety and purity  
 In which soft blue songs are sung and simple tasks are done  
 And human hate and shame become  
 Clean and meaningless and pure  
 As they disappear in Grover's fur.

Moving from work that engages children's literature and culture to work that engages an actual child audience was a natural progression for Apps, who is now preparing a poetry manuscript for children called *Jakarta*.

<sup>3</sup> Nichol was also a sound poet of some renown. Although his sound work with the Four Horsemen was intended for adults, we can't imagine many children who wouldn't delight at the extraordinary soundscapes they produced over the years.

<sup>4</sup> Bök, another Canadian author, is one of the most challenging members of the burgeoning "conceptual poetry" movement in North America. His *Eunoia* is a lipogram of extravagant difficulty, each chapter limiting itself to words containing only the vowel that names it. Thus, chapter A includes only words containing one or more instances of the vowel "a"; chapter E includes only words containing one or more instances of the vowel "e," and so forth. Chapter A ("for Hans Arp"), then, begins,

Awkward grammar appalls a craftsman. A Dada bard as daft as Tzara damns stagnant art and scrawls an alpha (a slapdash arc and a backward zag) that mars all stanzas and jams all ballads (what a scandal). (12)

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