



“The City, the Country, and the Road Between”: The 2011 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry

Michael Heyman, Michael Joseph, Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

Winner:

Susan Blackaby. *Nest, Nook & Cranny*. Illustrated by Jamie Hogan. Watertown: Charlesbridge, 2010.

Honor Books:

Rob Jackson. *Weekend Mischief*. Illustrated by Mark Beech. Honesdale: Wordsong, 2010.

X. J. Kennedy. *City Kids: Street & Skyscraper Rhymes*. Illustrated by Philippe Béha. Vancouver: Tradewind, 2010.

Seven, they say, is a lucky number. That bit of folk wisdom rings true enough to the judges and editors behind this, the seventh installment of *The Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry. Seven years ago Lissa Paul, then one of three coeditors at *The Lion and the Unicorn*, founded the award. She enlisted the help of Richard Flynn, Kelly Hager, and Joseph Thomas, who, over the course of a year, read stacks of poetry, winnowed them down to smaller stacks, and, finally, chose Marilyn Nelson’s *Fortune’s Bones* (2004) as our first winner. What set the *L&U* Award apart from other children’s poetry awards was the essay, which would not simply discuss the merits of the winning book of poetry alongside a handful of honor books, but instead would speculate on issues unique to the project of writing and publishing poetry for children, all the while painting a picture of that year in children’s poetry, treating the good alongside the great, the great alongside the bad, the bad alongside the embarrassing. This tactic was taken wholesale from *The Signal*

Poetry Award (in fact, before we arrived at a name, we referred to our new award in private as the “Not-the-Signal Poetry Award”). Featured in Nancy Chambers’ much-missed journal *Signal*, the Signal Award flourished from 1979 to 2001, its influential run ending only two years before the journal itself disappeared. The hole left by *Signal*’s absence has yet to be filled, but we hope that *The Lion and the Unicorn* Award will last at least as long as the award that inspired it.

In his introduction to the recent collected edition of the Signal Award essays, *Poetry for Children: The Signal Award 1979–2001* (2009), Peter Hunt notes that the award was “set up, in the spirit of the journal, to instigate, provoke, and sustain a *conversation* about poetry published for children and to provide a *service* to its readers” (11). Our goals at *The Lion and the Unicorn* are the same, and our aspiration is that this award and its accompanying essays will, like its progenitor, continue on for decades mapping the varied terrain of North American children’s poetry. This seventh year marks an important moment in the growth of this award, as it is the last year that founding judge Joseph Thomas will contribute to the essay. Last year (the 2010 award, despite the typo in the published essay’s title) was the first year the award stumbled along without the direct influence of Lissa Paul, who had the year before completed her stint as an editor at the *L&U*. Once Joseph leaves, the award will be an institution standing free from those who founded it: a capable new slate of editors (David Russell, Karin Westman, and Naomi Wood) will guide the work of next year’s judges, two returning (Michael Heyman, who first contributed in 2009, and Michael Joseph, who joins us this year), and one brand new (Emily Cardinali Cormier). Yes, this little institutional history may be a tad dull (and perhaps more than a tad self-indulgent), but, since journals are commonly read online these days, we wanted, upfront, to contextualize just what you’re reading: the most recent installment of an annual series of essays dating back to 2005, an ongoing engagement with the poetry of North America that, although uncollected, reads well from the beginning. So if you’re interested in poetry for children, do yourself a favor, call up those earlier essays on whatever database you may be using (or—is such a thing still possible?—head over to your bookcase), and take a look at what’s been going on in the world of children’s poetry for the last several years. We hope you dig what we’ve been laying down.

Back in 1979, *Signal* judge Aidan Chambers explained, “Our hope is that the Signal Award, by its presence if not by our comments, will encourage poets and publishers to think more readily, more keenly and more challengingly about not just the conventional and obvious, but the untried opportunities we believe are to be found in writing and publishing for children” (39). We share similar hopes. Yet this year, our lucky number seven, we were struck

by how many missed opportunities we discovered in our piles of submissions. Of course a missed opportunity can lead to good fortune as often as it leads to frustration. In “An Unread Book,” Randall Jarrell suggests that “a novel is a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it” (50). A similar definition may apply to a book of children’s poetry: a collection of poems with something wrong with it. Often, this “something wrong” is difficult to pinpoint, and just as often it may be what makes the work strange, unsettling, and, indeed, successful. It may be in the poems themselves, a metrical quirk, say, or it may lay in the book’s design, its art, the way the illustrations speak to or shout over the text. It is an element that becomes, sometimes, provocative, or, more often, irritating. And as the oyster knows, not all irritants become pearls. We remind ourselves consistently that we are, after all, judging *books* of children’s poetry, not individual children’s poems, so it is the artifact we praise or condemn. This year’s winner, Susan Blackaby’s *Nest, Nook & Cranny*, illustrated by Jamie Hogan, is not only a fine collection of poetry, but also succeeds as a book to be grasped and looked at. It somehow makes graceful the dreaded “informative nature poem” collection, transcending the genre of didactic animal books by its severe attention to poetic form, and Hogan’s pastel and charcoal pencil drawings, given depth by the visible texture of her Canson paper, decorate without overwhelming the delicate verses. Our honor books similarly blend productively design and poetry: X. J. Kennedy’s *City Kids: Street & Skyscraper Rhymes* (illustrated by Philippe Béha) is an antidote to the prevalence of nature poems in the world of children’s poetry, all the while avoiding the unfortunate over-seriousness so often accompanying treatment of life in the big city. Rob Jackson’s *Weekend Mischief* (illustrated by Mark Beech), our second honor book, is a solid offering, melding a sure sense of poetic form with winning design. However, these books are rare. More often the synergy between image and text, poetry and design is skewed one way or the other: more common are excellent poems nearly ruined by bad design, or, on the other hand, adequate poetry elevated by exceptional art.

For instance, consider C. M. Millen’s beautiful *The Ink Garden of Brother Theophane*, a narrative poem that “celebrate[s] the scribes of the Middle Ages, who turned books into great works of art.” Lavishly illustrated by Andrea Wisnewski, the pages depict our titular monk at work illuminating medieval manuscripts. The jacket explains the process Wisnewski employed to create its striking art:

Andrea begins each illustration by drawing a design and cutting it from paper. She then has the papercut design made into a plate, which she prints on a handmade press. Finally she adds color to the print with watercolor paint.

The finished product recalls the medieval woodcut while maintaining a contemporary, cartoony feel, with bright colors and thick, sure lines. It's a handsome effect. Especially delightful is the art within the art, the poems within poems, the latter adapted from actual monk marginalia, a strategy Michael Heyman found novel and refreshing. Yet this promising concept is undercut by the poetry itself. Millen's overdependence on the anapest, an anachronism less productive than Wisniewski's provocative blend of the old and the new, is ultimately off-putting. Why Millen chose a meter associated with the nineteenth century is anyone's guess, but in doing so she missed a grand opportunity to introduce young people to medieval, accentual meters (like those of many folk and nursery rhymes, as well as actual medieval religious verse like "The Dream of the Rood"). Consider these lines, which seem like outtakes from "A Visit from St. Nicholas":

Then each at his desk,
they bowed their brown heads
to quietly copy
wise words they had read.

The stage was set for the poetry to go somewhere fresh—a blending, as in the illustrations, of the old and new—but Millen chose to play it safe.

More problematic are Karen Beaumont's *Shoe-la-la* and Jackie Mims Hopkins's *Our Texas*. Winning the award for Most Cynical Cash-in, *Shoe-la-la*, is *Sex in the City* for "ritzy-glitz / glamour girl"-poetasters-in-training. Four girls, whose fatal flaw is shopper's indecision, spend the day wallowing in shoes, so that they might "show off [their] pretty feet" and be properly shod for their career choices of "Cow girl . . . / Rock star . . . / Princess . . . / [and] Bride . . ." Yes, folks, it seems "bride" is the pinnacle of fantasy "careers." We only regret that illustrator LeUyen Pham chose not to add just a little more sparkle to the wash of glitter on the cover, as this might have bedazzled us into consumerist ecstasy. Born in "Tyler, Texas, during the annual Texas Rose Festival," Hopkins offers children of all nations and creeds *Our Texas*, which, like *Shoe-la-la*, may not steer children toward poetry, but certainly may drive them to attend a "tour of the aquarium" in Corpus Christi, or give them a hankering for the "very well known" pink grapefruit of Brownsville. In *Essays on Practical Education* (1798) Maria Edgeworth allowed children but one toy, a "substantial cart" (2), and, appropriately, each of Hopkins' verses is a kind of rickety barrow filled to overflowing with the virtues of various Texas cities. In San Antonio, don't you know, "The loveliest spot is the fine River Walk— / a great place to dine, take a stroll, or just talk." And in the face of global warming and our struggling economy, what child wouldn't want to read about Houston's "oil barons," who "crave Texas tea!" (More puzzling is Hopkins' claim "That black gold's a priceless commodity.")

No wonder our markets are wonky.) In both these books poetry is mostly an afterthought, a spoonful of saccharine to assist readers in choking down homeopathic medicine of questionable value.

Considering that our award winner this year—*Nest, Nook & Cranny*—is also, in a way, a “substantial cart” in practical nature education, we should take a moment for the more typical ramshackle constructions that crowd children’s book lists. As high as Jane Yolen soars in her anthology *Switching on the Moon* (see below), so she is brought low with *An Egret’s Day*, another inessential collection of nature poems adorned with photographs that could come from any number of other inessential collections of nature poems. What sets this one apart? Facts! About the animals! Did you know that the egret makes its nest of sticks and reeds? Evidently it’s true. One doesn’t have to look far, even in our relatively small pool of submissions, for similar volumes that promote facts over poetry, such as Stephen R. Swinburne’s *Ocean Soup: Tide-Pool Poems*, a googly-eyed sea-creature trifle with a similar late-night infoverse design. Facts on barnacles (they “fasten themselves to any surface”) are paired with Spice Girls-esque “rap”: “Don’t want no crab. / Don’t want no prawn. / All I wanna eat / is fresh plankton.” Each page of Michael McCurdy’s *Walden Then & Now* is filled with a long paragraph of prose doling out disposable details of Thoreau’s wilderness experiment, a single line of alphabet verse hovering above like a cirrus cloud. Unfortunately, McCurdy’s well-composed, graceful woodcuts are not recompense for the thin poetry trailing along the top margin, more like a title than a line of verse. McCurdy, like the other poets mentioned here, tends to get run over by his own substantial cart. When we step back from all of these flawed specimens and see what Blackaby can do with the genre, we realize how much potential is actually there.

Although the award emphasizes volumes of new and original poetry, we have always prized anthologies, and this year we take pleasure in discussing a few of the best we’ve received, most notably *Switching on the Moon: A Very First Book of Bedtime Poems*, a stunning collection by Jane Yolen and Andrew Fusek Peters. Admirably, the editors managed to acquire from established poets many pieces newly written or first published for this volume. Furthermore, the poets range from old-timers like Roger McGough and Marilyn Singer, to fresh (but not inexperienced) voices like Roger Stevens and Cynthia Cotton. A few surprising canonical voices pop up, such as Alfred Lord Tennyson, Sylvia Plath, and Langston Hughes, but they play well with the others, thanks, in part, to G. Brian Karas’s glowing illustrations. The book progresses through three sections, “Going to Bed,” “Sweet Dreams,” and “In the Night,” ending with the first hints of morning. The illustrations convey mixed feelings about nighttime—the fear, wonder, and comfort—by combining an imposing darkness with some kind of light source, a safe zone, or a human focus. The final result is full of echoes, revelatory moonlight, and shadows.

The echoes begin with a few traditional verses threaded throughout, but these are not simply for the sake of familiarity; rather, they are sounding boards for newer pieces. Near the beginning, for instance, we encounter Jane Taylor's classic "The Star," but then deeper in we hear its echoes in Cynthia Cotton's "Night Light" and John Agard's "Twinkle Twinkle Firefly":

Twinkle
Twinkle
Firefly
Lend the dark
your sparkling eye. (65)

Sometimes the relationship occurs on the same two-page spread. Darker poems, such as Karla Kuskin's "Wordless Words" are balanced with lighter ones, like Polly Peters' "Bedtime Chant for the Tooth Fairy." In the former, we find "Wordless words. / A tuneless tune. / Blow out the sun. / Draw down the shade. / Turn off the dog. / Snap on the stars. / Unwrap the moon" (66). Here, echoing repetition, assonance, alliteration, internal rhymes, and long vowel sounds help to haunt the night, while, contrariwise, Karas's illustration keeps away the gloom: the top half of the spread is a closing shade, whereas the bottom half depicts a bright fairy from Peters' sunshiner "Bedtime Chant for the Tooth Fairy," which intones, "Robin redbreast, swallow, swift, / Wake to find a silver gift" (67). Here, as with many of the poems, the night is both dangerous and safe, uncanny and cozy. We leave this volume with mixed feelings about the night, an ambivalence expressed best in Eleanor Farjeon's "The Night Will Never Stay": "Though with a million stars / You pin it to the sky," night will always "slip away / Like sorrow or a tune" (90).

Yolen and Peters' anthology is almost perfect, while others miss the mark by a wider margin. Elise Paschen's anthology *poetry speaks who I am: poems of discovery, inspiration, independence, and everything else. . . .* is one such example. Judge Michael Heyman, who teaches performance poetry and administers a Performance Poetry minor, was initially excited by this book, as it has a cover design similar to adult anthologies of performance/slam poetry by the same publisher, Sourcebooks. The cover touts, "HEAR THE POETS READ THEIR OWN WORK," and the publisher's note claims the "visceral and immediate" poems will "rock your soul." To be sure, all the judges recognized the quality of the pieces chosen. Yet the included CD will disappoint anyone who has ever heard decent performance/slam poetry. Though competent and compelling in a dry, mildly-litling Billy Collinsesque way, the performances lack the "visceral and immediate" punch of the wildly popular slam poetry movement. Where are the edgier performance poets anthologized elsewhere—even by the same publisher? As wonderful

as the selection and individual pieces are, this volume swings a big whiff when it comes to the *performance* side of poetry, the very aspect that makes it so popular with young people. Here was a chance to heal the rift between the worlds of performance poetry and “page poetry,” a battle already being fought in classrooms, a chance sadly squandered.

While we all enjoyed Rita Gray’s *One Big Rain: Poems for Rainy Days*, with its mix of freshly translated ancient haiku opposite modern seasonal poetry, we were less pleased with *Give Me Wings*, selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins, wherein capable poems are often hobbled by unintentionally terrifying illustrations of children resembling stiff, infernally gleeful zombies. We nearly came to loggerheads over *Sail Away with Me: Old and New Poems*, by Jane Collins-Philippe. Michael Heyman found puzzling the uneven selection process and organization, as well as the lack of distinction between Philippe-Collins’ many poems and the others, including mostly traditional verses, but also one piece each by Eugene Field and Edward Lear. As a result, Heyman found the volume awkward and perhaps a little self-indulgent. Michael Joseph felt he understood why Philippe-Collins selected the nine traditional poems in the volume, but not the canonical and oft-reprinted “Wynken, Blynken and Nod” by Eugene Field, or “The Owl and the Pussycat” by Edward Lear. That question aside, we found common ground in admiration for the lyrical, salty flavor of her original poems, a quality plainly evident in the volume’s concluding lullaby:

Baby’s boat’s the silver moon
Sailing in the sky,
Sailing o’er the sea of sleep,
While the clouds float by.

This piece demonstrates Collins-Philippe’s affection for both traditional sea poetry and the sea of which it sings; one might say that her poems have been carved from the same substrate out of which the traditional poems arose.

The first of our two honor books, X.J. Kennedy’s *City Kids: Street & Skyscraper Rhymes*, delivers the traditionalism one expects from Kennedy, a critic, poet, and anthologist intimately familiar with traditional poetry for both children and adults, while remaining fresh and contemporary (a freshness marred only insofar as the collection includes eight previously published poems). *City Poems* perfectly balances poetry, art, and design, Philippe Béha’s color-saturated illustrations vaguely suggestive of spray paint, and Elisa Gutiérrez’s simple yet elegant design superbly framing both art and text with its wide, generous margins. The second poem in the volume sets the mood, thumbing its nose at more typical bucolic nature poetry for children:

Who needs cow moos
and bleating sheep?
Give me a taxi
with a wicked BEEP! (12)

Kennedy celebrates the urban landscape with street vendors and performers, subways, museums, graffiti, car crashes, and summertime open fire hydrants. Like other collections of urban poetry for children, such as Langston Hughes’ *The Dream Keeper* (1932), *City Kids* includes both the lighter and darker aspects of the city. Kennedy carefully portrays homelessness in “Singapore Shorty” (though *must* Shorty’s wife be a “crazy old lady”?), pollution in “Where Will We Run To?” single-parent families in “Tires,” and gives a beautiful, simple portrait of a 9/11 fireman:

I think about how Anthony met
The worst fire ever, all
Those people running hollering down stairs
In the World Trade tower ready to fall,
And Anthony, holding his face to the fire,
Climbing to face it, higher, higher. (80)

Unlike Hughes who writes in newly-acquired urban forms like blues and spirituals, Kennedy rarely uses the poetic forms of the city, though there is one notable exception in “Keeping the Beat,” a rap that actually works (which is no small accomplishment for an octogenarian poet):

Want to race like a spaceship,
decompress,
want to rocket uptown
like the Pony Express. (42)

Vestiges of his generation show through, however, not just in references like the “Pony Express,” but also in other pieces where “modern” talk about computers and pop music are a bit awkward, like your mother humming pop tunes while driving the junior high carpool. There’s not much experimentation with form in *City Kids*, which is a shame, as its more formally inventive pieces are often quite successful, such as “Hoops Haiku” and “The Man with the Tan Hands,” which unfolds eloquently down the page:

The man
with the tan
hands
who stands
and scoops up
roast

chest-
nuts
in cups
of old
news
folded
like perching
birds
sold
me a few
new words. (40)

A little experimentation, with carefully woven rhythm and rhyme, makes magical an otherwise mundane street scene.

One of *City Kids*' many strengths is Kennedy's ability to take the poetic subject's perspective instead of his own. In "Aquarium," Kennedy imagines how fish might see us, a squid commenting, "Hey, where's your fishfins, kid?" (30). "How to Watch Statues" teaches a kind of aesthetic patience, a willingness to let art create dialogue with us on its own terms:

All you do is stand
In front of a statue
Till, ready to talk,
It looks right at you. (26)

We feel for the elephant of "In San Diego Zoo" and see the city from the sun's perspective in "Roofscape," an extraordinary poem that includes a kind of urban beatification:

Tanks stuffed full of water
like dragonflies perch.
A skyscraper shadows
a low-kneeling church. (74)

Behá's illustration shows a child peering over the rooftop, with the church far below, and above his head a flattened out sun that looks more like a halo.

The focus on urban landscape is not without some weaknesses. A few of the poems are written for specific cities, though Kennedy rarely takes advantage of the potentials of site-specific culture. The most distinctive markers in "Sword Play," set in Quebec, are that the characters have French names and are eating French bread. "Keeping the Beat," while a good rap, seems to have no clear relation to San Francisco, the city named in the subtitle, except perhaps loosely with the Pony Express. Overall, however, Kennedy succeeds often enough to make this volume stand out. He injects more levity into the city than one might expect (the world of children's poetry remains largely

Arcadian, the urban space primarily a backdrop for didactic "poetry" more akin to public service announcements or afternoon specials than anything a human being would call art). With *City Kids*, Kennedy achieves a balance between the woes of urban life and a sense of beauty and community.

While *City Kids* is a large, sumptuous book, fit to honor the 2009 Robert Frost Medal for a distinguished lifetime of service to American poetry, Rob Jackson's thirty-one-page *Weekend Mischief* is physically more modest, weighing in at slightly less than half its size, though it is no less deserving of being our second Honor Book. The second book of poems by Jackson, *Weekend Mischief* offers twenty lyrical poems that playfully express the potential of poetic form. "Road Trip" leads us away from the city and back to the country, deftly evoking the magical moment that motorists experience when they turn the wheels of their automobile off of the highway and onto a quiet country road:

We leave the interstate behind
Ignore McDonald's, Colonel Sanders
Find some smaller roads that wind
A slower trail that still meanders

The delightful Sanders/meanders rhyme provides the sort of shock that one reliably finds in poems by X. J. Kennedy. But if Jackson's stanza lacks the kind of subversive pop we expect from Kennedy, its gently didactic insistence on the charms of language is ample consolation. By making evocative use of internal rhyme (find/wind) and consonance (small, slower, trail, still), the stanza musically prepares us for the introduction of the uncommon word "meanders," so that the turn from interstate to country trail feels almost like a turn from prose to poetry—a move deepened or made more resonant by Jackson's artful use of the provocatively oxymoronic "still." (One is reminded of Yeats' famous line from "Lapis Lazuli": "Or lofty slope where it still snows.") Combined with Jackson's idiosyncratic decision to dispense with endstops, "still meanders" leads or misleads the reader away from the poem's linear narrative and into contemplation rather than consumption.

A similar kind of poetic self-signifying occurs in "Campfire," a poem of four stanzas (three tercets and one quatrain) that offer rhymes for *dragon* (*brag on*, *gag on*, and *bag on*). While the first two stanzas conclude with *dragon* rhymes, the third, which happens to be the poem's only quatrain, concludes with a rhyme for "yellows" ("marshmallows"). The fourth stanza returns dutifully to the tercet form and as well to the poem's signature rhyme. However, the single, anomalous quatrain, with its own self-contained rhyming pattern, suffices to give the concluding *dragon* rhyme additional visibility. The poem therefore concludes with an amusing, perhaps even an explosive, phonological crisis, as well as with a nimble virtuosic trick:

And my friend the unicorn
 Roasts the marshmallows on its horn
 The whole bag on.

Sensitized to the rhyme, we are made to wonder at its provocative instability: do we emphasize “bag” or “on”? Jackson seems to be making a joke of our uncertainty and, wrapping around that joke, the stanza appears to be poking fun at its own torturous game of rhyming by embedding this enigmatic rhyme within the equally preposterous image.

Since the question inevitably arises in discussion of poetic technique and children’s poetry, we would mention here that unlike James Janeway’s children, who intuitively grasp the complexities of Calvinist doctrine before they die, Jackson’s child readers surely won’t admire his sophistication or naively grasp the complexity of his poetic meter. Yet they can and will perceive his poetry’s rigorously complex music, and they may also find themselves reacting to its effects. Their curiosity might be piqued. We rejoice in the underlying premise—of this collection and the others we have awarded—that good poetry is the best way of calling children’s attention to poetry.

In awarding this year’s *The Lion and the Unicorn* prize to Susan Blackaby’s animal book *Nest, Nook & Cranny*, we have not failed to appreciate the role animal poems have played in the history of children’s poetry. Early English examples date back to at least Isaac Watts, whose works are known better to us—and if at all to children—through the cantankerous parodies in Carroll’s Alice books (which we fear may themselves have become as wearisome to many children as “Against Idleness and Mischief” and “The Sluggard” were to Carroll). Mostly later than Watts, the ladybirds, pussycats, dogs, pigs, fishes, robins, and wrens of nursery verse figure prominently in the history of the genre, too, as do the singing, lovelorn, and nonsensical brutes of Edward Lear, which are scarcely more animal-like than that towering icon, the Stan Laurel-esque eponym of the unforgettable animal poem, *The Cat in the Hat*.

A crucial part of the tradition, if long forgotten, are the animal poems generated during the *La Nouvelle Vague* of early nineteenth-century-children’s poetry, for example the immense allegorical bestiary of Ann and Jane Taylor, with its worms, goats, snails, foxes, crows, linnets, robins, pigs, squirrels, ducks, mice, lobsters, weasels, turtles, bees, spiders, monkeys, sharks, peacocks, turtles, glowworms, hens, hyenas, wolves, buzzards, bees, beavers, swans, and of course cats and dogs, to say nothing of the little lamb of Sarah J. Hale, which seems to follow children’s literature everywhere *it* goes. One might say, it seems to be stalking children’s verse.

This abundant presence of nineteenth-century animality follows from the animal poems authored by the great first-generation Romantics, William Blake and William Wordsworth, liminally children’s poets, who, rather than

the cartoonlike creations of the nonsense poets (in whose jolly crew we include Dr. Seuss) are the immediate inspiration for the animal poems written or published for a cross-over audience by twentieth-century icons like Ted Hughes, Theodore Roethke, T. S. Eliot, and the incomparable *Bat-Poet* poet, Randall Jarrell. Between then (mid-twentieth century) and now looms a teeming population of authors industriously crafting animal poems for children, over which we will happily vault to end back where we started, with *Nest, Nook & Cranny*, pausing, before we land, to note that *The Lion and the Unicorn* Award has once before been given to a collection of animal poems, JonArno Lawson’s mouthwatering *A Voweller’s Bestiary* (2008). And this year, as we have already noted *in passim*, we received a large number of books of animal poems, still more that included animal poems in them, and, as a matter of fact, we would be hard-pressed to find even one that lacked an animal poem completely, or over which the imminent possibility of an animal poem didn’t hover. Even in the *City*.

The twenty-one short, lyrical poems in *Nest, Nook & Cranny* are arranged according to habitat: desert, grassland, shoreline, wetland, and woodland. As the arrangement unambiguously announces, the poems are naturalistic rather than allegorical, Romantic, or nonsensical. They do not instruct us in virtue or depravity, exemplify categorical boundaries, or present us with animals singing merry gibberish. Rather, they aim to convey incisively some information about the animal, or about the experience of observing or thinking about the animal. In this latter, phenomenological area, one might say that Blackaby makes furtive sorties across the border between the strictly scientific and the imaginary. She transcends the stringent restrictions of her task (to illustrate) by focusing on the poetic, so that, happily for city critters like us who don’t really feel they want to know too much about snakes, tortoises, moles, and so forth, there is still a lot to enjoy.

Blackaby can be deceptively simple and transparent, as she is in her mouse poem, “A critter skittles through a door.” This odd sort of sonnet consists of seven rhymed couplets, but, although the first four lines (the poem is not broken into stanzas) are in iambic tetrameter, with the first foot of line three inverted, the next four lines are in trochaic tetrameter. The meter has shifted, as the eighth line, “You can hear him switch positions,” directly tells us, a shift reminiscent of the movement of the mouse: this twitchy little mouse of a line ends with three trochaic feet, yet its skittish first foot scans one moment trochaic (“*YOU* can”) and the next pyrrhic (“you can”). The poem continues in trochaic tetrameter until the final line, where it plays another neat trick:

In the insides of the house
There lives a mouse.

The final, severely shortened line (a mouse without a tail?) of two iambic feet returns to the meter of the beginning of the poem. Additionally, Blackaby indents the final couplet, so that the lines physically start within the imaginary rectangular borders of the poem, what one might stretch to imagine as the house of the poem; the pulse of the accented syllables suggests the movement and life of the mouse. Cool, right? Well, consider that the final line of iambic dimeter echoes the similarly shortened concluding verse of Robert Burns' famous "To a Mouse" (no children's poem, to be sure, but commonly found poking about in anthologies like Burton Egbert Stevenson's *The Home Book of Verse for Young Folk*, doubtlessly because of its mousy subject):

An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Consider also that the word "skittles" in the first line of Blackaby's poem echoes "sleekit" in Burns' first line ("Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie"), and that her "mousie," in line eleven ("With his mousie congregation, / Nibbling on the insulation": note the obsolete spelling) unmistakably echoes Burns use in one of the most famous lines in Scottish poetry:

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley.

In these nooks and crannies of meaning and allusion are little treasures to be savored, above and beyond the imagistic clarity and sonic directness available to all readers.

As we see in her use of the sonnet form, Blackaby makes creative use of adopting poetic forms to pragmatic ends. In "Hawks circle fields and furrows," Blackaby uses the triolet, with its two rhymes and asymmetrically repeating first line (three times) and second (twice), to configure the monotonous spirals that hawks trace in the air. While in "Some would find a beaver lodge quite cozy," she chooses the intricate villanelle to comment on the industriousness of the beaver. We couldn't help reflecting on other villanelles, those chestnuts by Dylan Thomas, William Empson, W. H. Auden, and Anne Sexton: funnily, we could suddenly see a little beaver in all of them, even in Theodore Roethke's heavy-hearted "The Waking."

Blackaby's poems do not need this kind of literary excavation to be enjoyed, but they do reward it. Take, for instance, Blackaby's bear poem, "Bears spend the wintertime slumbering snuggled." In her companionable notes on "Writing Poetry" at the end of the book, she has this to say about the meter: "The strong-weak-weak combination is called a dactyl, a waltz tempo that is

very bearlike" (47). As in the case of the villanelle above, Roethke springs nimbly to mind. Not only is "My Papa's Waltz" bearlike, but Roethke insisted he *himself* was "a sort of dancing bear" (Hamilton 335), writing in his poem "Four for Sir John Davies" that he has "made a promise to my ears / I'll sing and whistle dancing bears" (5–6). More immediately relevant to this associative chain is Roethke's humorous poem "The Lady and the Bear" ("Tell me, dear Bear there by the Stream, / Why are you fishing that way?"). Roethke and his "Biddly Bear" haunt Blackaby's sure, allusive verses:

Bears spend the wintertime slumbering snuggled,
With noses, ears, bellies, and paws in a huddle.
Bears wait for spring things, like berries and trout.
When springtime arrives, caved-in bears lumber out.

This last line reminds us that Blackaby's poems are not written for scholars, and may not really need them except to point out they are indeed layered and tend inexorably toward aesthetic bliss. "Caved-in" bears is a wonderful, carefully observed pun: after a winter hibernation, slimmed down bears really do look concave.

In describing bees, Blackaby (who is herself a kind of bee) writes, "When the workers' busy workday ends, / They take off in a beeline for the comb," where they will "get the latest buzz from all the drones." In her otter poem, "thoughtful otters" do not remember to cross their t's and dot their i's, yet they do "dot the ocean"; and the poet puns on the phrase "pray tell" by way of asking, "What prey, tell, do otters dwell on?" (Answer: "Anything that has a shell on.") Flies caught in a spider web "stick around 'til dinnertime" because "(She never eats alone.)" (Parentheses, you see, because once you have read this far into the poem, gentle reader, you are also caught in her web.) And in one of our favorite poems, since city folk have these as well, Blackaby describes bugs: they "hunker / Under junk," "bunk in / Garden bunkers," and in other small crevices and fissures "Meant for creatures / Of a very / Tiny type." The size of the letters in her last line drops by a few points, so "Tiny type" appears in tiny type. Blackaby slyly demonstrates how poetry makes hay of the unpredictability of words, phonologically, morphologically, and typographically.

While all of the poems are light verse, Blackaby's studiousness about poetry is everywhere evident and impressive. While several books in this year's batch comment in various ways on the writing experience—*The Robin Makes a Laughing Sound*, for instance, as well as performance poet, Sara Holbrook's *Zombies! Evacuate the School*, which includes very helpful and sometimes hilarious notes in bubbles in the margins of her pages—*Nest, Nook & Cranny* adds ten pages of endnotes about the poems. This sec-

tion appears to be meant as a teaching tool, and one hopes children reread the poems after reaching the endnotes, and that instructors do not reverse the process or invert the importance of the texts by reducing the poems to exempla. As instructive as the notes are in relating information about form and genre, explaining, for example, the elements that constitute villanelles, triolets, cinquains, Shakespearean sonnets, among other verse forms as well as particulars of prosody, what we find truly remarkable here is Blackaby's generosity in providing the reader with real inside baseball tips about how she thinks about language or solves specific poetic problems. For example, in discussing her hermit crab poem, she says she wanted to keep the language "tightly packed to match how the crab fits itself into a shell," and that she "repeated word parts (*curled, curlicue*) to make the sounds overlap just as the crab parts have to overlap" (44). This note in particular demonstrates how making meaning of a poem, as much as the writing of it, is an imaginative act, a kind of linguistic alchemy. We found these discussions exciting and often were informed by them, envisioning ideal teaching situations in which knowledgeable instructors admitted to students that they, also, overlooked interesting poetic structures, and then reread the poems from the same exploratory position. Of course, revealing elements of composition is dangerous, as the revelation may not inspire the readers to look more deeply into the poem, but may tempt them to reread the poems merely to get the point. So that, for example, the reader reexamining "The hermit crab must somehow squeeze," stanza two,

He tumbles with each tug of tide,
Curled in a curlicue inside
The twisted whorls of others' shells:
Periwinkles, whelks, or snails[.]

might now perceive how the imbricated sounds in "Curled in a curlicue inside" show the overlapping bodyparts of the crab, but might complacently leave it at that, and miss how the line twists into "The twisted whorls of others' shells," or how it uses enjambment to exemplify and embody several things at once—the actual physical twists in the shell and the tumbling of the tide—or how the stanza's second couplet deploys imperfect rhyme to illustrate that it is the hermit crab's lot in life to make do in an imperfect world. Still worse, perhaps the poet's gloss will lead, or mislead, readers into thinking they can now dispense with critical commentary! They would therefore not linger to hear us say that in "The twisted whorls of others' shells," Blackaby is quietly signaling, or indeed paying homage, to a line in "Crazy Jane Reproved" by W. B. Yeats, "To round that shell's elaborate whorl." Critics have observed that Yeats meant the "elaborate whorl" to represent structures in a poem, and

intended the poem, itself, to be a comment on the excruciating exactingness of writing poetry, a concern treated elegantly in *Nest, Nook & Cranny*.

In the front matter, Blackaby writes, "My habitat is a wooded garden that used to be a dense rain forest." That may indeed be where she lives, but clearly her natural habitat is poetry, and it is in recognition of her extraordinary negotiation of that terrain that we make *Nest, Nook & Cranny* the 2011 winner of *The Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry. Blackaby's collection, alongside our honor books, *City Kids* and *Weekend Mischief*, remind us that no matter how large or small its subject, North American children's poetry remains as vital and vibrant as ever. Furthermore, these books and the many other winners and honor books we've engaged over the last seven years testify not only to the possibilities inherent in the children's *poem*, but also suggest the opportunities unique to the interplay of art, design, and verse possible only in the *book* of children's poetry, that special collaboration of poet, artist, and publisher. We remain thrilled to have the opportunity to discuss such quality work, and look forward to those future books that, as Aidan Chambers wrote in 1979, explore the as of yet "untried opportunities we believe are to be found in writing and publishing for children" (39). We hope you'll be around for the ride.

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