

President's Prizes

President's Prize winners set new precedent of conservatism

By PAULETTE PEIROL

Judging by this year's entries in York's third annual President's Prize literary contest, "there is a trend toward more conservatism in writing," says Prof. Matthew Corrigan, head of the Creative Writing Department. "It's less experimental than 10 years ago." Yet Corrigan also notes that creative writing is "alive and well, particularly prose."

The winners are:

POETRY:

Penny Johnston: *A Time for Planting*

Laura Lush: *In the Quiet*

FICTION:

Mark Kemp: *Road Signs*

Margot Rosenberg: *The Barracuda*

STAGE-PLAY:

David Burgess: *The Great One*

For the second year in a row, there was no prize awarded in the screenplay category. All of the literary winners are second and third year students, and each winner is awarded \$250. In the case of tie-breakers, the award is split between the two winners.

Excalibur showcases the award-winning work of these five authors:

"Road Signs" (excerpt)

What an incredible imagination he was cursed with, what terrible conceits it plunged him into, he thought, hearing now only his thoughts and the rain like a metronome timing them. The afternoon was wearing on, yet he was unaware of time; the somnolent little villain with its silly girls was far behind and nothing was ahead. Nothing, he hoped, but rain, solitude, and more rain. No bakery girls or milkmaids. His mind circled, unwilling, back to the morning at the guest farm.

He had caught up with the girl in the barn. He presumed she was going there at such an hour to milk the cows. Keeping his voice low and friendly, he tried to speak to her but stumbled after bonjour, and the surprise and fear visible in the early dawnlight in her face as she turned halted his efforts.

He began again but she stopped him with a smile—at least her eyes glinted in the dim light; he couldn't see the lower part of her face—and a flood of words. He could pick no meaning from her quick speech, but he translated its inflections into warm suggestive English in his mind.

"Nathalie! OÙ es-tu?" the raspy voice of her mother suddenly called. James could hear boots on the soggy straw outside the barn. He jumped quickly into the shadows and hoped she had not heard or seen him.

The pale light on the girl's high cheek and the focus of her brow were still suspended before his eyes, reflecting from the black rain-washed surface of the road, ten hours later as he rode. Rain ran from his hood over this face, into his eyes, down his cheeks.

Other than his feet he was actually quite dry under the wide paunch that was stretched over the handlebars like a canopy. The hood enclosed him, isolated him, eliminating all sound but that of the rain beating its rhythms on the thick rubber. The world was reduced to the grey watery circle straight ahead; the perimeters were the edges of the rainhood. When he looked down at the pavement sliding by like a river below him, he saw her face there. But when he looked up, his eye sockets filled with rain and blurred his vision. Rain ran over his nose and lips and seeped into his mouth. He drank, opening his mouth to let the streams of rain run in; he was drunk with drinking rain. Cool, clean, cleansing, it was better than all the perrier, cognac, beaujolais in France.

by Mark Kemp

"The Barracuda" (excerpt)

Finally.

The hotel beach, bordered by dark gray jagged rocks, is small but it has a fabulous lagoon—waist deep water clear as a window, with a white sandy bottom. It is an aquarium of beautiful little fish. Pink, white and violet sea anemones blossom on the walls of the shallow cave forming in the cliff. She is in a Jacques Cousteau film surrounded by teeming splinters of silver-shimmering, sparkling. How is it possible to be in such a dense blizzard and yet not feel the touch of a single fish? A silvery flash and all ten million about-face as one. Why do they do that? Some master mind among them, a leader, impulsively turned them around, with no anxiety about his power or the correct use of it. Or are they of a single mind, the Universal Mind, or no mind, not caring what their peers, their lovers, their mates and children are thinking?

Something green squirms against the ragged rock. A giant sea slug, all eight inches of him, unencumbered by relationships with other sea slugs, is finding his dinner, eating at his own pace, by himself. Gloria looks up into real life to see what Bruce is doing. He seems to be enjoying himself, testing his new snorkel and examining the sea life.

"I'm going to explore out there."
"Don't go far," he says, extending his warning tentacles.

She swims outside the lagoon into the bluer deeper water. Could those be what she thinks they are? She can't let herself believe she is this close to barracuda, yet she continues swimming, keeping a respectful distance, along the ragged submerged cliffs. Bruce is following. They swim leisurely, enchanted by the variety of fish, pointing out to each other especially fanciful designs—iridescent blue polka dots, purple and yellow stripes, turquoise bodies with orange lips. A fantasia of fish. After a while Bruce grabs her big toe. She turns and he points back toward the opening. Even in the water he asserts his control over her. They return, passing the barracuda, and enter the lagoon.

by Penny Johnston

"A Time for Planting" (excerpt)

I buried myself today
in the backyard
beside the garage
Dug a deep deep hole with my hands
and let myself fall in
pulling the ground on top of me
like a lover

The way the earth worms itself against my raw skin
makes me itch
but I can't scratch
in this hole
too heavy for motion

The gritty dirt sucks inside my nostrils
with every breath
I try to take
unearthly sounds like dying whales
strike my ear's
drum
echoing

My eyes dried
My fists clenched
My covered tongue
as rough as a cat's
I taste the earth
and feel my pregnant belly grow

Upstairs in my room, I've left a note
for you
explaining
I wait
and grow forgetful
silent as the earth
my rounded belly blossoming upwards
like grass
scarring the flat ground

by Margot Rosenberg

"In the Quiet" (excerpt)

Near remote pine
the women huddle around the fire
shelling nuts, husking stars
hollow into the wind.
One by one they stub their voices out
on the soft thick of smoke.
Coals smoulder, pulling off the last bits of flame.

In the morning they awaken to the strange silence of trees,
the sparrows secreting in the damp shade of leaves.
Their fingers skim the air for signs.
They cannot explain what their hands can't hold.
They drink, their tongues whittled clean
by the boil of cedar root.

At dusk, they lug their hearts over the hills. Coyotes
hang at their skirts, snapping at shadows.
Behind them their smiles ghost in the branches of trees.
They wade through curls of fern, picking the last of
morels, leeks.
Above a lunar smell musts.
The night draws on like the quiet moan of a river
rushing over stone.

by Laura Lush

"The Great One" (excerpt)

DONNY

Don't talk down to me. I'm saying that the highlight of my whole career was being chosen third star on Hockey Night in Canada in a game my last place team lost, Four to Two. My great accomplishment was shooting the puck from behind the net so it did a Minnesota Fats ricochet past Bruce Camble, and passing the puck another time to Bob Berry, who took it all the way down the ice for what, by all rights, should've been an unassisted goal.

JANE

So?

DONNY

So? I was on the California Golden Seals, for Christ sakes! My best ever memory, at Maple Leaf Gardens, skating out as one of the three stars, I'm on the California Golden Seals! I'm wearing green hockey pants and yellow skates! I'm wearing green hockey pants and yellow skates! YELLOW SKATES! Try telling that to your kids sometime when you know they're gonna ask you if you ever did anything as great as their uncle Bob!

JANE

A lot of guys don't even have that, look at Dougan.

DONNY

I was traded the next week to Detroit and they sent me to Hershey. I wasn't even in the league long enough to be called Suitcase Ryan. I'm not on a single bubblegum card.

JANE

Alright, already.

DONNY

You don't understand. I didn't make teams 'cuz I could skate or shoot; I made 'em cuz maybe I could punch-out a Plager brother or a Ferguson or somebody.

JANE

You made them with what you had.

DONNY

I'm saying if Bobby came up to me swinging a stick I'd've had to fight him, too.

JANE

If someone like Bobby came up to you, you wouldn't have tried to remove his head.

DONNY

I didn't say, "like Bobby", I said: Bobby. And by Jesus . . . I would.

by David Burgess