Parallel Universe

2nd Parallel Universe Poetry Competition Winners 2013
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Refraction

Manhandling a mirror across a concrete walkway
we’ve caught the sky; a contrail
unspooling in the bluest air,
the skin of the Thames mixing it
with glints from propellers and waves
and upraised hands on cruise-ships.

We had the world to juggle with.
The mirror caught all this
as we shuffled slowly back,
the rain sheathing the glass like glass,
as we saw, with double-sight,
each rain-drop gliding backwards through time
and yielding to the swelling clouds
making this my one attempt at skywriting.

Roy Woolley
X-ray

Though the bone’s fine –
unbroken arc of hip
a mottled half moon –

my caught gaze widens in surprise
to your thigh’s white field,
its pencilled fence of skin.

X-ray stencil broken bones,
ostensibly fractured spirits,
even a messiah’s mending face.

Strange then to see suddenly
this living trace of human flesh,
visible but completely missed for years,

revealed now like a trick, like science,
loud once the sound stops dead.

Samir Guglani
Transplanted

The gardeners sow the ‘seeds’
into rows of furrowed flesh,
stripped to protein skeletons.

Stem cells multiply, colonise, grow …

From these ‘ghost’ chambers
hollowed into pig and rat hearts,
a strange hope beats.

Wonders multiply, colonise, grow …

In this orchard, stripped bare
of apples, branches bend
with pulsating flesh.

Windfalls cruelly multiply.

Sarah James
Knockout Mouse Model

*A knockout mouse is a genetically engineered mouse in which researchers have reactivated, or “knocked out” an existing gene.*

Its body & blood are teaching tools; islands of the genome’s archipelago disabled, the conditioned chaos observed. Most won’t grow past the embryo, designed for dissection & microscopic eyes. A scientist spends his lunch hour contemplating the concealed sides of its origami heart.

How to say that suffering should yield something? How to say *trespass, hope, progress* stowed in the lax body, in one utterance?

Terror is imagining the human body intruded upon in this way, its furniture rearranged & forced to breed children. Someone coming in the night with helix scissors, clipping your eye color, turning off your hearing, switching out your liver for a third kidney, all of it happening slowly, like an old movie reel.

I feel my cells retreat into my fingers ready to defend their information.

In a gentler, cartoonier universe, the mice would be anthropomorphically attractive: knockouts, mice who model. They’d drink n the house wherever they went, twirling their tails flirtatiously.

Tonight, the unstudied, parasitic mice are having the night of their lives, scaring couples on stoops, freeloading meals from granite floors. Deli cats hear them pacing behind walls. The excitement of their tiny footsteps is excruciating.

An off-duty scientist is breeding something for fun, to see what happens if – what happens? Nature’s mice are breaking & entering, slipping under doors with all they need to survive.

Maya Popa
Mr Higgs

I built the tallest towers for it,
Spent months awake, wide nights cowed by the plans
Of pipes, and tunnels, slits blink-thick
And echo-chambers, fanned around like hands
So cold and steely like a womb
A man has made, in hope:
I closed a secret wish inside each room;
Here it would sleep, and play; here on this slope
We’d glimpse it first, like dust grains crushed in smoke.

I loved the time we shared at work;
Me lost in papers; desk a flat white ditch,
Defining spaces, sketching curves
Strung through with one concealed bosonic stitch.
Day by day, I learned its form
Like dust brushed from God’s bone;
I learned its size, its shape, its smell, I swore
To learn its face, that I would make it show
Its teeth, which gnashed at night, to me alone.

I changed my course to other things
Swept corners, stacked up lemmas, strung out proofs
But this boson now grew wings
And watched me from high trees and broken roofs.
Before they turned the chambers on
I ripped the plans, and wept:
The drawings on my page were paragons
Of beauty, works of art, and dreams well kept.
All real things, in comparison, were inept.

Lindsay Oldham
Anatomy Lesson, December

In December 1650, Thomas Willis and William Perry were surprised to discover that the felon whose corpse they had claimed for dissection in Petty’s rooms on Oxford’s High Street could be resuscitated.

They are, all three, still:
She lies prone on the dining table
Her throat livid where the rope has cut.
Neither Mr Petty nor Willis is ready to approach her
Though they’ve laid their pamphlets, diagrams out
As if she’s something they’ll assemble together.

A clock chimes in the city’s chilly night –
Petty approaches her, his scalpel held out straight,
As though she – Nan, who swung for her child –
Might rise and fight.

Willis flicks a pamphlet page flat,
Looks at the cross-hatched chambers of lungs
Where arrows and Latin signal spaces they will never see
Unless they do so now.
He sighs and thinks of boyhood games,
Rumours of women’s hidden spaces,
Of his mother’s body, safe in her long gown.

Petty shouts – he is beside Nan,
Clamps his mouth to her face, tilts her head –
Willis gasps, shocked at his friend’s low goal –
But the woman gives a throaty chuckle-cough –
Willis’s breath catches in his throat – a sob –
Petty’s scalpel falls – tactful Willis will later kick it out of sight –

But now, just now, they stand staring
In the grip of an ungentlemanly disappointment
At what this woman has done.

Rosemary Appleton
Account from the Leper Colony at Culion

Our souls were chartered
by this unseen shoreline
beneath the shade of palms, terrace
and bamboo
so that we may gaze through an hour
at Chinese spirals
and recall the malformed footprints of a beggar
who believed he could be
reborn upon a bright archipelago
immune to this anaesthesia. Yes,
we crouched beyond all measure of things
in some opiated palace of mosquitoes
never imagining
Our Sisters of Charity
and the caress of white cotton
in high summer
becalmed by Chaulmoogra oil
or the cool hospital arcade
where we exchange
cigarettes for coins cast in our own image
and listen to the Pacific. Yes,
when evenings are warm
the fingers of children manipulate
trumpets, drums and trombone
so this quiet, disfigured realm can rest
under God’s grace.

Paul Scott
Family unit

It’s probable
We are a well-established theory,
A proposal of unification of matter in 1972.
The magnitude of your unified decision
Cancels each other’s charges.
As gravity gathers its greatness
We escape the friction, your
Attraction, and repellent natures,
Your strange methods,
Objectives unwritten.
Your independent velocity
Displaces our elementary particles until
We are empty squares,
Poles opposite in electric air.
Our new observations gathered in
Hushed togetherness, in hiding.
Our childhood becomes a
Paper-thin palimpsest of
Skin and tears and open suitcases.
We are a puzzle to be dissected as we
Count the sand with little fingers.
In this complex new dimension, we are a
Matter of property
Travelling from A to B and back again
Always waving in one direction or another.
You, like light propelled
Not following the rules of constancy.
At least you returned to your original state;
For us it became unsolvable as you
Expressed our disorder.

Anna Hobson
Leighton, 1989

I remember the corridors’ countless tiles –
ceiling, walls, floors, stretching
blandly to an end
somewhere; an inevitable
Conclusion.
And gardens scattered occasionally:
small affairs – concrete, naturally –
breaking up the grey with
green-grey.

I remember staring at the rain scarring windowpanes,
at the paralysed trees
and the starlings;
starlings, launching themselves from diseased branches
in hysterical scrambles,
blindly hitting unseen windows.
I remember their dull eyes fixed; stony.
Dead.

And how silly it all seemed, aged eight.
“But Mummy, people come to hospital to get better!”

Katharine Wiseman
Thorium 238

I am Thorium
luke on mi magnifisens an kwiver.
Yes, I can save de world,
D-fur de inevitabble 4 a millenium
wile u punie weeklings kerb
yr pathetic adickshun 2 fossle fules.

I will skwat on a shelf an woch
yr cowerin scientists run
Xperiment after Xperiment –
presher, timing, tempretcher –
crunch de numbers lyk fish bowens.
Den yr blinkerd engineers fiddl an swet
2 get it 2 werk.

U canbild yr collider in a playgrown,
bombard me wiv protons,
thro everything u hav at me,
an 1 glorius day I will radee-ate 2 order.
I am de answer, earthlings,
Now go figger out de kwestions.

Kate Dempsey