

"I hope you have not underestimated the response you'll get and that you are ready for a downpour of verse!" writes Jack Fenwick, a reader who describes himself as an "86-year-old retired construction man who writes poetry."

Well, Jack, you're right. We received thousands of entries in the poetry contest. Taken singly or together, they illustrate vividly how scientific knowledge informs one's perceptions of the world.

The poems not chosen are in some respects as remarkable as the 19 that were. One person wrote about the gritty reality of life in a penguin colony; another composes poetry about subjects geologic as she drives home late at night from her job as a waitress. One child wrote about the seashore, another about her grandmother with Alzheimer's disease.

Special occasions inspired poetry. A sister wrote a poem for her brother, a theoretical chemist, on his wedding; a father composed verse for his daughter in honor of her promotion to computer supervisor. Many tributes were written to Carl Sagan.

Teachers write about and for their students, using rap and other verse forms to make difficult subjects easier to understand or remember. Students write about science, scientists, and hilariously failed experiments. Researchers sent poetry written in field camps in Antarctica and the badlands of South Dakota.

Choosing among the poems was difficult. In the end, the ones we selected represent a wide range, from touching to humorous. All are exceptionally fine.

 Blair Burns Potter

from How Things Are: A Suite for Lucretians

16.
We have never even, stranger, been within ourselves.
Never have I sailed the red arterial grotto
to my thick hand, have never and never
seen the mauve noon there, like the sun through squeezed lids.
I imagine the air mid-palm as dense and tropical,
but there is no air; breathing there is sub-marine,
continuous but hidden, molecular like time,
and, like time, runs without our willing

as even our will does. I say *I will walk*, but given the power
over walking, I would fall debating which nerves to fire,
which of a score of muscles to contract in order.
If I were responsible for everything in my body,
I would pass out from mismanagement of glands
I don't even know the names of. As for the legions
of mitochondria and ion channels, how would I supervise them,
and still remember to draw breath in, to beat my heart,
as if I were charged with counting *a million, a million and one*
in a million voices simultaneously?

The body is what is done for us. From it
our dream of the world's beneficence derives,
from it, too, our helplessness, since, floating above it,
we do not know what we do or how we do it.
Thus, alone or together, our intensest pleasures
are pleasures, too, because they lose us in our bodies
with a slow perfection. I taste and fail,

or let music sway me with the wide slowness
of a plucked string in strobe. *It is rich to die*, I say,
torrents of darkness filling my closed eyes:
old metaphor, but true, since it is true in dying,
by gunshot, cancer, heart attack, whatever,
the last thing is: cells starve for oxygen and go down.
All deaths, in the end, are drownings in the body,
as what desire desires is drowning in desire.

 James Richardson

At Princeton Airport

1
Over and over again
I entrust what I love
to the cold wings of the air.

The tow-line of connection
(and here I should mention
her brother in Africa)

stretches thinner and thinner
until my very motherhood
is in question and faith

falls short,
until I must shake
the snow off my coat

and hold on tight
to mechanical certainty.

2
The function of the curved wing
is not unlike
the function of the heart—

what flows past quickly
creates a vacuum
into whose emptied space

rises what I need.
I wait
with my hands in my pockets

for the twin engines
to lift her
above the water tower

above my disbelief
into the white sky
which holds her

which holds her.

 Penelope Scambly Schott

Haiku

Sir praying mantis
goes to his lady knowing
he will lose his head!

Virginal aphid,
with nary a male in sight,
mothers generations!

Snowy white egret
searches muddy waters in
yellow rubber gloves!

Three shiny leaflets
smile their poisoned message,
"Remember me? Don't touch!"

 Kristi Betts

Down's Syndrome Settling Heather

Heather and her moon-shaped face
wait at 8
p.m. for the bus.
She says she is a strong
swimmer
and I believe that
but wonder where she heard it.
I
with my correct chromosomes feel
some throbbing behind my eyes
and hate for her
her extra chromosome
because perhaps she does not.

 Mary Ann Chapman

Paloma Tomb

A seabreeze blows
The dry pampa's gray
Snow, dust of sixty
Centuries passed.

A grave beneath
My trowel smells of
Grief, a mother
Touched her child last.

Pulling away
Shrouds wrapped tight that
Gray day, briefly
I am clasped

In ancient time,
Melancholy, the
Line intersecting
Present and past.

 Robert A. Benfer, Jr.

Encounter

The lizard streaked by like a missile
launched out of the hard places
where the crusty lichens lay
on the sun-blasted limestones,
oblivious except for that frozen instant
when he impaled me with his yellow eyes,
captured me like a snapshot on his brain,
carried me back to the wild dark places
deep down inside the cool crevasses
where the heat splits the rocks
like rails under axes.

Now I wonder whether I am still there
implanted behind those yellow eyes
scratching for water in the secret places
that lizards know.

 Laurence Levine

Pinecones

A pinecone speaks softly of mathematics.
Listen to it count in curious sequence:
1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8,
Spirals to the left and right whisper
the magic numbers to the sunflowers
while pineapples applaud the secret three-fold.
A nautilus acknowledges the coded message
and rises to the surface.
Pussy willows stretch in the sun and purr
phylotactic ratios . . .
13, 21, 34,
All nature sees the simple pattern and feels
the common bond.
Connected by a simple thought,
numbers lean on other numbers for support.
Where did the sequence start and what else
repeats the count?
Who hears the sighs of geometric growth?
What living architects mimic the expansion?
Quietly nesting on the ground,
a pinecone is a most unlikely mathematician,
an unsuspected philosopher,
something you can count on.

 Judy White

Theory of the Leisure Clams


On sandy beaches open to the surf,
"Olivella, Oliva, and Donax . . .
will quickly disappear," says Arnold,
"being rapid burrowers."*

Surf brings their game, their crops, their restaurants,
their supermarkets filled with meaty plankton:
sea-babies, larval innocents—
perhaps their own.

To sandy suburbs scoot those nimble clams
who missed the last wave. Now for a while they fast,
watch wrestling on TV,
work needlepoint,

unwrap the neglected, paid-for Book-of-the-Month,
work crossword puzzles in old magazines,
antique the spare-room chest,
polish the silver,

Get on each other's nerves, discuss divorce
Twelve endless hours creep by, and some slow minutes.
The tide announces dinner,
And the clams climb.

 G.P. Winship, Jr.

*Augusta Foote Arnold, *The Sea-Beach at Ebb-Tide* (New York: Century, 1901), p. 10.

Redeeming Time

Einstein said time stayed the same
 as long as you carried it around with you,
 but if you left it behind
 it grew longer or shorter
 depending on how fast
 you tried to run away from it,
 which is why saving time
 is a waste of time
 because you can't run fast enough
 for time to stand still;
 and that, after all, may be why
 I'm saying all this to tell you
 the time of day and temperature
 compliments your local American National Bank
 and to remind you that in a couple of days
 we'll start saving daylight
 or losing night, I'm not sure which
 except I know that someone,
 sooner or later,
 is going to have to pay the bill
 for all this extra time;
 and it won't be me.

 *Bill Stifler*

A Symbol Song


Sigmund Freud
 Could not avoid
 Obsessive thoughts of sex.
 He felt these drives
 Ruled all men's lives
 (cf. Oedipus Rex).

But Truth (defined by modern mind)
 Does not such malice see,
 And says Old Sig
 Was just a prig;
 His thinking—fallacy.

 *Don Singalewitch*

Limerick

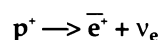
Music did not begin where men sang
 Nor when the first bow string went "twang"
 Nor with reed, nor with horn.
 No, sweet music was born
 with percussion: First came the Big Bang.

 *David Goldstein*

A reflection while shaving on the finite speed of light

Stars are further than we comprehend.
 We view at last the news they send
 and read the past. This face I see
 is out of date, a counterfeit, a sham—
 someone I was looking out at who I am.

 *Graham Walker*



They tell me a proton
 Long considered to be eternal
 May have a life of 10^{33} years
 Not much cause to worry
 But we may have to redefine
 Eternity, slightly downward

 *James R. Villiesse*

The Rockies

Brawny, snow-cragged peaks
 Scrape heaven's belly—
 Youthful impetuosity!

Colorado Stratification

Layer by layer
 History revealed—
 Hungry river writes exposé!

 *Ernest A. Peterson*

Poesy

My love is like a source code
 that compiles on the first shot.
 My love is like a PDE*
 when all nonlinear terms drop out.
 And so you can extrapolate,
 so locked in phase am I,
 That I will love you till they find
 the last digit of pi.

 *Rebecca Carlson*

*partial differential equation