2010 Bellevue Literary Review Prizes

Goldenberg Prize for Fiction
Judged by Gail Godwin
Winner: “Cocido” by Larry Hill

Marica and Jan Vilcek Prize for Poetry
Judged by Tony Hoagland
Winner: “The Thundering” by Amanda Auchter
Honorable Mention: “The Bottom Drawer” by Amanda Auchter

Carter V. Cooper Memorial Prize for Nonfiction
Judged by Phillip Lopate
Winner: “The House Across from the Park” by Joan Kip
Honorable Mention: “A Shear Pin’s Nothing” by Mark Holden

Please visit our website for information on the 2011 prizes.
www.BLReview.org

The House Across from the Park
Joan Kip

Time is a river, a violent current of events, glimpsed once and already carried past us, and another follows and is gone.

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

I open my eyes this still, foggy morning and peer at the clock on the wall opposite the bed—the clock that Art designed over fifty-seven years ago. A disk, painted white, with the hour and minute hands fashioned out of black electrician’s tape, it was to be temporary. Like so many other projects around the house: our bed frame Art made from a plank of used plywood, the living room couch built out of secondhand pine, painted black to hide its knots, the dining room table carved out of a damaged door we brought to Berkeley from our first house in Massachusetts. Mementos from our days of frugality, retooled many times over, they remain brazen in their refusal to relocate to a receptive Salvation Army. Not yet ready to greet the day, I remain in the twilight zone of emerging consciousness, my mind drifting along its idle path until I am aware that I’m thinking of that dining room table—of the first time we met: each of us, in a way, damaged.

It had been a long and humid moving day as I drove along the Massachusetts Turnpike from Cambridge to our new home in Lexington. Art had preceded us, together with our furniture and Jonathan, our four-year-old son, whose exuberance was tempered by a chronic ear infection. My mother-in-law, Alice, squeezed alongside me in our packed, 1935 Ford, holding three-week-old Jennifer, who wailed inconsolably with hunger pains, rhythmic, echoing wailings that shred a mother’s gut. Then, inexplicably, the car lights failed. Back in the forties there were few bright lights on the highways and, except for passing cars, one depended on the moon and stars and an assumed faith in the benignity of the gods. Off the highway and up the winding hill, aided by lights from neighborhood houses, I finally saw the light shining from our own carport, and Art, standing there, in the driveway, unpacking boxes. Still recovering from the polio that had felled me some weeks earlier, I trembled with exhaustion and a pervasive guilt that my daughter would die from
maternal neglect. But I was home now, with a bathroom not yet connected to its plumbing, and a kitchen lonely for a stove. Art, whose energy was on automatic recharge, led me by the hand and, pointing to a door balanced between two trestles in the middle of the living room, pronounced with biblical exactitude, “Look, the perfect table!” Sinking into a weathered chair, I caressed that pinewood door—an emblem of permanent solidity—as if it in some way reconnected me to the earth. There, surrounded by boxes, my feet on that accommodating door, I unbuttoned my blouse and nursed our daughter.

The telephone next to my bed jolts me awake. I pick up the phone and hear “Hi, Mum,” as Jen’s bouncy voice floats out to greet me from Guatemala. Fifty-nine years old, she lives in Panajachel, a predominantly Mayan pueblo along the shores of Lake Atitlan. We exchange daily uncensored chats, sharing intimate and unprintable happenings in our lives. If I’m out, she calls Jon in Los Angeles who, in turn, calls me. A family ring-a-round that invokes recollections of a yesteryear, when this house was young and every room was occupied.

Alone without Art, the house and I co-exist in a complicity of dependent love. Fifty years ago, friends stood on the deck off our living room, high up among the Redwood trees, and gazed across the park at the wonders of the Golden Gate Bridge. Now, dry rot has invaded the deck; its aging joists, no longer steady, falter in their tilt toward the earth and its railings have pulled away from the house. The sign on the deck warns Danger, Do Not Enter. In like fashion I, too, falter. The spring has gone out of my step, and I weave away from the house. The sign on the deck warns Danger, Do Not Enter. In like fashion I, too, falter. The face in the mirror appears saggy, a little anguished and devoid of its earlier animation. Sometimes I must a brilliant smile as if to plead a like response. But the smile cannot hold and the mirror knows there is no going back. So I fix my hair, touch up my face, and set about making arrangements to shore up the house before the rainy season intrudes.

By now, daylight is seeping into the bedroom. I get up and follow my usual routine—a routine that protects me from an aimlessness which shields me from a sadness I’d rather not face. Opposite the window, a curved wall illuminated with tiny lights enfolds photos of Art, of the children, the cover of a New Yorker magazine, a few poems taped to the wall, and a photograph of the 14th century inn in Somersetshire where we spent our honeymoon. Tucked in a corner alongside my green pill container is Art’s watch, which is still running.

Upstairs, the house and I greet each other in silent approbation. There are no walls in the dining/kitchen area, which is open to the living room above. Standing for a moment in the quiet space, a certain calm flows into my body and settles into my bones. I sense the ingathering of inerasable love between the living and the departed. This is my quotidian link with Art, and with others who passed through this house. It is my no-fear zone, where I am protected within an impermeable membrane. A place where danger cannot penetrate.

This protection was with me the day jackhammers were drilling into the street outside the house as city trucks clattered to and fro with workers working, or watching others work. It was sewer repair time. I was busy preparing an early dinner for friends prior to a poetry reading at Cody’s Books on Telegraph Avenue. Around 4 p.m. the trucks and most of the workers had left and I rested on my bed listening to Bach. Afterwards, I rejuvenated my face and sped upstairs to fix guacamole. After I’d collected the mail and was halfway back up the stairs, it hit me that the carport was empty of my blue Honda. At such moments the brain doubts the eyes, so I retraced my steps and checked once again. The carport was indeed empty, except for a few oil stains darkening the concrete.

The Berkeley policeman followed me through the house and down into my bedroom, then casually asked where I keep the keys to my car. With unerring confidence, I told him that they were in my handbag on my desk. Minutes later, the contents of my bag now scattered around the desk, I admitted that my keys were not where I had put them. Unnerved I searched for my wallet, but that too had disappeared. My imagination took over. My identity, formerly represented by all those numbers stamped on cards for my wallet, but that too had disappeared. My imagination took over. My identity, formerly represented by all those numbers stamped on cards for my wallet, but that too had disappeared. My imagination took over.

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going back to life in my house across from the park, and, he, in an act of self-destruction, was going back to the cold confines of prison. In a confused way, I felt sad for him.

The fog has lifted since my morning call from Jen, and I’m in the garden, soothed by the sensual warmth of the sun. Ten years ago, in my early eighties, I’d jump out of bed, self-soothed, and ready to plunge ahead. Now, my awakening mind is sometimes tuned to a disquietude that hovers over me in an amorphous cloud. If I bypass my mind and move within, I touch an emotion that is akin to fear, which I quickly dismiss as a general malaise of the very elderly. But I know that’s not true. The emotion that beclouds my days has been around many times before, in variant disguises, waiting to be translated into the language of awareness.

The telephone rings and this time it’s Jon, calling from his morning hike in the hills above Los Angeles. During the uncertain years between his second and third marriages, we’d follow an undeviating script: Jon: “You okay, Mum?” Me: “I’m fine, and you?” Jon: “Just fine.” But mostly he was not fine. He was lonely for the woman he insisted did not exist. A woman who knew herself, a woman who saw through his quirky moods and still loved him. And so we’d talk consoling talk. He’d console me for the aches and pains of old age, and I’d endeavor to give him hope, adding that I couldn’t die before he found his perfect mate, so please make haste. He’d counter with the resolve to put the whole search off, since he wasn’t ready for orphanhood. Things change, however, and late one evening as we were talking, he remarked, somewhat jocularly, that it was fine for me to depart now, then suggested that I say hello to “a person who’d just walked in.” Thus it was that I met Ann, my third daughter-in-law. They were married here in the garden one sunny June day. Ann, elegant in a blue silk sheath, high heels and sparkles in her hair. And Jon—well, Jon was Jon, dressed in blue jeans, a cotton shirt and, as a concession to Ann, a new pair of tennis shoes. It was a union blessed with the orthodoxy of the true non-believer, and one of the happiest weddings I’ve witnessed.

Early afternoon and I’ve just said good-bye to my cleaning crew. We’ve been together for over ten years. On alternate Thursdays they clatter up my steps with their heavy equipment, open the front door and call, “Hi, Joan,” and the house and I murmur our gratitude. On hot days the crew sweating and panting from those thirty steps, drop their machines on the dining room floor. Sometimes they look at me with a kind of wonder—or is it pity?—and ask how I still make it up with my groceries. I assure them that it’s good for my legs. I do not tell them that the steps, in a conspiracy with the general landscape, are upping the ante which, I fear, all too soon, I might not be able to meet.

In a bliss of quietude, I make tea and reflect on the balancing act between the pleasurable sense of community and the profound relief of aloneness. I wonder, as I tilt more toward the solitary, if I’m retreating into a passive self-centeredness. But to do otherwise feels like a willful regression to a distant past, when time was unending and death was a subway station where no one got off.

These days, I watch as I enter the season of my ditherings. Once a center of firm resolution, I am more forgetful, less focused, and beset with unexplained mood swings. Occasionally people still greet me with, “Oh, you’re such a model for your age.” And I think I should enlighten them as to its inherent difficulties. Instead I thank them and wonder if they speak with an honest heart, or are uttering yet another consolatory, well-worn phrase. Perhaps, though, it is my heart that is less than honest, since I rarely admit to moments when, without warning, my energy drops to the point of non-existence, as if I’ve sprung a leak and must lie down before I fall down. At ninety-two, energy is the lodestar within which I exist, and when it sinks below my horizon, I too sink into an involuntary quiescence. As I ease into a zen-like peace, I catch a sense of relief, and the thought that comes is this: perhaps my diminution of energy is part of evolution’s innate wisdom. A gradual withdrawal from the pulsing, outer world into the inner realm of pure self. I soon learn, however, that meeting up with the inner self is not necessarily orderly or gentle, but can be abrupt and violent.

The heavy rain from last night’s storm leaked through skylights in my computer room and soaked the pages of writing I’d struggled with all week. Water left its mark on dictionaries, files, unused computer paper, stationery, stamps, and a morass of “stuff” stacked on a converted ping-pong table that serves as an extra desk. My next-door neighbor and her husband were to drop in for champagne at 5p.m. to celebrate her ninety-third birthday, and I hastened to place containers under the still-leaking roof before puddles on the floor drifted downward into the dining room. Rolling back the carpet behind my computer chair, in order to mop up the water, was the last conscious act I remember.
When I open my eyes, I am lying on my back on the floor, and for a stunned moment wonder where I am. There is a stillness within the room. Time has arrested its flight. The room takes shape and I try to move, but my right leg just hangs there limply, like a tattered sail attached to a broken mast. Blood trickles down my arms and onto my hands. I feel no pain, nothing. My mind clears and I realize I must have flipped backward over that rolled up rug and, on the way down, met the nearby wooden chaise lounge. Unable to move, I lie there searching the room as if it holds the answer to my dilemma. Then, my mind slips into its organizing mode: How to get from A. the floor, to B. the chair, and finally to C. the telephone. The plan is to wedge my computer chair with its flexible wheels up against my desk, on top of which is a telephone. The chair is out of reach, but by twisting face-down onto the floor and pleading with every strained muscle, I inch closer, until my arm takes off on its own and, with one blessed touch, the chair moves exactly as planned, smack against the desk. Lying immobilized on the floor, I contemplate that waiting chair above me, and recognize a certain kinship—that we are somehow in this together. At the same time, I feel there is no way on this earth I can get up and into it. It is then the voice in my head speaks: Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and jump. Opening my eyes, I find myself sitting squarely on the chair, unruffled, as if I’d been reclining there, on any other day, awaiting the arrival of a friend with whom to share a cup of tea. Except on this day, I’ve gashed open my head and broken my hip.

Later, answering the inevitable question as to what happened, I recount the exact events and my closest friends have no problem understanding. Others, I feel, politely withhold their views as to my sanity, and are merely relieved at my recovery. It is suggested that the jump from floor to chair was adrenalin inspired, alerted by a vigilant unconscious. A physician I queried did not entirely disagree, but he also believes there exists an elemental force, an enfolding presence, that protects us at times of infinite danger. The paranormal is a touchy subject for many, but not for me since that quiet, unequivocal voice in my head, to which I am sometimes unfaithful, has been with me for most of my adult life. Rooted in my center, it is twin to my deepest self.

As I write this, three months later, I am drawn back to the precise moment I arrived up there on that chair—to the ordinariness of it all, as if I’d been privy to an agreed blueprint. I am left with the indelible impression of having experienced a gap in time, during which consciousness was held in abeyance; its shine, momentarily opaque. Meantime, my hip is happy with its titanium implant and my psyche, which faltered with the specter of the dreaded dependency, is back on its unpredictable track.

There is, though, a subtle shift in the play of my days. The fall shook loose a self-image that I’ve long pursued of a woman endowed with a lively mind, who dances her walk with unflinching invincibility. Part of me still holds this image, but it’s countered now by the veritable presence of myself, as I read more gently and move with less swagger. And, like many older women, at times I must cling to a cane. I’m aware, too, of a new vulnerability in my interaction with others; of my fear that I am viewed with a touch of pity for my increasing fragility; of their disappointment that the expected glow has dimmed to its vanishing point. As I see-saw between these two images, unwilling to relinquish the old and unhappy to accept the new, I realize that the choice is not mine. But that both are here to stay, both will continue to change, since change—that feared intruder who creeps into my well-guarded house—is embedded in our every heartbeat.

For some, change is embraced as a baptism of renewal, a chance to escape from the existential exactitude of everyday life. But for me, the faintest nudge out of my familiar path and my foundations begin their inexorable disappearing act into a quicksand of fear. There is, always, the enemy “out there.” As it was three weeks ago on Good Friday. Upon waking, I followed my usual routine, listened to the news, dressed and exercised. Glancing in the mirror, I noticed my early-morning not-yet-together face appeared stranger than usual, and realized that my left eye had disappeared behind a blurry facade. Upstairs, reading the New York Times at breakfast, I sat blinking under a bright light, trying to fill in the tops of words to the left of each column, since they, too, had been decapitated. My fear softened somewhat as the accommodating mind slowly filled in each empty space, and I felt a guarded hope of optimism that this sudden change was a temporary aberration. Later, the MRI showed that I’d had a small stroke—a little bit of me had floated up and landed into the visual area of my brain.

Late afternoon, I sit at the dining room table, and gaze onto the garden. Bay Area fog disappeared early today, usurped by a singularly ardent sun, and the house, the garden and I sink into a collective stupor. There is a certain tranquility in a heat-induced exhaustion, and with my batteries down to a shade above zero, there is no energy to be anywhere other than in this exact moment. No energy to listen to the trickster-mind with its contrived fears, its concoctions sent to tantalize, to confound, and perhaps to grow me. Only the empty moment. I hear the crows calling as they swoop across the trees,
hear the children in the park, smell the smoke of barbecues. In the stillness I feel the garden merge into me, so that the garden is pulsating within me and the garden, the house, and I hum to the same melody. I am reminded that when I do not look, is when I see. And when I do not listen, is when I hear. And when I do not think, I am.  

Cocido  
Larry Hill  

The street looked much the same as when he'd left four years ago. Same hazy San Joaquin Valley sunlight landing on neglected buildings tagged with Chicano graffiti. Same trio of vagrants, or their successors, bum in the middle holding the paper sack of grape, other two eyeing it and rubbing their faces. Same sign on the family restaurant, just Villarreal's, nothing else, the red maybe fainter, because he could detect the brush strokes forming the tall V. He noticed, too, the sign in the window. Cerrado. Christ, early afternoon and it was closed.

He pulled over, took his hands off the wheel and spread his fingers. Not a tremor. Still he thought of Specialist Reinhardt's one-on-one inquisitions after the Baquba missions, those tense inquiries happening for weeks into months, until you feared a Reinhardt shooting investigation more than you feared not shooting at all. Except for Kavanaugh. Fucking Kavanaugh feared nothing. As the rented pickup rested from its drive over the Grapevine, Alex felt the pull of a memory, one he couldn't permanently switch to off, something still in his head about the Medevac to Ramstein.

A Marine medic explains the 11-7-2 rule to him. “Eleven on liters, seven walking wounded and two of us,” he says, like the equation is religion. He’s placed on a liter, blood from the one above landing on his left hand when the plane banks toward Germany.

Behind the restaurant, he got out of the truck and tested his gait. Not bad. He felt for pain, thumb and finger opposed on his skull as if checking a cantaloupe. Shit. Not good. His decision to return home began in the Palo Alto Hospital, that female doctor teaching him to pick out small memories to meditate on, ones that calmed him, her words soft, her smile nice before she moved on. Then, after months of staying at Kavanaugh’s pad in L.A., he’d told Kav his plan. “I’m going home to help my sister in the family restaurant.” They’d been watching Iron Chef on the Food Channel, both of them stoned and full of take-out pizza.

“No,” he said, seeing in his mind just the three of them—Tensia, Mama, and himself—posed apart from a town full of Mexicans, none of them blood related that he knew of.

“This involves the sister you used to e-mail?”