

Charlotte Newberger Poetry Contest

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The Poet

Laurie Suzanne Lessen-Reiche

This year's Charlotte Newberger Poetry Competition winner was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1955. She is a widely published poet now living in Northern California. A "serious autodidact," she says it took her many years to find an emotionally safe way to turn her attention to studying the Holocaust. "That safety came with Susan Gubar's important book, *Poetry After Auschwitz—Remembering What One Never Knew*. I began a journey back through and into the Holocaust."



The Prize is Named for

Charlotte Newberger

Charlotte Newberger's support for poetry in *Lilith* magazine has made possible an expanded number of pages for new poems and reviews of poetry, and this—the second annual Charlotte Newberger Poetry Prize. Charlotte has had a longstanding interest in poetry, and the arts in general. In Chicago, she has been a board member at the inception of several theatres, including the St. Nicholas and National Jewish Theatre, where she was president, and she sat for nearly 20 years on the board of the award-winning Steppenwolf Theatre, as well as The Poetry Center. She currently serves as president of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.



The Judge

Myra Sklarew

The judge for the 2006 poetry competition at *Lilith* was Myra Sklarew. She is the author of nine collections of poetry, most recently *Lithuania: New & Selected Poems*, *The Witness Trees*, and *Eating the White Earth* (translated into Hebrew by Moshe Dor) and published in Israel; a collection of short fictions, *Like a Field Riddled by Ants*; a collection of essays, *Over the Rooftops of Time*. Her work has been recorded for the Library of Congress's Contemporary Poets' Archives and has received the National Jewish Book Council Award in Poetry, the Di Castagnola Award, Poetry Society of America (shared with Erica Jong), PEN Syndicated Fiction Awards, Anna Davidson Rosenberg Award from the Judah Magnes Museum. She is the former president of the artist's community Yaddo, and is professor of literature at American University. She is currently at work on a nonfiction study, *Holocaust and the Construction of Memory*, an exploration of Holocaust testimony through the neuroscience of memory.



She says of this year's contestants:

Though I have read a good deal of poetry over the years for contests and through teaching, I was particularly struck by the kinds of people who have submitted to Lilith: daughters of Holocaust survivors, women (and one man, if I recall correctly) from other countries and the United States who are immensely accomplished, those who have lived abroad and worked in other languages. Even if the poems were not chosen for this contest, they were always important in terms of the kinds of experiences and knowledge that they explored and for their craft and language and depth.

I had the feeling that if you put these people around a table, they would have a great deal to contribute (as they already have) and a great deal to share with one another. So I thank you for the opportunity to be in the midst of such kindred spirits.

Abba Kovner Listened

by Laurie Suzanne Lessen-Reiche

"In November 1941 a young girl crawled up over the butchered bodies in the pits at Ponar and made her way eight miles through a frozen forest back to the Vilna ghetto. No one could believe her story—thousands of Jews lined up, shot, and piled in a ditch. But Abba Kovner listened to her."

(from the introduction by Shirley Kaufman to "My Little Sister and Selected Poems" by Abba Kovner)

1.

Chicken Little has come
half frozen, feathers stiff
with the blood of her flock.
Chicken Little has come
but this time
no one believes
the sky
is falling.

2.

Chicken Little trembles, splinters
of fresh bone
on her hands and knees,
the frost of the forest
on her parched tongue,
a silent scream stuck
at the top of her throat.

Who will listen to the little bird?

3.

She says there are beasts in the cities
building
walls, beasts in the woods
tearing down the sky.
I have seen, she says, the world collapse
in a pit of darkness.
I have seen the beast's
red eyes.

4.

One man listens.
Only one man is crazy enough
to listen.

5.

He lifts Chicken Little
in the nests of his hands frightened
by her weightlessness.
He thinks, I am lifting
ashes.
He says, Sister.
And in the cinders
of her eyes
he sees the sky fall.

6.

He says, my love.
He says, daughter.
He says, wife.
He says, you.

7.

He warms Chicken Little,
washes away the blood,
removes what splinters he can.
He builds her a coffin
to carry on his shoulders,
he builds her a coffin
of words and makes himself a coffin
of hope.

8.

Then he carries them both
toward the edge of the earth,
the sky pressing down,
the sky forcing him to his knees
but he never lets go,
never lets Chicken Little go.

9.

He says,
From here you can see the world
of the living.
From here a whole world watches
my face dissolve into blue.

10.

He says,
I believe you.

And with that
they hold back
the sky.