

2023 Judd's Hill Poetry Contest Judge Leza Lowitz:

There were many powerful poems this time that Bunnie and I both loved. I'm continually amazed at the skill, insight, creativity, and diversity of the poets who submit work. Every time I judge this contest, I wonder if I can be surprised by a new approach to the rather broad but challenging topic of "wine." Well, you did it again!

The winning poem is "While Unpacking Giant Wine Goblets" by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. This poem stood out for many reasons--the seemingly mundane art of unpacking a mother's kitchen subtly transforms into a meditation on aging, loss, memory, and appreciating the small moments of joy in a life, and the vessels that contain these moments and memories. "She needs these glasses/round as grapefruits, clear/as happiness." More than an ode to wine or "beautiful globe-shaped glasses," it is a celebration of the connection between mothers and daughters, the fragility of time and memory, and the importance of holding onto and cherishing the simple things that bring us happiness. Reading it made my heart at once a bit more tender and expansive, which is what one hopes for in a poem. Just beautiful.

While Unpacking Giant Wine Goblets by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

At first, I wish my mother
would consider giving them away—
her new apartment is shy on cupboard space.

How many wine glasses do you need?

I ask, trying to sound reasonable.

She responds by saying,

But they're for red wine,

as if that explains it—

as if *of course*, she needs eight

beautiful globe-shaped glasses

for serving pinot noir and merlot.

And they're so hard to find

in this exact shape, she adds,

clearly pleased with these glasses

she has transferred

from home to home to home.

And so, I think, *of course*,

she needs these glasses

round as grapefruits, clear

as happiness. I imagine her

sipping a fruity red with easy-drinking

tannins and a super-soft finish.

I imagine the smile on her face

as she sips from the larger goblet

designed so the wine can contact

more air and thus open up

so its cherry and raspberry notes

shine through. I imagine the smile

on her face—and I slide

the glasses onto the shelf

and move on to the china,

the measuring cups, the spoons.

Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino, 2004 by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Inside the glass bottle,
the wine from Sangiovese grapes
aged in oak barrels for three years
continues to age,
losing its youthful fruitiness,
becoming more heady,
more sour cherry, more rose.
A glass of such wine is like
a drinkable love letter to change.
So when the sommelier's wife
gifts me a vintage from the year
my son was born,
I taste more than raspberry,
dried flowers, coconut and tobacco.
I taste deep red.
I taste rolling down grassy hills
and painting our faces with mud.
Taste sleepless nights and midnight fears.
Homework at the table.
Camping in the desert.
The vinosity of devotion.
Late summer swims in the pond.
The glass empty long before
I wish it were done.

Aging by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

The wine in the glass
remembers the long days in darkness—
how it couldn't breathe,
how it lost its scent of grape
and became more grapefruit,
more green pepper, more grass.
How it lost its harsh taste,
lost its astringence, and became
rounder, more smooth, more
wine. I, too, am changing
in these long days.
I, too, am converting what I've known
into what I will be.
I, too, am becoming something
I almost don't recognize—
heady with transformation,
yet tethered by memory
of what it was like
to feel trapped,
what it was like
to steep in that darkness,
to have to learn to trust
whatever came next.

Of Vines and Struggles by Susan Notar

Châteauneuf-du-Pape is one of the preeminent wines of France.

In Châteauneuf-du-Pape galettes
nestle around the gnarled grapevines
egg-sized stones they fit smooth and round and cool in your palm
and green shoots must push through them
and vines must fight with them
in the unblinking glare of the Provençale sun
that risks withering them in summer

The strong wind down the Rhône
le mistral
takes shutters off windows
howls in your ears
people walk against it in angles
and the vines cling amidst the galettes
or risk being rent from the earth

People say the reason
for Châteauneuf's glory
with its macerated cherry color
its taste of stone fruit campfires and spice
its blends of grenache syrah mourvedre
is that the vines had to struggle through the galettes
against the unrelenting sun
the mistral

People I seek now
are like those vines
having struggled
having persevered
and because of their travails
are burnished deeper in color and texture

VÉRAISON by Peter Mellencamp

(originally written to be set to music for the Napa Valley Chorale)

Day begins
Dawn of life
Sprouting, budding
Climbing toward the sun
Warm in spring
We gather in clusters,
And music comes:
Birds sing, bees buzz,
We unfold, green,
Full of the juice of life...

Then days grow long,
And véraison!
Suddenly red,
Flavor sweet and
Heavy with promise,
In the hot sun of maturity,
We sing!
Sing of hot days, cool nights
Brilliant light, shafts of color
In this valley of life...

Then days relax, growing shorter,
We turn heavy, slowing,
Skins holding depth, richness,
The melodies of age,
Of knowing,
Of serenity.
Clustering gives
The warmth of friends
In cool evenings,
Sweet harmony of sharing life...

And when night falls,
What becomes of the richness,
Of what we were, what we knew,
What we lived?
We are transformed!
Into wine
The wine of song
And laughter
And dance
Spirit transformed
Once again
And forever more.

20/20 by Nikki Palladino

I did some dumb things in my 20's,
like spend too much at Aspen Marketplace on Washington Ave.
when I should've been eating instant everything.
It's because Nora Ephron had written and directed that film with Amy Adams
and suddenly, some of us thought we could make Beef Bourguignon like Julia.
No one spends or saves the right amount in their 20's,
but we ate well.

I did some dumber things in my 30's,
like take a job and then leave a job and then take a different job
without health insurance.
That was after we saw the Jason Wise documentary and thought we detected
hints of who knows what each time we swirled a wine glass.
Hardly anyone masters anything in their 30's,
but we drank well.

But I fear I'll do the dumbest things in my 40's,
like take that "traditional" job with "good" benefits,
and only have time to cook meal kits.
Too tired to drink wine, and
that trip to Sundance stalled.
Our 401k practically overflowing,
all so that we can say we "adulted" well.

I did all that so my kids can carry a cell phone to kindergarten,
too wired to nap, and
their summer camp summers never-ending.
Our bank accounts tied up in 529s,
We'll maybe finally get to Napa for one of our 60th birthdays.

It was the 90's.
They had a growing piggy bank and me and my brother.

They microwaved every one of our dinners when they could've been using a Crockpot.
Beringer was one of the only wines in the house and my parents didn't get the
wine references when Alexander Payne's movie *Sideways* came out.
No one's parents set them up for success
But we turned out alright.

Your Love by Mike Reis

For Carina

That light, lemon-straw lilt of your love
is like an effervescing *vinho verde* harvest,

unstemmed to the chanty of ripples
in River Minho canyons,

handed down high ladders
from dew-draped pergolas,

gathered into deep cork baskets
where fruity, plump *alvarinhos*

cascade into room-sized *lagares*,
stone tanks big-souled enough to stomp in,

to squeeze and squish in,
that light, lemon-straw lilt of your love.

JUST 'BE KIND' by Michael Quinn
After Judd's Hill

Beauty like a red, red wine
Every Cab Sav is divine

Kindness tends the vines with grace
In Napa's warm welcoming embrace
Now friends gather there, hearts align
Done with love, by the family Finkelstein.

Lovely Wine by Katy Keffer

That sip of wine, liquid on lips,
grapes and earth and grasses on tongue—
it draws us closer. We lean in,
smell fruit and spices, admire
legs, long and smooth draped inside glass.
A sigh exhales, a smile flickers
uplifting foreboding spirits
improving the mood in the air.

Peace and Wine by Lucia Kiersch Haase

There is peace in the valley
amidst the long rows
where each bountiful grapevine
in sunlight grows.

There is grace in the glass
that overflows,
earthy and aerated
where friendship grows.

There's a long fermentation
and a balance that's brilliant
when a bottle's uncorked
amidst souls so resilient.

And of aging and texture...
well, who's keeping tally
throughout the long rows
where there's peace in the valley

1992: A Jew-ish Holiday by Markell West

Margaret asked if she could come
to join me at my seder;
I'd never held one but I knew
I should, sooner or later.

For sympathy I told another
friend the situation
which somehow he interpreted
to be an invitation.

"I can come," he said to me,
"but I can't stay very late;
I have to go and meet a plane
on the evening of that date."

So I asked my parents to come down
and help me throw the feast,
and they said "yes," so I would have
some life support at least.

My mother helped me cook the meal,
and when the date arrived,
we read from the Haggadah;
into history we dived.

We talked about the Exodus,
the saline parsley dip,
and how Elijah visits
every house to take a sip.

Well after dinner, as he'd warned,
Ky went to meet his friend,
and so it seemed the seder
had reached its natural end.

The three of us remaining
cleared the table, had a chat;
I saw Elijah's wine and asked,
"How should we handle *that*?"

"Has Elijah been here yet?
Or should we let it wait?"
and then we heard a noise outside,
something at the gate.

Suddenly without a knock
an uninvited guest
waltzed right through the kitchen door,
and he was on a quest.

Just after I had been assured
the glass of red was mine,
our uninvited guest said,
"I'm Elijah! Where's my wine?"

When the Purple Witch Poured Me October Wine

by Katharyn Howd Machan

I thanked her, of course,
from the bottom of my wishes,
and stayed a while to toast the moon
she promised would soon be full.
The glass she offered was smooth
to my touch, yet in its curve it held
dark fire, core of a star she swore
would burn away my every regret
for venturing to her woods. *Wine*
she whispered *is more than the blood*
of grapes plucked at bright dawn.
She smiled—oh, that October smile!
—and only part of my life went home
that night of thorns and leafless light.
She kept every summer I have known
of gleaming fruit upon a vine,
the sound of laughter as love's hands
reach high for sweetest harvest.

Words by Katharyn Howd Machan

*Be still, you said, with patient hand on mine.
A moment's thought outweighs an hour's tears.
In time the grapes will darken on the vine.*

Confusion reigns; the silent, guiding sign
is lost like innocence among rude leers.
Be still, you said, with patient hand on mine.

*Behold the stray bird resting in a pine:
though lost, he brings sweet music to our ears.
In time the grapes will darken on the vine.*

Uncertainties and helpless needs entwine
to drag decision down in drowning fears.
Be still, you said, with patient hand on mine.

*The sun will brighten toward the harvest wine
as confidence in choices reappears.
In time the grapes will darken on the vine.*

Now that I feel the pattern strong and fine
I think of you, first love, across the years:
*Be still, you said, with patient hand on mine;
in time the grapes will darken on the vine.*

Postcard from Perugia by Katharyn Howd Machan

he writes of the city:
he is making melodies
rise from smooth old keys

*the food the people
dark wine so very full
of music's ancient magic*

blue shutters everywhere
that open wide to hear
soft reach of summer song

*I easily imagine
a life here forever
childhood dreams turned true*

(but what can we toast
with his beloved laughter
staying far away?)

*my Chopin flowed
in the basilica:
how widely Bacchus smiled!*

Winter Light by Doug Smith

On my way to dinner
I took the shortcut down
the brick passageway
behind the storefronts
of downtown, expecting
to go blindly through
the darkness

but a wedge of light
fell from the bookstore
window, bright enough
to warm the sidewalk

inside friends sat listening
to an expert offer advice
on how to write a bestseller

I stood in the alley
alone, looking in
at their determined faces
so earnest I wanted to cry

knowing I could have
joined them
but chose instead
a sautéed white fish
and perfectly chilled glass
of Sauvignon Blanc

Chicago Girl by Doug Smith

tulip stemmed wrists
cigarette fingers
broken nails
painted yellow
not bitten
hastily clipped
down to the stubs

the backs
of her hands
creamy smooth
underneath
dry and callused

late summer
intentionally lost
in
Wisconsin woods
somewhere near Wausau
she holds
a glass of white wine
to her lips
but does not open
her mouth

she sits atop
a long smooth boulder
in the middle
of a narrow rapids
daydreaming
dips her feet
into the shallow river
sighs and lowers
the glass
onto a rock

“You don’t like
the wine?” he asks.

The wind catches her
long black hair
and whips
around her
pale white face
he can’t see
her eyes
only
that tight
chapped
disappointed smile

Ode to Cabernet Sauvignon by Dave Seter

Some things are hard to put into words—
pour out your heart—people say—
or simply pour them a glass of cabernet.
The simpler the material the harder the art.
On the tongue thousands of taste buds—
and you thought you were tongue-tied—but
not really, before there were words we did o.k.
So if wine leaves you speechless about wine then say—
something else—something kind—
say we share the bee's interest in lavender.
Sip and sustain this common miracle
preserving the moment in honeycomb, in bottle
Life is a labor of love—farmer and wine both muscular,
permanent dye of cabernet on a favorite shirt,
and how many shades of red in a rainbow?
Join me in tilting a glass to the seasonal angle
of the changing sun—we are changing too—
we may be simple but we are art in the making.

Ode to Picpoul Blanc by Dave Seter

In this glass, a dance recital,
will you join me in the spotlight?
Let's sing together in this starlight
stinging my lips and tongue with words.

Maybe you and I speak different dialects,
but when I look into the glass.
I find you on the other side haloed in light—
call it straw—call it amber—you are sunlit.

I believe we're Big Bang scattershot,
isotopes of the stars, so looking into your eyes
is like staring into the sky—I toast your light—
this glass of wine predicts a bright future.

Will you join me? Let's make this memory—
swirl this wine—youth is bold and maturity fine—
we are kind we are vines of our heritage trellising.
We are puppies tumbling in amber light.

In Praise of Wine by Meryl Stratford

Sappho drank wine
when she danced her verses,
and it was Horace who said,
*No poem was ever written
by a drinker of water.*

After the night in Berkeley
but before Muir Woods,
Chinatown, and Yosemite Falls,
we stopped at a winery.

Baudelaire urged us,
*Be drunken always
with wine, virtue,
or poetry.*

We saw the huge oak barrels
and the bottling assembly line,
plucked sugar-sweet grapes
in the vineyard, learned how
the grapes are tortured-
poor soil, not enough water,
that's what gives them
their intoxicating flavors.

Hafiz confided, *If I were in a tavern tonight
I would buy freely for everyone in the world
because our marriage with the cruel beauty
of time and space cannot endure very long.*

We drank the wine.

Cabernet Sauvignon by Ron Robins

Cabernet Sauvignon!
Complex sensations dance on my tongue

Dark fruit swirls with mellowed tannin,
tobacco hints with a chocolate companion

Supple elegance to enhance a meal
Immersing pleasure; a treasure surreal

Cabernet Sauvignon!
Exquisite wine that keeps me young

Cabernet Sauvignon!
Perfect pairing with filet mignon

Meritage by Ron Robins

Is it Meritage that rhymes with garage?

Or is Meritage that rhymes with fridge?

I think, as I ponder, it matters not,

because I drink it heartily,

I like it a lot

What other wine can be so divine?

And yet be made from such differing vines?

Cabernet Sauvignon,

The queen of grapes, so famously known

As a varietal - it can hold its own

But, in a blend it ascends the throne

When it comes to Cab Franc, can we be frank?

I recall raspberries and white pepper the last time I drank

Nothing subtle here, it's bold and swank

I love it so, the gods I thank

The vanquished grape, the poor Merlot

A dimwit movie dealt it a blow

But rebound it has, for those that know

Richness of its warming glow

Petit, Petit, Petit Verdot

Along with Malbec it's in Bordeaux

It's Meritage that rhymes with fridge

You're smarter now, well, just a smidge

Chardonnay by Ron Robins

Chardonnay, oh Chardonnay!
A delightful nose of summer bouquet.

Sometimes buttery, sometimes tart
A subtle sweetness, that sets it apart

Dancing yellows of shimmering light
Prancing, cascading, a joyous sight

Chardonnay, oh Chardonnay!
You've captured my spirit; all the way

Soft yet bold, elegant yet strong
Refreshing my taste buds like words in life's song

Chardonnay, oh Chardonnay!
Perfect on a warm spring day.