Linda France  
*Bernard and Cerinthe*

If a flower is always a velvet curtain onto some peepshow he never opens,

it’s a shock to find himself sheltering from the storm in a greenhouse,

seduced by a leaf blushing blue at the tips, begging to be stroked.

He’s caught in the unfamiliar ruffle of knickerbockers or petticoat, a scent of terror, vanilla musk. If he were not himself, he’d let his trembling lips articulate the malleability of wax; the bruise of bracts, petals, purple shrimps; seeds plump as buttocks, tucked, out of harm’s way, cocos-de-mer

washed up off Curieuse or Silhouette. But being Bernard, he’s dumbstruck, a buffoon in front of a saloon honey high-kicking the can-can. Can’t-can’t.

He attempts to cool himself, thinking about sea horses, *Hippocampus erectus,*

listening to the rain refusing to stop, soft against the steamed-up glass.

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Continues over
Discussion points

- Do you sympathise with Bernard the buffoon? Does the poet? Who holds the balance of power in the poem, Bernard or the personified Cerinthe?
- How feminist a poem is this? What might the poem ‘Bernard and Venus Fly Trap’ be like?
- When was the last time you saw anyone wearing ruffled knickerbockers or petticoats? In what period is this poem set? Does that knowledge or inference affect your relation to the poem?
- Pick yourself a bouquet of flower poems to read and discuss. Here might be good places to start, www.poetryarchive.org/solr-search/flower or www.poetryfoundation.org/search/?q=flowers. Are they all about sex?

About the poet

Linda France is based close to Hadrian’s Wall, near Hexham in Northumberland. Since 1992 she has published seven poetry collections with Bloodaxe, Smokestack and Arc, including *The Gentleness of the Very Tall*, *The Toast of the Kit-Cat Club*, *book of days* and *You are Her*. She has worked on numerous collaborations with visual artists and musicians, as well as public art projects. Linda also edited the ground-breaking anthology *Sixty Women Poets* (Bloodaxe 1993).

NPC judge Jane Yeh on Linda France’s ‘Bernard and Cerinthe’

This strange narrative of a man being seduced by a plant charmed the judges with its vivid imagery and linguistic wit. Its precisely honed couplets move from elegant description (“the bruise of bracts, petals, purple // shrimps”) to a tragicomic climax, in which our hero finds himself “a buffoon in front of a saloon honey / high-kicking the can-can. Can’t-can’t.” Truly imaginative and richly musical, ‘Bernard and Cerinthe’ is as much a pleasure to read on the page as it is on the tongue, and as such was the unanimous choice of the judges for first place in this year’s National Poetry Competition.

Links

- Linda France’s website, www.lindafrance.co.uk
- The flower in question http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cerinthe
- Enter the National Poetry Competition, npc.poetrysociety.org.uk

Discussion ideas devised by the Poetry School. More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at www.poetryschool.com
Paula Bohince

Among Barmaids

There was a metal door that took both hands
of a strong man to open

but we did it daily. Inside were our charges, sealed in
submarine darkness. We swam

through their booze, past the pool
table’s alien island, darts that thwacked the pricked wall

like failure itself, spinning like downed ducks
to the filthy tile. Like good dogs, we fetched them.

In a windowless silence, we watched our drunks
bend like sycamores in an all-day snowstorm.

When they slept, we let them, then shook them
with the tenderness of mothers.

They woke and smoked, still dreaming, wore their trade
on their fingers – coal or dirt or grease.

On the jukebox, five songs repeated, each a lament
about cheating women. We hummed along,

bore the plodding joke, slurred compliment,
nodded at creased photographs of estranged children.

The beer rose in gushes. Our forearms bulged.
One girl, what she wanted before she died

was to see the ocean. Froth pillowed up
from subterranean barrels, through pipes and pulleys.

We wore out our pity, watching men stroke the bar
like the hardened brushed hair of a daughter.

Continues over
We wore ours in scarves. Our hoop earrings swayed on the downbeat. We held rags
or tucked them in jeans, tattooed the names of ex-husbands, first lovers, into our skin
in script so thick and Bible-elaborate as to be illegible. One wore her drugged-out son’s childhood face
on her wrist, his doomed grin following us. Men brought their kids when the wives needed peace.
We gave them Cokes and bowls of cherries, let them draw on napkins and pinned up the drawings.
Sometimes we spun them on the make-believe dance floor, trying to turn despair into a party.

Discussion points
• Have you done this job or something similar? Does the poem speak of experience or observation? Beyond pulling pints, how far do the barmaids’ job descriptions stretch in this bar, what roles are they required to fill? Would you apply for a job in the bar? What other workplace-based poems do you know – many or few? Is work a well-worn topic for poetry? Would you rather read a work poem or a love poem?
• Think about the form of this poem, the structure of its sentences, the tone of its address. Is there likely to be a fight in this bar any time soon?
• Why a bowl of cherries, why not a bowl of nuts – you’re more likely to find the latter in a bar, surely? On a scale of “despair” to “party”, what emotion are you left with by the end of the poem?

About the poet
Paula Bohince is the author of two poetry collections, both from Sarabande: The Children and Incident at the Edge of Bayonet Woods. Her poems have appeared in The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, Poetry, TLS, The Irish Times, Granta and Poetry London. She has received the George Bogin Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, the ‘Discovery’ and The Nation Award, the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in the US.
NPC judge Matthew Sweeney on Paula Bohince’s ‘Among Barmaids’

“There was a metal door that took both hands / of a strong man to open” – so begins this taut, impressive poem, going on to say that the barmaids did this daily, then ruled benignly the enclosed world “sealed in submarine darkness” behind the door. With remarkable economy, the poem manages to construct an extremely detailed picture of the rituals of the bar-room, the lives of the barmaids – whose tattooed skin bears the history of ex-lovers and drugged-out children – and the lives of the drinkers “who wore their trade on their fingers – coal or dirt or grease”, and who played songs on the jukebox about cheating women.

The voice of the poem speaks in the first person plural, like a Greek chorus. Perhaps this is what lends the poem its power – the directness of the choral tone, the precision of the detail, the staccato delivery. The choral voice delivers an incantation of great warmth in a cold place. This is brought home in the final image of the children brought to the bar by the men, when their wives needed peace, to be spun on a make-believe dance-floor by the ministering barmaids, trying to turn “despair into a party”.

Links

• More about Paula Bohince, www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/paula-bohince
• Dive bar imagery, www.pinterest.com/americandivebar/
• The Poetry Review magazine, www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/publications/review
• Enter the National Poetry Competition, npc.poetrysociety.org.uk

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THE POETRY SOCIETY’S NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION 2013 – THIRD PRIZE

Josephine Abbott

Love on a Night Like This

Outside, air is balancing itself. We can hear branches in motion, some twigs breaking,

wires like violin strings, trees breathy as bass flutes. The acoustics of friction. The science of equilibrium

isn’t at all easy. Effort is needed to walk against the wind. Love isn’t easy.

Something – a plastic pot or a chair – skitters on a path. A bin tips over.

Tonight, things are on the move: leaves, dead and alive; seeds; fences;

flying insects and spiders new-worlded; birds made helpless as plastic bags;

dust, sand, water, all turned to spray and spread. Small trees blow over.

We are skittering on a path though we’re heavy with flesh, bone, eyes, tongues;

we’re sea-birds in the teeth of a gale trying to anchor ourselves in place;

we’re storm-petrels, called little Peters because we only look for a while as if we can walk on water;

Mother Carey’s chickens; oiseaux du diable.

Somewhere else, seas heap up and crests break. Here, we’re ditching meteorology for myth:

Continues over
the wind’s a creature broken out of a cave;  
a wolf, and this is Ragnarök.

Glass breaks; a car alarm sounds; trees wrench.  
There’s a science and a logic to loving you,

but there’s superstition on a night like this  
and all the stirring of the world to settle first.

Discussion points
• What relation does the poem have to this http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beaufort_scale? What does the phrase “we’re ditching meteorology for myth” mean to you? What gives you the best tools for understanding life – science and logic, or myth and superstition?
• If you could take one book to a desert island, would it be this: www.amazon.co.uk/The-Knowledge-Rebuild-World-Scratch/dp/159420523X or this: www.amazon.co.uk/Poems-That-Could-Save-Your/dp/0002570726?
• All three of the anonymously submitted winning poems were written by women. Is that insignificant? Do you believe that there is anything in these three poems that can only have been created by a woman? Would we have asked a version of that question if the three winning poems had been by men?

About the poet
Josephine Abbott was born in Manchester, studied Latin and English Language at Sheffield University and now lives in Derby, where she has led a variety of poetry and creative writing projects over the years. She has had poems published in magazines including Acumen, Agenda, The Frogmore Papers, Staple and Stand, and has won awards for her poetry, including an East Midlands Bursary, Lancaster LitFest 2000, a runner-up prize in the Bridport Competition 2009 and a commendation in the National Poetry Competition 1999. Her collection Trying Not To Levitate was published by Blinking Eye (2006).

NPC judge Julia Copus on Josephine Abbott’s ‘Among Barmaids’
This poem is full of incidental sounds that seem loaded with meaning. Its world is in motion from start to finish, as it searches restlessly for equilibrium. “Tonight, things are on the move,” the poem says. Indeed they are. The poem is an attempt to replicate the risky balancing act of loving another human being. It depicts both the simplicity and enormity of that act – the way it has us completely at its mercy, reduced as we are, in the presence of love, to “sea-birds in the teeth of a gale.” What we admired about this particular poem was its energy, atmosphere and detail – a plastic pot skittering on a path, birds “made helpless as plastic bags” – and the way each couplet bristles with sound and movement. This is a poem in which the personal and universal, the minute and the enormous, do more than co-exist: they are one and the same thing.

Links
• Where’s Ragnarök? Here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ragnar%C3%B6k
• The Poetry Review magazine, www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/publications/review
• Enter the National Poetry Competition, npc.poetrysociety.org.uk

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