

Sing what is well made

WB YEATS SOCIETY OF NY 2025 Yeats Poetry Prizes

REPORT OF THE JUDGE

It has been an honor to serve as the judge for the 2025 Yeats Poetry Prize. I am always grateful for the opportunity to sit with new work and be reminded of poetry’s power to surprise, disturb, and move us. I believe poetry connects us—to history, to place, and most importantly, to each other. While it may be hard to imagine poetry changing the world, I know it can change one person, offering a moment of reflection, joy, or understanding.

The poems submitted this year offered a wide range of voices, perspectives, and formal approaches. In a time when so many of us are weary—navigating constant demands and the uncertainty of daily life—it was heartening to witness how poets continue to meet the moment with imagination and care. Poetry offers the space to pause, reflect, and envision new possibilities. It invites us to find the extraordinary in the ordinary, to celebrate the beauty in the everyday while acknowledging the weight of history.

Two poems, in particular, rose to the top. The winning poem, “Looming Light”, is an elegy of quiet reckoning and layered tenderness. Lines such as: “I speak my name. I tell myself goodbye./The downward wind takes everything/I say. Tell yourself to go on singing.” ...reveal a poet with an ear finely tuned to rhythm and restraint. It builds a world where absence hums beneath each image, and where grief is rendered

not through grand declarations but through quiet, persistent song. This poem trusts both its reader and the silences between lines. Like Yeats, who wrote, “A pity beyond all telling / Is hid in the heart of love,” Katz captures loss with clarity and compassion. I found myself returning to “Looming Light” again and again, each reading revealing something newly resonant.

The finalist poem, “The Elephants”, dazzles in its formal confidence and imaginative architecture: “in the distance / a temple stands / geometry as fragile / as my elongated limbs I listen / to the wind’s hush / moving / between its columns”

This poem is a lyrical maze of sound and thought, where logic is challenged and reassembled. I admired its risk-taking and its capacity to surprise. Chung’s work invites the reader to dwell in mystery, in strangeness, and in the thrill of not knowing.

Honorable mentions go to four remarkable poets: “Persephone at Nine Weeks,” “Song for a Spotted Flycatcher,” “Madame President,” and “Blood Memory (For Octavia).” Each brought their own vision and voice to the page, and I celebrate their inclusion here.

Congratulations to all of the poets. It was a joy and a privilege to read your work.

January Gill O’Neil

FIRST PLACE

Looming Light

by Elly Katz, New York City

I empty myself of manners. I empty my pockets
of loose change & the names of trees.

I empty my boots on the roadside. I love my brothers
but turn them away. I backtrack the clock

& look at myself as a girl in mom’s scrapbooks.
What’s the point? The minutes finished their jobs.

I speak my name. I tell myself goodbye.
The downward wind takes everything

I say. Tell yourself to go on
singing. Grey falls from the moon.

White cracks in the air. The dome empties
itself of light. The dark darkens.

Empty we hear. Empty we see.
My grandmother paints in silken studios

of clouds. She raises spoons of chocolate ice cream
to the memory of lips. The hours negotiate

who I am. I move the air. The air moves
into the places my body has been.

I change & remain the same. I empty myself
of my life & my life goes on

as the night sends shivers down
your spine. You keep going & leaning

over this page. Tell yourself you know
nothing besides the melody of your bones.

Keep going until you reach the persistent kindling
of winter stars. Where forward & backward

are impossible steps. We turn our backs
& find ourselves. I pick up the phone.

Your mouth is the receiver. Say you love
what you are. We shine the instant we disappear.

SECOND PLACE

The Elephants

by Leonardo Chung, Ottawa IL

after “The Elephants” by Salvador Dalí

I feel the weight / of my body / even as I barely touch / the
earth / my legs stretch / impossibly / stanchions of a world /
drifting on spacetime / red sky swallows horizon / in a
forever dusk /

I watch the distant figure / below raise a hand in reverence /
or fear /

something drips from my trunk / memories turned liquid /
falling quietly onto the sand it speaks of places / I do not
recall / of burdens / left half behind /

above me / an ornate tower / rests as if it demands I bear /
what no one else can shoulder I do not complain / the
silence of this landscape / denying my futility /

in the distance / a temple stands / geometry as fragile / as
my elongated limbs I listen / to the wind’s hush / moving /
between its columns /

I hold a stance / and moment / that threaten to collapse / if
I shift / my weight / too suddenly /

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Persephone at Nine Weeks

by Chelsea Woodard, Exeter NH

December is the reason
that I crouch in cellar dark
cuddled by garlic bulbs
and daffodil. I never hear the lark

these days. I’ve learned to sow
moon-watered beds of dead nettle,
nightshade, and tuberose,
while up above, new snow settles.

on the plots my love
once tended, I cannot mend the wound
I’ve made. I ate the seed
but never heard the rooting sound

because by then, I’d gone
too deep into the underground,
and here, hidden from dawn,
I keep my harm to myself. Shed

treasures sift down here: shards
of clavicle bones and gold teeth,
rust-corroded keys,
sapphires that sink below the freeze-

line to find purchase
here. In my garden, the gate’s
always creaking. The hour
is perpetually late,

and my heart needs to know

when the wait will be over, the seeds
of this winter scattered and grown.
A vernal sun will bleed

weak light to this cave
where I sit, bushels filled with Narcissus and husks
of the world I gave
up—every joy has its season.

Song for a Spotted Flycatcher
by Harry Man, Stockton-on-Tees England

Song following lad twist-rodeos the ifs
of forward flight falling up the buzzed
toothy new buds of lilac white wigged berries
nightclub ultra-lit, stump humid lintstudded
treehouse clutchdown up in the nosebleeds
perch-ease fold in the shake, chatter ‘n’ scold of robins,
who *teek teek* to the geordie metro yellow gold topped
leafhoppers over this year’s hottest spots to de-sting wasps
or share catkin doggybagged money spiders,
a whip-quick moth snatch, hoverfly yes-please,
leatherjacket rich nectar hoopla, on the starch cartilage
bark-ridge mosswork. Figures in the dawn steam,
fingers of light, finch-strobed craneflies dogfight
about chicken of the woods, the bossed out fungus
with feather-headed rivals, midge-fed twig rippers
listen to the double dipper kingfishers, wrens glitterballed
in the shadowwork of oak-side sunwise creak-waft,
zip transfixed with inflight stories of Sudan, Mogadishu—
Have you been? Dodoma? Maputo? Harare?
Dar es Salaam? Seen the Nile meet the Med
like a graveside note that melts down the *forever*
of the earth, watched wildebeest turn and stagger
and ripple like poppyseed and ash off a black plate
in the Rwenzori Mountains, fountains rising
from their feet from a thousand feet?
The world over, we should go together
and come back again. Your song longing in my throat,
again, again. We should go together
and come back again. The world over,
I’ll follow your voice like a holiday.

Madame President
by william o’neal ii, Brooklyn NY

My mother gets on like an American

president. She preaches faith
without works is a death
sentence. My mother does not play
about her money. She bled
through her nipple
from a lump in her left breast & still kept
the Lord’s books.
My mother’s water broke
in the backseat of a ‘97 Lincoln town
car with her right hand placed
upon the Holy Scriptures.
My birth was an inauguration
parade of confetti & blood &
fanfare. The streets were lined
with angels dressed in heavenly
camouflage. The national bird
of my mother’s country
is a white dove
with a dead crow’s foot
between its bill. Her Navy
ship’s flag unfurls in black
against a bruised sky.
O Madame President!
You make the enemies
retreat to their strongholds.
The dark skies of illness & panic
are no match for your power, you command
a fleet of ships brandished with
steeled cannons. You give
orders for atomic shells
to rain fire upon my enemies.
You start a holy war & call
it righteousness; your love
spreads across the night sky
like long-range missiles. The midnight
heavens of your country glow
orange & hot. O death,
where is your sting?
You call me out of darkness
& into marvelous light.

Blood Memory (for Octavia)
by Elana Churchill, Murfreesboro TN

She wrote apocalypse like
she was taking minutes.

No soft landings in her worlds—
only bone, only thirst,
grief that calcifies,
faith learning to hunt,
mutation as survival’s price.

Her prophets crawled
through wildfires burning
and spoke in ember and ash,
knowing god was change
and nothing else would last.

She gave us black girls
who wouldn’t bow or bend,
whose fingers sparked lightning,
resolution etched
into the map of their palms.

She tracked the raised lines,
showed how history’s claws
pierce deeper than memory—
leaving marks that scab, scar
but never stop being.

Ancestors collapsed into
the present, and we learned
what we call history
isn’t relic or ghost but
blood memory, still feeding.

Her aliens wore bodies
as borrowed clothes,
taught us plague could
reshape us, showed us
how humanity ends:

Not with surrender
but with metamorphosis,
each betraying its neighbor
until we are all
strangers.

Now we live inside her warning:
world on fire, seas rising,
zealots burning libraries,
tyrants wrapped in flags,
every headline reading like
rough drafts of her novels.



The Yeats Poetry Prize is open to members and nonmembers of the Society of any age from any locality worldwide. **First prize \$1,000, second \$500, honorable mentions.** Winners and honorable mentions receive plaques and two-year memberships in the Society and are honored at a public award ceremony in New York in April. Entry fee is \$15 for first, \$12 each additional. Poems in English up to 60 lines, on any subject, unpublished at submission, may be entered... at *Yeats.Submittable.com/Submit* between September 1 and January 31...or mail to address above to be received by the January 31 deadline. Do not include author information in the poems themselves, but enter name, address, phone, email address and a short bio in the *Submittable* entry form, or name and contact info on an attached 3x5 card with mailed entries (check made out to WB Yeats Society of NY). No entry form necessary. Authors retain rights, but grant us the right to publish winning entries in a competition report like this one, and on our website. Winning poems accepted for publication elsewhere *after* submission may require permission from the publishing outlet For information on our other programs, and on membership, please visit *YeatsSociety.nyc* or write to us.

