

Sing what is well made

WB YEATS SOCIETY OF NY

**Yeats Poetry Prizes**

**2023**

## REPORT OF THE JUDGE

When I was first contacted about judging the Yeats Poetry Prize 2023, the society anticipated about 200 entries, not the 880 poems we received.

What did it feel like, then, for one person to screen so many poems? First off, I found myself grateful when a poem disqualified itself!—a cliché, or even a banality? Great! Move on! A facile rhyme? Easy, move on! Or maybe I'd read ten lines, has no clue. Move on! I decided to reject anything dourly humorless, or over-earnest, or overwritten, or asserting—however skillfully—some accepted doctrine or political consensus. At least an hour a day rejecting poems.

But would I ever find poems I liked? When people are beginning to read poetry I advise them that it's a little like going to a thrift store. Most items aren't that interesting, but you want to look for those few good gems.

As a professional rejecter of poetry, I found myself moved by the grief people were sharing. Though they undoubtedly aspired to win the competition, I hoped they'd find that the entry fee was worth it to them to have someone listen to their pain, even for a moment.

Often, though, I couldn't figure out *why* people were writing. Did the world need another look at moonlight on the water? (The moon on water seemed fashionable this year.) On the other hand, when a poem had something amusing to tell me—even if it wasn't a serious contender for the prize—I was thankful for that brief respite from the tarn of misery that this mass of poetry began to resemble. I could count on the fingers of one hand the few poems that were actually, convincingly about joy.

All in all the poems I liked best addressed me in a way that seemed frank, rather than poetic. I liked poems that seemed to care more about what they had to say than showing off how beautifully they could say it. Using the term very broadly, I felt a sense of humor was important since it showed an intelligent grasp or proportion. Eventually, after days and days of reading, I flagged about twenty poems. Each of these demonstrated some substantial virtues—sometimes amazing promise—but judging among them was like judging apples, oranges, walnuts, doilies, and lawnmowers. Even to make this process possible, I finally decided I had to reject poems that I felt could be easily edited and made more wonderful. Didn't gymnasts dazzle us with almost superhuman moves and yet fail in competitions because of some arm or leg just a little out of place? Well, this too was a kind of brutal poetry Olympics, wasn't it? So I ended up keeping just four poems that pleased me throughout.

“English”—the first poem I'll mention—is spoken by a woman (I assume) who has a spouse or lover who also speaks English, but “proper British English compared with the “rough metallic English” she learned in America. Their different accents are a metaphor for their incompatibility: “I think I understand the gist of you/But I'm not sure if you've read the synopsis of me/Even when I've submitted it many times.” Well, this is very witty, but the poem goes on to expand the problem beyond the personal:

Speaking of America,  
We remind me of football fans  
Autumn after autumn, standing guard over  
Disappointment,  
Is this what loyalty is, to keep faith in  
Something even when it loses you,  
Even when you aren't sure it has room for  
You anymore?

As someone not keen on football, I certainly enjoyed the idea that it comprises “standing guard over/Disappointment.” But is she speaking here of her incompatible mate or, as an immigrant, of her sense of alienation from her adopted country? America perhaps failed to read her synopsis, however many times she tried to submit it. Is that how an immigrant feels? “English” charmed me in the way the poet has interwoven personal and political woes and stayed bravely funny.

“Shifting Lights” at first seemed to me to be a well-written street scene, a deft description, but what was really happening? The more I read the more I came to admire the subtle way it wove time and history and even nature together in what seemed like a casual narrative. And it had Yeats in it! The speaker has paid a visit to Woburn Walk, the charming and well-preserved pedestrian street in London where Yeats lived from 1895 to 1910. Today, the speaker’s hairdresser keeps her shop there, and Yeats has a plaque. As someone who was once a professional house painter, I enjoyed the accuracy of him noticing, late in the evening, that it’s “tough/enough at any hour to miss the panes.” Woburn Walk is very trim and kempt, very black and white. But life isn’t. Yeats’s lease lasted “through four proposals to Maud Gonne and one/to her daughter, until, at last, Georgie Hyde-Lees/said yes.” Woburn Walk may be well-preserved since it was first built (1822), but it’s a living neighborhood, woven together by messy humans, like any. “*Of course we get along, Maryanne [the hairdresser] says/when I observe how well the shopkeepers seem/to help each other. Lots of gossip though.*” The big event on the little street on the day the poem is describing is the mounting of another plaque, this one for a competing historical celebrity, George Jacob Holyoake, the radical journalist who died before Yeats was born and coined the term “secularism.” Well it’s been there a long time, Woburn Walk, and it’s actually fed the language, the poem suggests. (*If the center will not hold some people will blame secularism.* I find myself attempting a sentence that might make no sense without Woburn Walk.) The poem concludes with “an aproned Tondoori waiter” enjoying his break in the “son’s slant.” Into the warp and weft of this black and white street comes a thread of another color, a happy poem after all. “Shifting Lights” seems so effortlessly to manage large and small: history persists, time moves on, Woburn Walk is a good place to get a haircut.

When I first read “Doll, It All Goes by So Fast,” an elegy made up entirely of data about the dead person and almost completely bare of metaphor, I thought its facts were interesting but its poetry wasn’t. In this elegy for her father, the writer of “Doll…” presents the facts in seven carefully strategized unrhymed eight-lined stanzas. “This is very moving but it’s sentimental, isn’t it?” I warned myself. But many re-readings kept convincing me it wasn’t; it was too well-made. Subtly, almost slyly, the poet builds a powerful case for this “ordinary” man, who isn’t so ordinary after all! Yes, he sold life insurance for fifty years. But then there was his aborted desire to dance ballet (though he continued to be a fan). And his mystical certainty that he’d been a Viennese Jew in a previous life. The poet’s mother says, “*the first time he was in Vienna,/he knew exactly where the synagogue was—/he found his way across Austria without a map.*” [Twilight Zone theme here, please]. The power of this composition doesn’t rest in heightened language but in careful, expert juxtapositions. After staying out late on a date, the poet says she’d come home

and apologize for waking him up. He’d say *I wasn’t sleeping*  
*I was just resting my eyes.* He never told me he loved me,  
but he loved me.

The poet here is showing faith in the reader to intuit the connection between these sentences. The man is tactful, reticent, not apt to be overly expressive, but unfailingly protective, a man whose love is clearly seen through even the smallest actions. And then, at the end, like pulling the pin on a hand grenade: “it was an unremarkable life,/and it was astonishing.”

“Picking Favorites” feels more associative than carefully planned. It shares some DNA with Frank O’Hara’s semi-logical, faux-naïf disquisitions, or so it strikes my ear. But since I first wrote about O’Hara in the early 70s his poetry has infused so much of American poetry one can’t even be sure if this is direct influence of O’Hara has simply gotten into the air, at least for some poetry communities. O’Hara’s daffy essay poem “Ave Maria” begins: “Mothers of America/let your kids go to the movies!/get them out of the house so they won’t know what you’re up to”.

So this poem, too, is going to advance a half-serious argument, and pretend not to see the weakness of it.  
We’re not supposed to pick favorites.  
Whether it’s a favorite child, favorite pet (now deceased)...

If the argument is absurd, the speaker seems aware of it. (Something about the formality of “deceased” is meant to make me smile.) Where he’s going with this argument against counting things, this “don’t-pick-favorites admonition, is to speak about time:

It makes sense.

There are things you really don't want to know, like  
How many days you've been alive or how many  
You've got left. Picking favorites is probably  
Like that too. Unlucky.

The speaker even appeals to biblical authority! "In *Chronicles*, David gets into/Trouble for counting the people." The poet (sophisticated clearly, since he talks about Lorca) must also know the verse, "Teach us to number our days so we may get a heart of wisdom."

Or even if he doesn't know that, he somehow does. The poem ultimately—unlike so many hundreds of others I read this past month—is about the importance and delight of everything! The poem is convincingly about joy. It makes an indefensible argument, but one that succeeds, at least with me. Should we have favorite days? No, "That night/Will be perfect just like *all* the others" [*italics mine*]. What's so successful for me here is the way the speaker casually conveys so much of his like through what seems like a kind of digressive randomness. He might have children, a dead pet, a father's nagging guilt, kids who don't listen to him—one who "Chose a class in Iranian film over Shakespeare or another [who]/Gave up his scholarship." Maybe he's traveled to Venice by himself and loved it. But then into the poem comes Ximena—Ximena of the lovely name! His joy in being with her is all the more convincing when he warns himself:

Don't start counting times like that.

Don't try to remember them either. That way,  
They'll stay somewhere inside you, unchanged. You  
Can't help it though.

One thing to like about the voice here is the vital way it contradicts itself, thinking this, then that (a spontaneous-seeming informality emphasized by somewhat bumpy enjambments). From sophisticated talk about Lorca, who was murdered young, the poet next tells himself, "Don't think like that." Death has been in the poem from the first—"your dog the vet sedated with the first shot, then/Killed with the other"—but he's contemplating a future. He'll go back to Mexico, order tacos again in El Califa, and Ximena will make fun of his dreadful Spanish, and he'll laugh too. The best moment of his life is on its way, he believes, "perfect, just like all the others."

My wife is an artist who's been in many juried shows. Sometimes they'll mount a parallel *salon des refusés*. We love those. In the official show the guest curator has not picked one single painting that's figurative! But next door is the *salon des refusés* many wonderful paintings depict people, houses, boats, and other objects we recognize. So to the hundreds of poets who contributed to this living river of poems, what can I say? Thank you for having faith in the contest. My chemistry is all over this selection process, I freely admit. A different reader would mount a very different exhibition. And all the entrants who have collided with my judgment will simply have to shrug, and "cast a cold eye" as Yeats suggests, and keep on writing.

Alan Feldman

# FIRST PRIZE

## *Picking Favorites*

*George Franklin, Miami FL*

We're not supposed to pick favorites.  
Whether it's a favorite child, favorite pet (now deceased),  
Or favorite time when you went to bed early  
And the radio played all the right music—you're  
Not supposed to think this way. How will  
All the other nights seem if you do? They won't have  
Disappeared. You'll still remember them, the holding,  
Touching, her lips, yours. You're supposed to say that all  
Those nights are equally great, that each child is special,  
That your dog the vet sedated with the first shot, then  
Killed with the other, was loved no more or less than  
The dog after or before, that each house or apartment  
Where you lived has been the dream home you  
Always wanted. Get it straight, you're supposed to lie,  
To everyone else, to yourself too. Even if you say  
You treat each child the same, there are moments  
You're closer to one or the other. Sometimes, of course,  
You wonder if you haven't failed them all, in different ways—  
Times you shouldn't have gotten angry so easily, how  
You should have said "Great!"—with conviction—when one  
Chose a class in Iranian film over Shakespeare or another  
Gave up his scholarship. In *Chronicles*, David gets into  
Trouble for counting the people. It makes sense.  
There are things you really don't want to know, like  
How many days you've been alive or how many  
You've got left. Picking favorites is probably  
Like that too. Unlucky. There was the morning in April  
When you first walked around Venice by yourself or the night  
You and Ximena sat by Biscayne Bay, looking  
At the lights from the causeway, the occasional boat  
Passing on the water. Don't start counting times like that.  
Don't try to remember them either. That way,  
They'll stay somewhere inside you, unchanged. You  
Can't help it though, You remember how the sidewalks  
Dipped in Roma Norte where driveways met the street,  
How you had coffee and talked about Lorca. Don't think  
Like that. In a little over a month, you'll go back to Mexico,  
Order tacos again at Il Califa, and Ximena will make fun  
Of your dreadful Spanish, and you'll laugh too. That night  
Will be perfect, just like all the others.

## SECOND PRIZE

### *Doll, It All Goes by So Fast*

*Valentina Gnup, Oakland CA*

#### I

As a child, my father was often hungry. His father worked in a Pittsburgh steel mill for fifty cents an hour. My father never complained about growing up poor, but one time he mentioned how he would have loved to take ballet lessons. He wanted to be a dancer, instead, he played baseball in high school, enlisted in the military, graduated college on the GI Bill, and spent the next fifty years selling life insurance.

#### II

The only World War II story my father ever told me was about his last job, discharging soldiers in the Air Force. When it was finally his turn to fly home from England, another airman begged to take my father's place on the flight. My father gave him the last seat on the plane—the plane that flew into the side of a mountain. Everyone was killed. Generosity saved my father's life, though he didn't tell the story that way.

#### III

After knowing each other for forty years, my Polish Catholic father, who wasn't dramatic, who seemed to have no mystical leanings at all, shocked my mother on a walk through Vienna saying in a previous life he'd been a Viennese Jew. She tells me, *the first time he was in Vienna, he knew exactly where the synagogue was—he found his way across Austria without a map.*

#### IV

When I was ten, I found a copy of *The Sensuous Man* hidden in my father's sock drawer. I was shocked at the content, alarmed that he'd seen it too. Several years later, he picked me up from the eighth-grade dance—he caught me kissing my boyfriend and waited outside to give us privacy. I felt that mix of shame and sorrow we feel watching our parents witnessing us grow up. I wasn't his baby anymore—I was a girl capable of making out.

## V

My father packed my lunches all through elementary school  
and junior high. He'd make cheese or liverwurst sandwiches  
I'd be embarrassed to eat in front of my friends.

He'd wait up for me when I went out during high school  
and fall asleep reading on the couch. I'd come home  
and apologize for waking him up. He'd say I wasn't sleeping,  
I was just resting my eyes. He never told me he loved me,  
but he loved me.

## VI

Before the world realized it was the most objectified,  
sexist nickname, my father called me doll.

My whole life.

When he used this endearment, the feminist in me  
chose to overlook it. I felt pretty and protected—

I knew it was politically incorrect, but I loved it.

The last cogent words he ever spoke to me were

*Doll, it all goes by so fast.*

## VII

My father wasn't a writer. His stories ended  
in 2015 when dementia stole his language, his body,  
his life. He died at home in the living room  
on my mother's eighty-eighth birthday—  
my parents had been married for sixty-five years.

Work, daughters, grandkids, travel, the ballet,  
friends over for dinner—it was an unremarkable life.

And it was astonishing.

# HONORABLE MENTIONS

## *English*

*Noor-ul-huda Mehdi, Montclair VA*

We both speak English,  
But at times it's messy, messed up  
Like a badly dubbed movie,  
A disconnect, a fatal delay between  
What one mouth says and what another hears  
I think I understand the gist of you  
But I'm not sure if you've read the synopsis of me,  
Even when I've submitted it many times,  
We're always one sentence behind each other  
in the manuscripts, alternating so that we never  
reach the same place together in the sky  
We both speak English, but I think sometimes  
We say it backwards or else it's been  
Garbled by the wind, carrying the short distance  
Between the couches of our living room,  
Maybe I will try again, to write myself an  
Explanation in the proper British English of your  
Childhood, not the  
Rough metallic English I've learned in America  
Speaking of America,  
We remind me of football fans  
Autumn after autumn, standing guard over  
Disappointment,  
Is this what loyalty is, to keep faith in  
Something even when it loses you,  
Even when you aren't sure it has room for  
You anymore?



## *Shifting Lights*

*Sandy Solomon, Nashville TN*

Late in the evening, well after quitting time,  
well after dark, I am passing through  
Woburn Walk to catch a bus towards the Heath,  
when I see two men with brushes and cans of white gloss  
who stand in the light of the stationer's open door.  
They're trying to paint the shop's bay-front—tough  
enough at any hour to miss the panes, but now?  
I like this passageway, where, the blue plaque  
on number five, the building opposite, says,  
Yeats lived for 24 years, his lease  
lasting through four proposals to Maud Gonne and one  
to her daughter, until, at last, Georgie Hyde-Lees  
said yes. He wrote a lot of poems here, I think, as I pass  
(*pale unsatisfied ones/Appear and disappear*).

When I return the next morning, the men are still  
at work, this time daubing black on trim. And a man  
is standing on a ladder above the stationer's door  
to fix a plaque, then cover it with cloth and pull cord.  
Mystery solved. George Jacob Holyoack—  
radical journalist, and cooperative advocate,  
who coined the term, “secularism”—lived here until  
four years before Yeats was born. I've clocked in  
at number seven with Maryanne, who's cut my hair  
since she moved from Paris 30 years ago to take  
the shop lease. As snips of hair fall to the floor,  
I watch the painters scrape spatters off the glass  
while they joke across to the sandwich shop guy;  
later, he comes over to help them stow their ladder.

*Of course, we get along*, Maryanne says  
when I observe how well the shopkeepers seem  
to help each other. *Lots of gossip though*. She's laughing  
that throaty laugh I like so much. I miss the unveiling,  
but when I walk through again, a group is crowding close  
to pose for a photo beneath the newly mounted plaque  
in front of the newly painted shop, its black and white  
intensified. An hour later, when I return  
from the bank, it's business as usual—most celebrants  
have left, but one painter sits with the sandwich shop  
guy at a metal table. Through her open door,  
I spot Maryanne; she looks up from a head of hair  
to wave. Down the way, an aproned Tandoori waiter  
leans on a beam, eyes closed, in the sun's slant.

**Alan Feldman**, over more than sixty years, has published poetry in such publications as *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *The Nation*, *The Yale Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *Best American Poetry*. He has also won several prizes, including the 1978 George Elliston Book Award for *The Happy Genius* as the best poetry collection published that year by a small, independent press; the 2004 Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry from the University of Wisconsin for *A Sail to Great Island*; the Massachusetts Book Award in 2016 for *Immortality*; and the Four Lakes Prize from the University of Wisconsin for his 2018 collection, *The Golden Coin*. His latest book, *In the First Half-Century that I've Loved You, Poems from a Marriage*, will be published this year with paintings by his wife, the artist Nan Hass Feldman. From 1972 to 2008, Alan was a professor, and eventually chair, in the English Department at Framingham State University. For 22 years, he also taught the Advanced Creative Writing seminar at the Radcliffe Seminars, Harvard University.

**George Franklin**, a practicing Miami attorney, has published several volumes of poetry, including, from Sheila-Na-Gig Editions, *Remote Cities* (2023), *Noise of the World* (2020), and *Traveling for No Good Reason* (2018); from Katakana Editores, *Conversaciones sobre agua/Conversations About Water* (2023). written in collaboration with the Colombian poet Ximena Gómez, who translated his *Among the Ruins/Entre las ruinas* (2018); and from Blue Cedar Press, *Travels of the Angel of Sorrow* (2020). In 2018, he won the Sheila-Na-Gig Poetry Competition, and in 2020 the Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Prize.

**Valentina Gnup**, a recently retired teacher, won the 2023 Tucson Festival of Books Literary Award, the 2019 Lascaux Prize in Poetry, the 2015 Rattle Reader's Choice Award, the 2011 Barbara Mandigo Kelly Peace Poetry Award, and the 2009 Joy Harjo Poetry Award from *Cutthroat, the Journal of the Arts*.

**Sandy Solomon** is Writer in Residence at Vanderbilt University and recently published poems in *The New Yorker*, *Plume*, *Harvard Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Hopkins Review*, *Vox Populi*, *Moment*, and other publications. Her book of poems, *Pears, Lake, Sun*, won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize. She has held fellowships at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, and at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She is recipient of an upcoming residency at the *Oberpfälzer Künstlerhaus* (Artist's House) in Bavaria, Germany.

**Noor-ul-huda Mehdi, MD**, is an internist in Washington DC. This is her first poetry award.

**The Yeats Poetry Prize** is open to members and nonmembers of the Society of any age from any locality. First prize \$1,000, second \$500, honorable mentions. Winners and honorable mentions receive two-year memberships in the Society and are honored at an event in New York in April (pandemic permitting). Poems in English up to 60 lines, on any subject, not published at the time of submission may be entered. We prefer entry through the Submittable website at *Yeats.Submittable.com/Submit* between November 1 and February 1. Do not include author information in the poems themselves, but enter name, contact information and a short bio in the Submittable entry form. Entry fees are \$15 for the first and \$12 for each additional poem. Postal entries may be mailed to the address below (check made out to WB Yeats Society of NY). Authors retain rights, but grant us the right to publish winning entries; however, 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: WB YEATS SOCIETY OF NY, National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, New York NY 10003, *YeatsSociety.nyc*