

2016 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE

Everyone has to start somewhere. The standard image of Yeats gives us the grand old monocled bard, the Senator in Ireland’s newly constituted Parliament, the Nobel Prize winner, the “smiling public man” he joked about in one of his most famous poems. But his youth was lived in a Bohemian stratum of the London scene, where he and poets of the Decadence like Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson formed their Rhymer’s Club and met for pints and poetry wars at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street. We see a contemporary hipster equivalent in Fran Lock’s (I learned the authors’ names after selecting the honorees) poem “The Rites of Spring,” which recreates the author’s slalom through the Bohemia of marginalized artists in Ireland and London. A good poem is more than bald reportage, though, and it’s Lock’s pungent language that carries the day, in phrases like “...the whole world running with green scissors, a cockadoodle spite beneath their skin.” Or, “... girls atilt with a sauntering kilter,” or, “We will honour you, ghost,/with vodka bottles smashed for making rainbow/mincemeat out of daylight.” Lock’s title recalls the famous Ballets Russes dance for which Stravinsky wrote his most famous score. In that work a young woman is sacrificed in a ritual meant to conjure the advent of spring. Lock’s poem speaks of *bed*-springs and “...days spent lying better-dead against the corkscrew guts of mattresses.” We might think of Yeats’s poem “The Collar-bone of a Hare,” where the poet plans to view the world through a gimlet-hole he has pierced in a bone and “laugh over the untroubled water/At all who marry in churches/Through the white thin bone of a hare.” Lock, perhaps because she is a woman, can’t be quite so blithe as Yeats when she claims her rights to springtime renewal. The ordeals through which she passes, painful and chaotic are, nevertheless, part of the apprenticeship, one conducted in helter-skelter environs, as when we find her noting “in the scrubby parkland the litter bins/are trying their very best to grow.”

In Aaron Poockigian’s “Take It to the Roof,” we again find the exuberance characteristic of the youthful hipster, and the description “over the top” seems especially apt here, given that the poet’s drunken revelers carry out their pranks on a rooftop, barely restrained from multi-story plunges by a sagging guardrail. The poem adumbrates the semiconscious and dangerous undertow of the situation, reminding us of Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse.” Like moths to flame, poets are drawn to precipices—in this case, with no disastrous outcome. I’m guessing that it is the author’s skill with meter and rhyme that serves as his guardrail, even more than his high spirits. That skill seems worth praising in the context of a prize awarded in the

name of Yeats, whose mastery of prosodic resources went far beyond those of any other member of the Rhymer’s Club.

Zara Raab’s “That Was No Country” also demonstrates skill with prosody, and of course her title recalls the opening of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium.” But here the message has to do with a country inhospitable to young women rather than men grown old. The hardscrabble existence of a young woman after her marriage to a man living out in the wild is carefully rendered and when we reach the conclusion, we realize the poem is an affectionate, clear-eyed portrait of the author’s mother.

Kathleen McCracken’s “The Fulminologist” is a portrait of a father, who is presented as an expert in lightning. Hard and even startling facts about this natural phenomenon lend credence to the notion that a layman could know as much as he does about the subject. If we want to allegorize the portrait we could instance Randall Jarrell’s comment: “A poet is a man who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times.” I’m guessing that this poem will prove to have been be one of the author’s qualifying encounters with the natural shock of inspiration.

Aaron Poockigian scores again with his ebullient lyric “Song: Go and Do It,” which turns a slogan often found on T-shirts into a series of fanciful commands, very like Donne’s “Go and Catch a Falling Star,” whose heterometrical template this author adopts for his poem. But Donne’s sardonic conclusion is upended here by a poet who apparently believes he is going to carry the day once the beloved realizes that no mere location will equal the shelter provided by mutual love.

Finally, Marshall Witten’s “Second Mowing” takes us to the pastoral realm, autumnal and contemplative, where an unrhymed sonnet connects the contrarities of farming to two mythic narratives: the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the eternal ordeals of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a heavy rock uphill repeatedly for having tried to elude Death. Experience is of course freighted with many Sisyphean tasks unrelated to farming (poetry itself, for example) and nearly everyone can identify with the author’s chastened grasp of his situation. But perhaps the best response is one provided by Yeats himself in “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing”:

Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play
Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.

Alfred Corn

Sing what is well made

FIRST PRIZE

The Rites of Spring

by Fran Lock, London, England

Long day awash with wheezing breath, sadsoft mood of lesser nettles, heading home at five a.m. Our mutant cohort treading weather, unkempt earliness we walk, in transports, tribal blankets, pixie-hooded, resolute. Come again to London: affrighted sky, beleaguered wage, the rage we bargain into grief. Count the ribs of half-starved dogs while city women shriek like zips. This is spring, the whole world running with green scissors, a cockadoodle spite beneath their skin. Back again, pacing the sprained light of squats, reeling a love we want to dig the loamy breadth of. Back, to days spent lying better-dead against the corkscrew guts of mattresses. This is spring, Neanderthal with suffering, and twitching its teased prick. And we will seek dark spaces, fold our arms like pharaohs, close our eyes until fury’s gold implosion finds us, sunshine after cinema. Then we will rise, practise our pagan ablutions: boys in stonewashed mood swings, grinning a dissolute wonder, girls atilt with a sauntering kilter, singing to cheap speed, adrenal distress; old men leading their horses to water, and all the lust they’re lame and fumbled with. We will honour you, ghost, with vodka bottles smashed for making rainbow mincemeat out of daylight. We will honour you, with three part harmonies, chemical dread. Because this is spring, the whole world under a tourmaline sway, and the gates of the Cross Bones cemetery, wanton with ribbons. We will honour you, in that famished hour when sorrow files its weasel teeth, and under the wan spin of stars, in the unquiet sci-fi of a mind that makes a drowned world of this dockland. Hush now, hush. The night is the ambient temperature of a carsick sob, and in the scrubby parkland the litter bins are trying their very best to grow.

SECOND PRIZE

Take It to the Roof

By Aaron Poockigian, New York City

It’s madness that the tipsy gravitate toward precipices, but they do, they do: the high love highness; an ecstatic state defies the nag of earth. We knew (we *knew*)

but, caution nonsense to communal stupor, up we went and stormed the rooftop, feeling primitive, propounding, *Screw the super! Wake the neighbors! Crack the penthouse ceiling!*

Since two hands (like, my own or someone else’s) had brought the tunes, our would-be-airborne corps had found its wind and synchronized its pulses, and more came spilling through the fire door, more

evaporated in the dervish blur. Oblivion! That’s what it’s like in groups; that’s how it is with liquor. If there were some clumsy jostlers and a few sad droops,

we were, in concert, still one oversexed amoebic beast sublimely throbbing, bending the guardrail gulfward, and. . . What happened next eludes the conscious mind, so, for an ending,

I came round Sunday on a floor of doubt, grateful whatever bliss that bacchanal had brought about had goddamn gone all-out by lifting, for a spell, my in-di-vid-u-al.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

That was no country

by Zara Raab, Lee MA

for tender, underfed girls. The tough guys, the willful sons of pioneers, loggers, lumbermen sleeping rough, ranchers, wives intent those years to keep accounts: opinionated, deaf to sound beyond their own perimeters.

Why curb the steady trends of progress
for a newly wed in chiffon dress?

She had a complexion of pale rose.
Country bred, no knack for make-believe.
The in-laws drop by, hungry for news,
he stands there, cursing in shirtsleeves,
she freshens linens, pours the booze;
she had what it took; she didn't leave,
or run off with a handsome sailor, as
I have done, sailing the whole wide sea.

“Who are we really?” Again I ask.
Doors fly open once barely ajar,
and high upon a ridge, the needle-pass
is smoothed and paved in sand and tar.
“Who breathes beneath this sleek attire?”
Intent on finding out, we all undress.
Though young, I was a mortal stick,
spine formed of an ancient book.

Ideas are images the thinker
casts like leaves upon the world;
I hammered mine as wood for a chair
or spun my thought to make a bowl,
or knit up shawls for lovers
from strands of gold and emerald.
Some harden in time, some take flight
over vast continents, or in thought.

Mother stayed. This tiny woman
become a matron, un-softened, stiff
from labor of stove, bed and children;
she was there in body, a simple hick.
Soul, perhaps, wind swept away; then,
eyes took on the gaze of hammered stuff
the smith works on an anvil—iron ore
not found in these hills, not mined there.

for my mother, P.B.M.

The Fulminologist

by Kathleen McCracken, Greenisland, Antrim, N.I.

My father could tell us
everything we needed to know
about lightning –
how on average storms deliver
three strikes to earth per minute,

or that each coursing flash
maintains a tight diameter
of just one inch,
whole show an incontrovertible
transfer of energy.

He'd figured out its frequency
velocity and distribution
in certain regions of the world
- Kifuka, Catatumbo
the Kimberley Plateau -

could reckon if a charge was travelling
from cloud to cloud
or cloud to ground
or, intra-cloud, just roaming round
inside the cloud itself.

He would describe dark lightning
as a rain of gamma-rays, rhyme off weird varieties
from ball and bead and dry and heat
to ribbon, rocket, sheet, staccato,
the enigmatic thundersnow

then have us count up beats between
dazzle-flare and rolling clap
- five seconds to the mile -
or measure if the storm was too far distant
for thunder to be heard at all.

June nights he'd scan Jim Dawson's
ridge of pines and say
that lightning rods
and surge protectors
are a guarantee of nothing.

But mostly all the charts and tables
the observations and predictions
the sitting late alone
beside the lake or safe beneath
the front porch canopy

were divination, straightforward
old time guesswork
aimed at the odds of lightning
striking the same tree twice,
or else a patient's patient wondering

about metastasis, just how easily his mouth
might open wide to greet
that superheated bolt of blue,
his name in radiant stitches
along its ravaged spine.

Song: Go And Do It

by Aaron Poochigian, New York City

Leap Niagara, ask a Mountie
where they keep the joie de vivre,
then cruise down to Orange County,
surf the curl and smoke some reefer.
Ride class fives in the Cascades,
water-ski the Everglades,
go, go, go
until you know
precisely where the Good Times flow.

Hitchhike through the heartland, travel
wide, acquire a taste for tillage.
Where the asphalt turns to gravel
settle down in some quaint village—
cloudy, clear or partly sunny,
your new Land of Milk and Honey
will appear
much like here
but less suburban, more sincere.

Search through endless desert places
for the perfect little spot.
When at last some plush oasis
tallies with the spa you sought,
think of me and write a letter
gloating over how much better
life is there—
I'll still swear
we could be happy anywhere.

Second Mowing

by Marshall Witten, Shaftsbury VT

It's been an August week of cloudless skies.
The farmer's mowing fills the humid air with
sweet smells from fresh-cut hay. The fields are patterned
with tedded curving rows along the rolling
terrain, like dreadlocks, waiting for the sun
to dry the crop. The bailer swallows lines
like a conveyor belt, nonstop spitting
cylinders, six hundred pounds apiece.

The smells and measured order of this scene
suggest that we are masters of the land.
But farmers gamble with the gods' dice faces:
pestilence, drought, tempest, insects, markets, costs.
Sisyphean bargain, endless labor quietly
performed in these regions east of Eden.



The W.B. Yeats Society of New York poetry competition is open to members and nonmembers of any age, from any locality. Poems in English up to 60 lines, not previously published, on any subject may be submitted. Each poem (judged separately) typed on an 8.5 x 11-inch sheet without author's name; attach 3x5 card with name, address, phone, e-mail. **Entry fee \$15 for first poem, \$12 each additional.** Mail to 2017 Poetry Competition, WB Yeats Society of NY, National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, New York NY 10003. Include S.A.S.E. to receive the report like this one. List of winners is posted on *YeatsSociety.org* about March 31. **First prize \$1,000, second prize \$500.** Winners and honorable mentions receive two-year memberships in the Society and are honored at an event in New York in April. Authors retain rights, but grant us the right to publish winning entries. **These are complete guidelines; no entry form necessary.** Deadline for 2017 competition is February 1. We reserve the right to hold late submissions to following year. For information on our other programs, or on membership, visit *YeatsSociety.org* or write to us.