



2020 Yeats Poetry Prize

Spencer Reece, Judge

WB YEATS
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Judge's Report

Spencer Reece
Madrid, Spain

When asked to describe what poetry was, WH Auden famously said it was *memorable speech*. There are infinite ways to make a poem memorable: rhyme, meter, image, a turn of phrase, a provocative attitude even. WB Yeats was certainly memorable in his speech for all the ways listed. The three poems that I have singled out for this year's Yeats Prize all became memorable as I read and read them in different ways. The winners are:

First Prize: *Selfie@Fifty*

The poem showed dexterity with the sonnet form, using curious end words like *rainy* to rhyme with *remains*, which enhanced and suited the strange matching of the art of making selfies with various filters in comparison to an older image, pre-phone, of a child wearing a mask. The complexity and subtlety of this little poem kept me going back to it like a Rubick's cube, astonishing me with how it kept snapping together upon multiple readings. Not easy to pull off.

Second Prize: *On a Late Birthday—after Vallejo*

The poem maintained a delightful, bashful engaging tone that kept me turning to its page. This seems to me to be one of the magical allures of poetry: a curious idiosyncratic tone! Like an accomplished painting in a museum, with a strong poem we want multiple looks. A good poem must hold up to the "museum" test. This one does.

Honorable Mention: *Nazareth*

The poet intrigued me as much as the poem because of its humor and the sketching of a human character reminiscent like something out of Carson McCullers. A poem can fix, or try to fix, a person or moment, it is verbal amber, and this poem just like the two above held my attention by creating a memorable scene. And perhaps there was also a tone here of humility, which is not often seen in poems I read by modern poets much these days.

Bravo.

About the Judge

Spencer Reece is a poet and presbyter, whose work has appeared in *Boulevard*, *The New Yorker* and *The American Poetry Review*. He holds degrees from Wesleyan University, University of York (UK), and the divinity schools of Harvard and Yale. He was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in 2011. His first book of poems *The Clerk's Tale* was selected by Louise Glück for the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize. His second poetry book, *The Road to Emmaus*, was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in April 2014. *The Secret Gospel of Mark: a Poet's Memoir*, his most recently completely book of prose, is forthcoming from Seven Stories Press.

First Prize

Martha Greenwald
Louisville, Kentucky

Selfie@Fifty

Whiskered, garlanded, haloed by stars —
your image swiped from peacock to hippie,
snow bunny to witch, ghost to flirty jaguar.
Hold the cell high, filter, angle purposefully,

wrist extending farther than anyone believes
possible, till the sharp planes of your cheeks
& chin reemerge, features no longer bereaved.
Childhood, posted, accrues lies & likes —

my friend in kitten ears, you haven't aged a bit;
still out wandering with father, despite the rainy
October night, monster costume aglow, backlit
by wavering opal streetlights. No one remains

who would remember you like that: looking upward
from a silly mask, waiting to be told you're adored.

About the Author

Martha Greenwald is a writer, editor and educator, originally from Middletown, New Jersey. Her first collection of poetry, *Other Prohibited Items*, was the winner of the Mississippi Review Poetry Series. Her work has appeared in such journals as *New World Writing*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Slate*, *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *Best New Poets*. She has held a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford and been awarded fellowships from the North Carolina and Kentucky Arts Councils, among other honors. She is the curator of Correspondence, a literary reading series in Louisville, Kentucky.

Second Prize

Christopher Buckley
Santa Barbara, California

On a Late Birthday – After Vallejo

Because in all the afternoons of this life

I have rarely told the outright truth,
because the destination of wind
is unreadable in the acacia
and pittosporum trees,
I am the poorer for it. . . .
Sunlight's going to grey ash
over the bay—so there,
another embellishment—
what's that worth?

 There's a barrel
at the end of the bench
for trash, nothing more to be
made of that.

 Today
is another day I have lived
longer than César Vallejo,
and many of my comrades
from Fresno—talent, apparently,
having little to do with it.
Half my life ago I received a grant,
and searched out Modigliani's grave—
a slab of cement like one
on any of the sidewalks there. . . .

Now, I rarely travel beyond
this shore, where again today
a woman leaning on a shopping cart
filled with plastic bags, stumbles by,
and a homeless man, about my age,
pushes a bike with a bent wheel
out of the weeds. . . . Are you going
to elaborate on their stick-thin arms,
grease-colored skin, are you going to
pick up Tristan Tzara and feel
you understand something
about the human condition?

On a Late Birthday – After Vallejo *cont.*

I haven't missed a meal in years,
and no philosophy for suffering
survives the evening. And when
I think back to my 20s—getting by
on soy beans, boxed wine,
day-old bread—there's still
a stitch beneath my ribs . . .
but that's not much, really,
to complain about.

Whoever
said you get what you deserve
must be related to the fellow
with a cocktail on the balcony
of the boat club, the one overlooking
the harbor and, just to his right,
the man picking through garbage bins
in back.

When I sit here
long enough, a high tide
washes up around my shoes—
and sooner or later rain arrives
for those homesteading the bushes
in the park across the street.

The pier
here leads nowhere, into the sea.

About the Author

Christopher Buckley is author of more than 17 collections of poetry, including the recent *Star Journal: Selected Poems* (U of Pittsburgh P); *Cloud Memoir: Selected Longer Poems* (Stephen F. Austin State UP), and *AGNOSTIC* (Lynx House). His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Crazyhorse* and *The Nation*. Among his previous awards are a Guggenheim Fellow in Poetry, the James Dickey Prize, a Fulbright Award in creative writing to the former Yugoslavia, four Pushcart Prizes and two grants in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Honorable Mention

Pamela L. Sumners
St. Louis, Missouri

Nazareth

The woman who lived upstairs had soft red hair,
soft in tone and soft to the touch. She mistook me
for a dancer, but I was only a delicate acanthus stalk
pretending to blossom a shape, a puny, unkempt reed.
That 1860s townhouse was behind the Hawk 'n Dove.

She had a German short-haired pointer called Deli Dog
and I had six cats who moved in somewhat like Carl
Sandburg's fog had and just never dispelled to light. She
owned a shop of antiquarian books in Baltimore that
she may even have playfully named Nevermore. Every
night I would hear her hands flattering the ivory keys
just as they had taught her at Julliard, hear her playing

Rachmaninoff, Mussorgsky, almost feel her swaying
upstairs when she made for me mix tapes she left on
the landing, and I could see her sometimes standing
on those stairs, where she was humming Ray Charles,
the snarl-lip Elvis songs that no one knows like "Marie's
the Name (of His Latest Flame)," all of Jeannie C. Riley's
B sides. She taped for me the many versions of "Promenade
in Green" she knew, and when I heard her soft tread sneaking
away after leaving treasure, her feet on the stairs a musical
measure, I would dance to find it at my doorstep, humming

"When I go by Baltimore, need no carpet on my floor."
When she left, as vapors should, I wanted her to write an opera,
just for me, about what good thing could come from Nazareth.

About the Author

Pamela Sumners' work has been published or recognized by about 30 journals or publishing houses in the US and abroad in 2018-20. A 2018 Pushcart nominee, she was selected for inclusion in both Black Mountain Press's 2018 and 2019 *64 Best Poets* anthologies. Her chapbook *Finding Helen* will be released by Seven Kitchens Press in fall 2020, and her full-length collection, *Ragpicking Ezekiel's Bones*, is forthcoming from UnCollected Press in summer 2020. A native Alabamian who practiced constitutional and civil rights law there, she now lives in St. Louis with her family, which includes her lugubrious rescue dogs who think eyeglasses are a food group.