

# 2018 Yeats Poetry Prize

Leslie McGrath, Judge

WB YEATS  
SOCIETY<sup>of</sup> NY

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# Judge's Report

Leslie McGrath

I can now say that the feeling of being buried in poems is both joyful (for the thrilling capaciousness of the English language) and painful (for language's ability to frame fear, disgust, despair.) Every kind of human encounter could be found in the approximately one thousand poems from around the world that were submitted to this year's Yeats Poetry Prize. They ranged from brief (ten- to twelve-line lyrics) to sixty-line narratives. Many were written in various types of received form, but the majority were in free verse. Their subjects ranged from elegies and odes to full-throated manifestos urging action on the most important issues of our time--the destruction of our environment, endless war, and the inhumane treatment of the vulnerable.

As an American poet, I've been known to join the complaining choir that poetry is neither widely read nor supported, so that its powers as comforter and provocation are under-utilized. And yet people around the world continue to look to poetry as a powerful means of communication, not just among human beings but also with the Divine. We are still writing poems, many poems. It's been a privilege to sit with these.

In my eyes, poetry is a living art that reflects our time, while it is also aware of our history and looking toward the future. There were many "knock me sideways" poems to be found here and it gives me much pleasure to gesture toward those that I'd benefit from reading again and again.

"There goes woman," begins "Anthem" by Jennifer Militello, this year's first prize winner. This poem is a locomotive of language that characterizes the lives of women from a cultural perspective.

Woman is a maze from which no one  
gets out. Sometimes found dead in a pig trap.  
Sometimes living in a frying pan like a frog.

Every image, every line held me as it made its way down the page. I was riveted and made furious by the repetition of this eyeroll of a phrase: "there goes woman." It's the familiar sound of dismissal known to every woman and every man who cares about women. Was the poet male or female? I was judging blind. Should it matter? It wasn't until the poem's shift in its final lines that I knew that it didn't. This poem is anthem of our time.

"Brief on Disappointment" by Jon Davis is written in long-lined quatrains, which well serve his elegiac tone. This is a poem that speaks quietly and comfortingly to the outsiders, to those who did not win, those who are living lives that are smaller and more average than we dreamed they'd be. In other words, it's a poem for the vast majority of us. And at its core is one of Yeats's best-known lines.

Oh tenderest outsiders,

You who huddle in vestibules waiting to be recognized,  
Apprised and embraced, admired, mobbed, *Lie down again*  
*Where all things start, in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.*

Three poems received honorable mention. "Wintering along the Atlantic, thinking of *Hunter, Snow goose, Shadow*" by Caitlin Roach, begins as a calm winter pastoral and slowly reveals its broader intentions. A hint: Hunter, Snow goose, and Shadow are names of U.S. military drones.

I saw the song sung out of the northern bird's beard  
like the dawning of a new war and mistook it for a prayer.

J. David Cummings' "Praise Dust" conjures out of lush sounds the smallness of the self when backgrounded by eternity:

Praise the ceaseless anarchy of the small invisible  
And the calling of dust into stars  
And the calling of stars into wheeling islands

"The Women of Juarez" by Maurya Simon was one of the first poems I read and it stuck with me through my weeks of reading. This short prose poem reads like a poetic billboard and serves as a marker for one of the mass graves around the world.

What has happened to the beautiful girls of Juarez—the ones who blushed at their *quinceaneras*

Last, I note with pleasure and respect two other poems that reflect very different linguistic sensibilities. Debra Wierenga's sonnet, "Event Horizon" is a jewel box containing an elegy contained in a jewel box. Oliver Jones's "nU txt" uses the plasticity of language to show readers what it may look like later in the technological revolution.

My gratitude to everyone who sent us their poems.

Jennifer Militello  
Goffstown, New Hampshire

## *Anthem*

There goes woman, mind of a worm, that  
oyster, blister, fit of the willies, that prisoner  
of war. There goes woman, mouth  
of February, stern as a vase. Lemmings  
at the cliff. Stillness like a stain, sunlight  
through the blinds, reed-lisp to sing. There  
goes woman, sieve. In her eyes, disaster, drought.  
Fever. Aircraft carrier hull. Pupils dilate,  
calm like hunters hunted themselves, across  
a field, in exile, standing at the well, at the center  
of the palm a coin about to be dropped.  
Make a wish. Dare to crouch at the wink  
of light as it flips away. Down into the lag  
of darkness. Down into the animal throat.  
In her rot, we bloom. In her word, we scold.  
She kneads us of lime and sand and salt.

There goes woman, poison-lidded, string-like,  
thick. Annihilated, knobbed. She rates herself  
on a scale of one to ten. Plaited, her inability  
pours. Ruin is her ranchland of gods. Branching  
out, drying up. Her rote quadrant. Her quail  
crossing the road. Her old sense of something  
at stake. Woman is a maze from which no one  
gets out. Sometimes found dead in a pig trap.  
Sometimes living in a frying pan like a frog.  
Feathers like black plum whiskey: she follows  
the sharp line between shade and sun. A space  
the size of a farmer's porch, a hook inches  
from the void. Motor oil smeared along her body,  
brimming with garbage, apprentice to a lantern  
that lets her work at night, apprentice to cash  
and a Bible on a shelf. Her memory is a tangled  
market full of ripped clothes and starved vendors,  
a hospital, a warehouse of discarded weaponry.

With her wolf howl and muzzle and exposed  
bicuspids, with her insistence on temperatures  
and punch of the clock, with *no, darling*  
and cannot look. Leprous as a wither, suffering  
underwater, none of us take on the role of daughter,  
tannin-thick in a bottle-brown lake. Back when  
whispers were rationed like mercury dripped  
and hardened in a tooth. Back when horses'  
footing loosened and slipped. Back when questions  
were carried by the scruff of the neck. Her days  
are full. Her days are hands rifling through  
an airport bag, like the hands of a magician  
pulling a rabbit from a hat. Here comes woman,  
a grab of dander taken from the wind. None  
of us were heavenly, stalled in that ravine.

## Second Prize

Jon Davis  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

### Brief on Disappointment

After the prizes were claimed, the medals tilted to glint  
In the spotlights and flashbulbs. After the certificates  
Were signed and framed, the speeches hinting  
At dark political maneuverings obliterated

By the weary orchestra. After the nominees and runners-up  
Were ensconced and limousined. After the last  
Eligible contestant had tucked her program into her purse,  
The shame of once having hoped searing her cheek—

The prideful strut, the rented dress, the shoes,  
The tendered preparation for the snub. And the man gone,  
So accustomed to failure that he dressed like the walls  
Themselves, like the wait-staff that whisked away,

First, the punch bowl, then the squandered cake,  
The plates and forks, the flutes, the towel-wrapped Prosecco  
Aslant in its tepid bucket. After the winners were toasted,  
Encomiumed, vaunted. After the best were declared, and the list

No matter how many times they ran their fingers down it,  
Did not include their names, how did they continue?  
When the resources for continuance were denied them,  
How did they continue? Oh, tenderest outsiders,

You who huddle in vestibules waiting to be recognized,  
Apprised and embraced, admired, mobbed, Lie down again  
Where all things start, in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.  
In blessed obscurity toil and render there the battered doll,

Abandoned toolshed, bandana'd workers leaned  
Against a sun-scorched van. When the low sun gilds  
The wheatfield, lighting up each spike, each stem and tiller,  
Medals will begin to tarnish, ribbons fray and flutter,

Until all is dulled by rain and wind, every glinting thing.

# Honorable Mention

Caitlin Roach  
Las Vegas, Nevada

## Wintering along the Atlantic, thinking of *Hunter, Snow goose, Shadow*\*

The ring of blossoming cherry trees rose up early  
round the tidal basin like a rash as music from winter

birds poured like milk across the lake's frozen face, riven  
by the sound of a *shadow* passing over it, a *snow goose*

maybe, a winged thing scuttling on hardened skins  
of marshes when the season peeled back revealing

another. *Correction*: Leaflets let from a white belly in the sky  
above a war, warning of it. A young throat let go a sound

so hungry then I swear it smelled the blood of it, but  
swarmed toward where warmth was in the millions

instead, blooming fertile in the hunter's strip of sky blanks  
pealed in at each edge of the migration. I'm forgetting who

the killer became here. Little cuts in the lake's heart slashed  
by blades a child turned on in circles, looking for a way out

of perpetuity, proved that even what freezes to death still  
bleeds out when opened. How many tics did the *hunter*

draw before becoming the hunted? Tell me. Holy  
father, I saw the song sung out the northern bird's beard

like the dawning of a new war and mistook it for a prayer.  
It spun in the nocturne's loop or the shadow did, then set it

-self upright in a mountain ash, loosening scarlet berries  
toward the mouth of some child who will never be born

inside a war and so has already won. That winter a memory  
that can't be molted. *Snow goose*, after its namesake, winter

bird, *harbinger of change*, used for warning what's already expired  
in the scope. I'm forgetting the order of things. They're coming

up with new names all the time: *raven, wasp, reaper*. None  
remember how many bombs the U.S. let that year, nor

on how many countries, but they remember the frenzied  
flight of ten thousand snow geese clapping in their search

for open water, the black-tipped wings marking twenty  
thousand desperate edges massing lower and lower down,

their pink bills falling like blushed clots through a globe  
toward the mine's ruddy stew, and the host who swallowed

the toxic water choked by cobalt, arsenic, cadmium that  
burnt their throats and turned their snowy coats to rust,

their deaths smeared into the land so as not to be noticed,  
and the sea of white carcasses and Butte's gaping silence where

once a cacophony of honks and cries ten thousand deep  
preyed the wintry town and now its sudden loss of sound.

### Notes

*Hunter, Snow Goose, Shadow, Raven, Wasp, Reaper*:  
names of U.S. drones.

In the winter of 2016, thousands of snow geese died  
in Butte, Montana after landing on Berkeley Pit, former  
open-pit copper mine and a Superfund site. Necropsies  
on the carcasses showed their digestive tracts covered  
in sores and blisters caused by the acidic water.  
"Thousands of snow geese die at abandoned pit mine,"  
*The Smithsonian*, December 2017.

# Honorable Mention

J. David Cummings  
Menlo Park, California

## *Praise Dust*

Praise the dust that swirls in the dry field  
And the dust that weaves an arabesque of insect-light,  
Signaling summer's life in evening air,  
Praise the dust hungering for us, that does not forget,  
That rests on the leaves and drifts and burrows the pistil,  
And praise the dust that was the firmament  
When the firmament began, and praise  
The disturbances of dust that transmute it  
Out of itself and into itself,  
Praise the ceaseless anarchy of the small invisible  
And the calling of dust into stars  
And the calling of stars into wheeling islands  
And the islands into archipelagoes of light,  
And praise the light that emanates and spans,  
Threading the blackness, praise  
The countervailing blackness separating  
Island and star from island and star,  
And praise the dark matter's containing  
That holds true the star wheel,  
Praise the centrifugal uncertainty,  
Yet praise the planet's forming in the sun's circle,  
In the spinning dust,  
Praise this blue home buried in the star wilderness,  
Praise volcano and mountain, desert and sea,  
The roiling interior and spinning iron  
And the field of lines that turns away  
The solar stream of death,  
Praise the many-hued skin of air, how it sponsors  
The light fall that showers ocean and land,  
And the luminous clouds and the gray, rain-filled clouds,  
The shearing, zagging light, the clap of thunder,  
Praise the scum that became life,  
Praise the clay that became life,  
Praise the waters of life and the carrying wind,  
Praise fire, ignitor of all things,  
And praise with abiding grief the proposition of death,

How that which flees from itself in terror and blindness  
Yet yields that itself may live, praise  
What I eat, what eats me,  
And praise I will become the dust of my name,  
Praise that we lived, you and I,  
Praise the singular moment of our being,  
Praise love's late season, our life together,  
Praise the loves we have known,  
Praise the trees and the hands of the trees,  
Praise equation and number, poem and song,  
Praise how time will bring the sun closer,  
How the water and air will boil away  
And the spreading desert will inherit  
The continents, the floors of the sea, praise the wind  
That before it dies will lift aloft  
All that lived and will in its dying let down  
In dust the last rain of earth,  
And praise the wind of the sun that shall give up the earth  
To the void and the explosion of stars  
And the star's rekindling,  
Praise this mind that thinks and thinks it is not dust,  
Praise us, soul-demented beings of ruin,  
Praise chance, praise words, praise love,  
And praise the dust swirling the field this very moment.

## Honorable Mention

Maurya Simon  
Mt Baldy, California

### *The Women of Juárez*

There are bones strewn in arroyos and fields here that weep in their marrow. Bones of little girls, their skulls and femurs; bones of teenagers, small ribcages and delicate metatarsals; bones of young women, pelvises and spinal columns. Twenty years of bones scattered like casual debris from over six hundred girls—their laughter and giggles broken from their mouths, their tears burning the dry soil like acid. Even the desert sparrows sit dazed on their branches; even the lizards shrink from their own shadows. In houses all over Ciudad Juárez, mothers and fathers sit stupefied by their windows. Their hands tremble as they reach out to open their doors, when they touch their daughters, their breathing daughters. What has happened to the beautiful girls of Juárez—the ones who blushed at their quinceañeras, who walked dry fields at dusk, never returning from work at the factories? Who raped and tortured them, burned and disposed of them? What kind of men are these, what kind of men, I ask you, who have black bile in their veins, whose minds overflow with toxins, whose hearts are concrete—and why, oh why has no one stopped them?

Oliver Jones  
London

## *nU tXt*

1 day wen the fOks of 2morrow  
R dun cauterising every trace of U  
with hydrogen peroxide (Haich-Two-Oh-Two)  
& 1ce Ur dun flying 2 imbecile rage,

vAnly C-ling fissures in Ur busted postul8s  
that posterity rejX [sic] - just w8 - stop there.  
wen Ur tempted in2 all manners of hostile judgement  
(as we all R) – stop there. disRm. cogit8. & remember.

sumtimes, the only way U can knO  
wen a man's abused the communal toilet etiquette  
by temporizing in situ over the crapper way way 2 long  
is when U've been temporizing in there

suspicious long Urself. think on it. rumin8. cogit8.  
wen U kick down the cubicle door & enter  
the brown-sprA concavity of the unspEkable X-human  
who thrU fuk'd tEth protests that "it's the

drugs, man, the fRmaceuticals. thA stA in longer  
than i can cry them out" – w8 there. disRm. rumin8. cogit8.  
Consider the case's constituent pRts, its mEt & pot8oes.  
4 Rn't we all of us stuck in this same perplXity,

searching our shallO aQmulations of Xperience  
4 sum conXion to the gr8 & 4mless quiet that aw8s us outsId?  
Urself, curtis, cobAn, joplin & all the 3cubed angels,  
blair, rAgan, atilla & all the 2-2 solids,

past's sizzled in the same friction hEt  
of sum crUl & cosmic bUty's change of hRt.  
ambitions pickled in the same womb's terrible jR  
& terrible truth: not all drEms can cum trU.

1 day, we'll miss Ur gangrenous genius,  
Ur in2b8d intelligence & cancerous cre8ivity.  
1 day these fOk'll wish U were harder to erase  
& we'll graze upon the I-lashes of posterity's ancient face.

Debra Wierenga  
Holland, Michigan

## *Event Horizon*

In metrics that we understand, of height  
and length and depth and time, effects  
of gravity are weak: a fact which might  
explain dimensions one only suspects  
(I've read since your death), where gravity regains  
its strength at Planck (the smallest scale we know)  
and every atomic particle contains—  
or is—a minuscule black hole.

In such a many-dimensional state,  
(perhaps like the one in which you now exist)  
each cell would exert a force so great  
not even light could resist.

Where, in dark constellations compelling as sin,  
those dead ones we love keep pulling us in.

## Eddie Vega Prize Administrator

I had the pleasure and honor to prepare the poems for Judge Leslie McGrath's consideration, well over 1,000. I was deeply moved by many of them and feel increasing frustration that the nature of writing competitions prevents the kind of public recognition they merit, and by the sheer volume of entries, the writing of private encouraging notes.

One in particular left me unsettled. The poet withdrew a work a few weeks before I had the opportunity to send it to the judge. It was a poignant meditation on the poet's father that the poet came to conclude was not worthy of an award. I don't know if it was or was not worthy of an award... it is for me simply to ensure the entries are consistent with the contest rules and that they are sent to the judge in a timely manner. I was, however, saddened that the judge would not have the chance to read it.

There were other withdrawals that have made me rethink the rules of the competition. There were a record number of poems that were withdrawn because they had been (after submission) accepted for publication elsewhere. While it speaks loudly about the universally recognized quality of this year's crop, it does identify a problem. It should not matter if a poem is accepted for publication elsewhere after submission. The poetry community, from what I know of it, tends to be genteel and any such conflicts can be easily resolved since our report is closer to a news announcement than to a literary publication. Next year's rules will contain a clarification that such poems would not be automatically barred from consideration for a prize... come what may.

**WB YEATS  
SOCIETY of NY**

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