

Sing what is well made

W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

2012 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE

Before I talk about the winners of this year's competition, I have a confession to make. I have known the first-prize winner for many, many years, and even published a book of poetry by him when I ran a small press. It was pretty clear to me when I read the two poems that he submitted that I would have to pick Alan. But in all honesty I chose his poem because his work stood out from any of the other work that was submitted to the contest, and I read all of it.

Feldman's poetry is passionate and grounded in human experience the way that most of the poems that I read were not. The great majority of the poets who submitted work to this contest—the present winners and runners-up excluded—believe that poetry is mostly a species of nature description, festooned with leaves and leaves of adjectives. Feldman's work is immediate where these other poems are decorative. Alternatively, there were a number of ekphrastic poems. The feeling I got from the majority of entries was that it was enough to borrow from nature or art, but not to live them. Some of the poems were highly skillful, but often piled with the crackle-crunch rhetoric that I have come to find so idious.

I found this emphasis on human experience to be true of our second-place winner, Wally Swist, whom I do not know. But I think you'll see how good his poem is, and how it outlines with great skill a poignant human drama of missed connections.

I have another confession to make. I also know Alisha Kaplan, whose poetry group at Barnard invited me to read and talk with them a few years ago. She and I have kept in touch, but (honest-to-goodness!) I did not recognize the poem as something of Alisha's turns, its sense of daring and humor. I love how she has Yeats pop up in the final stanza.

Michael Miller's poem, "My Father's Hands," also moved me with its focus and compassion. It bears the same human quality as Feldman's and Swisher's work, as Victoria Givotovsky's likewise does, with its feeling and wit. And though I am also from Connecticut originally, I don't know Ms. Givotovsky, even though we evidently come from the same ethnic gene pool—I think!

I also didn't know that three of the winners were going to come from Massachusetts, but let's raise a glass of anything to that fact, whatever it means.

By now my bias in poetry should be evident to you. I respond to poetry in which the human drama is foregrounded, in which the world is presented as relationships. I also respond to humor and tactile language. One of my favorite poems is "The Circus Animals' Desertion." In it Yeats teaches us that "masterful images" must begin in "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." That's what the winners of this year's contest do.

Bill Zavatsky

FIRST PRIZE

At the Dentist

by Alan Feldman, Framingham MA

I am the father of a disabled son
who is now thirty-five. Among his problems,
an extraordinary sensitivity to pain.

I accompany him into the treatment room
and can see his open mouth, spotlighted,
bright blood on his teeth.

Even nitrous oxide doesn't help,
though he sees the dentist he saw as a child.
We need a world full of people who are kind.

I wish I could alleviate suffering
with some practical training.
Or put in my ear plugs
so deep grand piano chords
resound in my ears and I swell with beauty
as it billows inside me . . .

When my son was born
there was a poem the pediatrician liked
and gave out to his patients
to comfort fathers. Could I write
such a poem? A middle-sized graybeard,
with a voice a little on the high side,
trying to speak gently to the world
that needs so much care,
as it floats like a single-celled organism
in a vast bath of darkness . . .

I'm hardly the astronaut I thought I'd be,
rooted here near my son,
still on his back in that chair.

I'd rather think about the old sloop
that I've cared for: after many hours
of scraping and cleaning, we can set forth
with no thoughts of maintenance.

Perfect sailing days when she heels,
then steers herself, and I stand on the bow
beyond the vast curve of the genoa
to look back at the churning wake
that will never perturb the sea . . .

Will my son ever be on his own?
Yesterday I heard him
touch typing, about a hundred words a minute,
very loud, on an old typewriter—

some bird, it turns out, trying to find
a home behind one of the shutters.
And in other fantasies he's driving
a city bus, and will have a steady paycheck
and a good pension. As for my country,
it's kinder than you'd think
given all the Social Darwinist rhetoric lately.
For example, it provides him with food stamps,
and gives him a bit extra, too,
paying *him* taxes, just as the dentist
is kind beyond any professional obligation,
and the hygienist too, who modestly states,
"You can hold my hand, and stare
right at me, if you want. I know
I'm not much to look at . . ."
But she is!—with her brown eyes
behind her tortoise shell glasses,
meeting his gaze the way the world
tends to meet it, without turning away.

SECOND PRIZE

Velocity

by Wally Swist, Amherst MA

Through the velocity of love, they crash hard.

The man recalling the call, years ago, before
answering machines, after he heard the news

that she divorced, and the woman
not being home to pick up may have been
grace. How in passing, when he worked one

block away he saw her bent down
on hands and knees in the front window
of her husband's boutique to fashion a display

of gifts from Lebanon. How in passing,
thirty years later, she saw his name on
a poster for a reading, and she phoned to offer

her thanks to him for his asking her
to dance when they attended Mrs. Fishbein's
class in seventh grade. Divinity induces speed,

although the grace we live out of today
will portend whom we might love
and how we love years from now. When love

crashes hard, due to misunderstanding,

and the man phones the woman
countless times after she has turned off her cell

phone and her landline, it does so with
a velocity that is neither energy nor grace,
but pride, because they both have forgotten that

he indicated to her he experienced
his consciousness expand after the six-hour
marathon call she made to him; how the morning

after, she knew she was in love, when
boarding her bus to go to work, she realized
she had forgotten her purse, and returned home,

not for the credit cards in it,
but for lipstick; how months later
when they held each other in the late February

sunlight, and listened to a CD
of the melodic baritone voice
of Johnny Hartman synchronize with the dulcet

tenor sax of John Coltrane, he asked
her to bookmark that: *just in case they may ever
have any problems.* When the man thinks of how

he kissed the woman goodbye,
still tucked in bed, before he drove off
to work, he was always surprised when she rose

to flaunt herself for him on the back
porch, her white terry cloth robe open, it was
not the energy of their love but the grace of it.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Statues of January

by Alisha Kaplan, Brooklyn NY

When the bronze man moves out of his bronzed statue
and wheels his painted pedestal into a bank off Grafton

When the man in the long white dress with white face
waving his hands, offering a lolly, his last one
When he steps down from his cardboard stand
When he sags into a telephone booth
vanished to make a phone call

I see your dark skin under white paint
and passersby don't want your candy

When the man in suit, briefcase and hat for change
tie mid-air, blown by hairspray, an invisible wind

walks through the crowd after standing still for hours
under the sky, gray, biding with rain

A rare moment –
gray is lovely
like that woman's gray stockings
and shiny gray shoes

I have bittersweet chocolate in my pocket
as I lean on a lamppost and listen
to the sad cries of your tinwhistle
I saw you play fiddle beside that ancient Chinese woman
who sits every day in that alley
playing that little accordion

The jingling boxes of change for Haiti
alike to a trudge of feet mark time
The whistful whistle of violin and flute
visit the hills of distant seashores
from before you were born

The homeless man sits between lines of people
who wait to receive paper gold out of holes in the wall
No one looks at him
Where does he look –

I saw Yeats at lunch over tomato soup and sodabread
only he was an imposter, much less mad and mystic
I formed you! he yelled
though I could have sworn his lips did not move

My Father's Hands

by Michael Miller, Northampton MA

In the all-night coffee shop
where sorrows cannot be wiped away,
I looked at me hands
Cutting a piece of pie
and remembered my father's hands,
how naturally they fit
around hammers and chisels,
how evenly he sawed through
a piece of maple
clamped in the vise

fastened to his workbench
in our dirt floor basement.
My father carried a rifle
on the black sand of Iwo Jima,
raised a glass to my mother
every Thanksgiving dinner,
wiped my oval face with
a wet washcloth when fever
christened me with fear.
On his deathbed, in that
longest of storming winters,
when his liver-spotted hands
rested upon his scarred belly,
I covered his left hand
with both of my own
as if I could shield him
from the death
I never wanted to come.
Then his weak right hand
slowly lifted
to fall upon both of mine.

Testimony

by Victoria Givotovsky, Cornwall Bridge CT

Somewhere an old woman
is making love with her husband.
He is old, too. *How disgusting*
I would have thought,

did think, early one morning
--new to the idea of sex--
glimpsing my father naked,
leaving my mother's bedroom.

Now I am older than they were then.

In the Alzheimer's wing, a stranger
follows my mother, wanting only
to be near her. I have watched her
smile at this man and feed him

special morsels from her own plate.
My father rarely visits. When he does,
he does not stay long. When he leaves,
the stranger comes back. They hold hands.

She calls him Bill--my father's name.