

Sing what is well made

W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

2014 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE

Yeats's poem "Adam's Curse" tasks poets to have their lines "seem a moment's thought," and the four winning poems in this year's competition demand recognition for the untold hours of emotional work that hide behind their momentary reconciliations of suffering and perseverance.

As these poets evidence, the 21st Century has broadened our vision of the consequences of the human condition. We now know there is an emotional before-and-after for soldiers; we see the issues for whole families when one of their members has a troubled life. We also see the vulnerable mutability, through time, of memory, and through political tyranny, of facts.

In Michael Miller's First Prize poem, "The Different War," the speaker maintains composure through stanzas marked I through VIII, compartmentalizing what might explode if given freer rein. The internalization of war superimposes itself on the physical gestures of this veteran's daily life, so that while lifting his son from the sandbox he replays his rescue of a war buddy, or his attempt to:

He rushed to Riggins,
Lying unconscious in the wreckage.
Lifting him under the shoulders,
Pulling him away from the flames,
His body came apart at the waist.

His wife lying on top of him evokes "body armor," and in a reversal, "the Medevac helicopter / Lifting Garcia in a Skedco harness" becomes "a stork / Carrying him in a white cloth." By poem's end the speaker sees his work as a soldier being directed only by his drive to return to family, not by any political engine.

"How many times have I tried to write this poem?" asks the speaker of Gabriella M. Belfiglio's Second Prize "Erasure," which painstakingly documents a fraught relationship with the speaker's sister, who we realize is institutionalized. This poem, too, talks about the indelible longevity of suffering. Section III of her prose poem says:

Cell by cell, I've been watching her die for more than two-thirds of my life. Longer than . . . people have been dancing to *Thriller*, or watching *The Simpsons* . . . or than Spike Lee telling us how to do the right thing . . . or Natalie Goldberg's been advising writers to bare our bones . . ."

While the speaker's sister tries frantically to "erase" her own identity as an estranged family member during their visits, she continues to verbally "erase" the lesbian identity of the speaker, who writes herself back in through this poem.

Because poems can do that.

Congratulations, also, to this year's runners-up.

Julia Tompkins's poem, "There are plaques in this house," reflects first on the double meaning of "plaque" as a signifier for dementia, then, through its syntax and deconstructed language, reflects the sensibility of memory loss:

". . . Green
was a color with a name to him, my aunt, also, and the

tree releasing her leaves by the beaver dam which
was oak he knew."

The frailty of reality also comes to us through Morgan Michaels's understated poem, "After the Executions," whose first lines bring to mind Auden's "Musée de Beaux Arts":

The executions took place that morning, in the courtyard
as the sun climbed dutifully out of the sea
and daylight streaked the sky above the harbor.

And whose last line, "things settled down and all was as before," reaffirms how essential the poet remains as witness to what might be disappeared.

Along with the task of writing lines that seem "a moment's thought," I thank these poets for taking on the artist's responsibility of elucidating the human condition. As Yeats knew, the integrity of their seemingly effortless construction is what allows these poems—their questions and supplications, protests and discoveries—to stay in the moving present, through our repeated readings, and our living breath.

FIRST PRIZE

The Different War

by Michael Miller, Amherst MA

Lifting his son from the sandbox,
He remembers the roadside bomb roaring,
The shuddering air subsiding.
He rushed to Riggins,
Lying unconscious in the wreckage.
Lifting him under the shoulders,
Pulling him away from the flames,
His body came apart at the waist.

II

Like a white hole in the black sky
The full moon glares
Upon the naked field
Where he walks at midnight,
Sowing it with his grief
For dead comrades.

III

When his wife lies upon him
He thinks of body armor;
How naked, how vulnerable he feels
Without it. But he is not in combat,
He is making love with his wife,
This gentle woman whose unfolding hands
Have never held a rifle.

IV

He watched the Medevac helicopter
Lifting Garcia in a Skedco harness
And imagined a stork
Carrying him in a white cloth
Away from the fire
Where each wound was different,
Each death the same.

V

He dreamt he was vomiting bullets,
Shrapnel, grenades, then wiped
His mouth, stroked the snake wrapped
Around the dagger on his forearm
And went back to war.

VI

Pocked with bullet holes,
The veined rock rose at the foot
Of the mountain painted with
The words: Kilroy was Here.
But this was not France, not Germany,
This was the different war;
In his time, this was his war.

VII

In the blue solarium
He visited Henderson at Walter Reed
And recognized his face but not
The curling snakes of scar,
Not the smile that five surgeries
Had changed, and he felt
Embedded in the company of the maimed.

VIII

In the Taliban's domain
He had fought for his life,
Not for his comrades or 9/11
But to return to his son
Shouting, "Daddy!"
And his wife offering love
Through the portals of
Her body.

SECOND PRIZE

Erasure

by Gabriella M. Belfiglio, Brooklyn NY

I. We are forbidden to bring in any lighters, matches, scissors, razors, knives, personal medications, glass bottles, glue, knitting needles, rug hooks or embroidery, firearms, liquor, marijuana or drugs, finger nail polish or remover, aerosol cans, lighter fluid, or cameras.

The guard behind the front desk warns me to be careful—pointing to my belly seven months full of growing baby.

II. Lisa is happy to see us, for once. As usual, she immediately asks if we brought cigarettes. When she hugs me, I feel bone.

III. Cell by cell, I've been watching her die for more than two-thirds of my life. Longer than I've lived in Brooklyn. Longer than I've lived any one place, or than this tree that towers beyond my apartment has been growing, or than people have been dancing to *Thriller*, or watching *The Simpsons*, or Bono has been singing about streets with no names, or Madonna has been preaching to women about deserving the best in life, or people have been watching Thelma and Louise

triumphantly drive off their cliff, or than Spike Lee telling us how to do the right thing, or watching William Hurt kiss Raul Julia in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and Whoopi Goldberg kiss Margaret Avery in *The Color Purple*, or Natalie Goldberg’s been advising writers to bare their bones, or we have been tasting Anne Carson’s bittersweet love poems, or been lost in Toni Morrison’s middle passage, or solving the six sides of the Rubik’s Cube, and much longer than we’ve been using cell phones, iPods, YouTube, blogging, Facebook, or email, and longer than Lady Gaga has been alive or Georgia O’Keefe has been dead.

IV. We meet in the hospital lounge. My father sits next to my mother then Lisa, then her caseworker, and a social worker, around a small table. My girlfriend and I sit on two chairs with cushions along the wall close by. A team of four young interns in official white coats and nametags stand on the other side of the table.

As they discuss business, Lisa drags her chair over in-between Margarita and me. Lisa tells me she’s going gray in the same place I am. She tears her chair over to my mother’s side to interrupt the conversation. She has something *really* important to tell her. She spins back to me and asks if I will buy her a diet coke from the machine downstairs. She can’t sit still; still it is the longest I’ve seen her so contained in years. She tells me she cannot wait to get out of this place—that it’s been months and they all drive her crazy. She looks hesitantly over to Margarita and tells her it’s nice to meet her, not remembering when, about a year ago, she viciously pushed her out of the room.

Lisa leans closer to me and asks if I know who the father is. She tells me I can call her anytime if I need to talk. Afterwards she scrapes her chair to our father’s side, climbs onto his lap as if she’s trying to erase 40 years. His body immediately tenses.

V. How many times have I tried to write this poem?

VI. Before we leave, Lisa releases the chain from around her neck, a gift from her *boyfriend*. She says she is sorry it got a little messed up from the shower and loops it around my neck, where a rusted silver heart dangles into the hollow of my clavicle.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

There are plaques in this house

by Julia Tompkins, Brooklyn NY

Shouting into the trees because frustration plays out as wind for a moment my uncle did not remember my name.

Even as we spread out pre-sliced lunches onto breads, concoctions for the middle, while his head un-made

itself and catalogued years slipped out from beneath in folders with blurred titles, “Concord 1947” and

“Horses” and “People I have loved,” his eyebrows scrunch with the concentration, his newest huddle

in on himself, letting none of us in on his secret. Green was a color with a name to him, my aunt, also, and the

tree releasing her leaves by the beaver dam which was oak he knew. Words too were available, just parceled

into missed connections, along with missing car keys, coffee remained familiar and the state he lived in,

these things were simple, enough to converse with, pauses, but Thanksgiving I sat to his right,

our talk was fresh but not forgotten, rippled and repeated “how are you?” and “how are you?” and “how are you?”

After The Executions

by Morgan Michaels, New York NY

The executions took place that morning, in the courtyard as the sun climbed dutifully out of the sea and daylight streaked the sky above the harbor.

Both prisoners died like men, it was said.

They rose, shaved, ate, marched silently to the wall, pocked up richly from prior executions.

Neither trembled or showed fear. All very matter of fact.

In the towers of the watchtowers you felt them staring.

A squad of soldiers milled guiltily by the wall, by the yellow flags, chatting, biding their time.

The prisoners were marched out, took their places against the wall, closed their eyes, faced the guns.

One of them crossed himself three times, hastily.

Terrible, the moment of silence that followed.

On command, the soldiers raised their guns.

Hand upraised, the sergeant cried, ‘ready... aim...’

The colonel refused the blindfold, it was said,

and at the last moment, raised his chin to the fusillade, ‘*Fire!*’

Scaring the birds, shots echoed across the valley.

Tongues of orange flame leapt from the mouths of the gun.

Thunder flew straightway from the foothills,

across the gorse, the heather-like maqui,

settling on the faraway tops of the mountains.

The prisoners fell back against the wall, then toppled forward.

Blue, light-as-air smoke flowed from the gun barrels

filling the nostrils of the men with its acrid smell.

‘Long live the Generalissimo’, shouted the squadron.

None were allowed to enter the prison yard

or claim or examine the bodies, it was said.

By report, they were buried hastily at midnight,

borne to the cemetery in a military station wagon.

It was as though the two men never lived.

The colonel had children by a prior marriage, it was said, and sacrificed his life to ransom theirs.

Then, faint as the distant boom of the sounding surf or the wind that ruffled the fronds of the island pines, growing louder and more persistent with passing time and gaining, among the people, a sort of credence, a rumor! The colonel had not died at the wall!

Loathe to execute his ally and old friend,

the Generalissimo had secretly spared their lives,

having them shipped to Africa, some said,

others to South America, to the lands of their birth,

bidding them never to return to the barracks, where

the colonel was a popular figure, a figure

formidable in scale. Naturally, the men agreed,

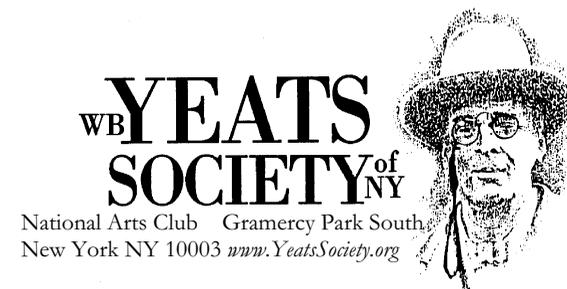
and vanished forever—never to be seen, again,

living out their lives in total anonymity,

contraband, conspiracy, forgotten,

and, after the executions, fake or real,

things settled down and all was as before.



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 \$8 for first poem, \$7 each additional. Mail to 2015 Poetry Competition, WB Yeats Society of NY, National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park S, New York NY 10003. Include S.A.S.E. to receive the report like this one. List of winners is posted on *YeatsSociety.org* around March 31. First prize \$500, second prize \$250. Winners and honorable mentions receive 2-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 2015 competition 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.