



2017 Yeats Poetry Prize

Alfred Corn, Judge

WB YEATS
SOCIETY^{of} NY

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This year's Yeats contest brought poems from many parts of the world and poems on wildly various topics, from politics, to nature, to loss and bereavement, the world of dreams, and celebrations of love. In that, they resemble the legacy of Yeats, whose wide-ranging work touches on all those themes. Considering so many excellent entries, it wasn't easy to make a decision. But I settled on Rory Brennan's "Up at the Castle" and feel certain that its merits will be effortlessly recognized. Yeats is the master of what might be called the retrospective love poem, one not written in the first heady flush of romance, but much later, when extravagant passion has subsided into something calmer and more reflective. Think of "Among School Children" or "Adam's Curse" or "When you are old and grey and full of sleep," all of them inflected by Yeats's disappointed love for Maud Gonne. In Mr. Brennan's poem, I can report that it is only youthful love that is no more, not love altogether. The emotional commitment still operates, but in a seasoned mode witnessing to the changes brought by the years. As the title suggests, a symbolic castle dominates the landscape, calling to mind both the tradition of courtly love, under whose influence Romeo and Juliet's fateful romance developed, and the commanding role that history plays in the course of our lives. I admire the way the poem (which I believe unfolds in the environs of Dublin) moves among the particulars of landscape and architecture even as it portrays the special quality of the relationship. Not incidentally, the author demonstrates a subtle mastery of meter and rhyme, aspects of poesis that are part of what Yeats called "the old high way of love," as enshrined in the art of the troubadours.

Among the entries dealing with life in New York City I was immediately struck by Ryan Harper's "Strangers' Gate," which evokes the semi-pastoral setting of our Central Park. The title refers to one of the entrance names devised by the park's first landscapers, Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux. In fact, the poem several times addresses Olmstead with his given name "Frederick." It also activates allusions to earlier poets, as when the narrator says, "I have met them as the day recedes," a soft-spoken reminder of Yeats's "Easter, 1916." The park setting itself recalls "The Wild Swans at Coole," whose denizens are described as "Mysterious, beautiful." Not all poems attempt to embody mystery, and yet as Francis Bacon memorably said, "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."

When I'd submitted the winning poems and was told the names of the authors, I was pleased that this year's Honorable Mentions included a poem by Fran Locke, who won first prize last year. Her "Rita of the White Bees" has an edgy verve and a political relevance that left me gasping. It was a nice surprise, too, that the other three Honorable Mentions are by the same poet, Martin Edmunds. Each of his poems is composed in a different poetic mode but all with intelligence and skill. It's good to remember that the best poets always had several strings to their bow, as the patron bard of this competition well knew.

Rory Brennan
Dublin

Up at the Castle

We used to walk up to a castle on a hill,
Down a long city road, then twists and turns.
I could draw a rough sketch-map of it still.
Past stem terraces and miniscule front lawns
As streets lost their grip and slopes spilt down,
Elbowing between the cliff, the edge of town,
With the castle up above an ogre-merchant's lair,
All turrets and balconies and granite-grey.
We were not orphans who had lost their way
But we went hand in hand as if we were.

Below lay a shadowy black lough, deep as a fiord,
Its shores lined with stranded wrecks of industry.
Ships wrought there once went all around the world
And at the time I talk of some still tramped by
And out into the soiled lace-curtain gloom.
In our hearts we knew we'd follow them
Far from the tiny gardens and the terraces,
But in the meantime we would hug and kiss,
Knowing nothing could be better than just this,
While knowing too that there were better places.

Off the sweeping drive strayed forest tracks
Overarched by boughs that filtered a pale sun.
Leaving the harassed, ailing city at our backs,
Our arms as ever round the other one,
We found a way through the branch-strewn maze.
I see now that we have done this always,
Delved into far deeper woods and made the best
When there were ditches, dikes and traps,
Even if we were foolhardy and ignored the maps.
The cliff-top hung like a hatchet at the crest.

I knew clever, courageous men had met up there
To proclaim a new and treasonable equality.
I admired them then. So much I still revere:
Their bond with each other, a frank readiness to die.
Perhaps our intense love of just one other one
Is possible because we know two people alone
Will perish in the gilded mirror of their gaze
And we need to cherish the whole universe.
Or perhaps the truth is simply the reverse,
That your beauty just continued to amaze.

The castle was a stage-set where we played.
You climbed up flights of steps to pose as Juliet
While I implored below the balustrade.
But the populace were Montague and Capulet,
Grudge-hoarding to exact revenge and kill,
Years of bloodletting welling up to spill.
We climbed back down, the castle perched above.
So we criss-crossed the world, like travellers in a tale,
Far from the maimed city and its neo-Gothic pile,
A strange place to discover and unravel love.

Ryan Harper
New York

Stranger's Gate

Of late this has been my entry:
Manhattan Valley, rolling, the sweep,
sidewalk hexes popping under root flex,
hard breaks in three dimensions,
under the long stairs,
abiding in the stranger
rock formations—native, by design,
law. Frederick, your condition:
exalt your valley without exposing it
to the loneliness of the high places.

I have met them as the day recedes
riverside, under your eye, Frederick—
on the corner, the gossip of angels
on worn benches. Parkside we muse
with our bodies on suffrage,
the experiment of real
relation: Yankee cap,
heavy stroller rolled up the ramp
into the park's northern heart
where we grandchildren of the south
gather. We work through each other
some strain of common life
in the chops of city passage,
a little mad for contact,
a little without it, closing on.

At twilight we idle, Frederick—
some take on legato as call
in the midst of the bowed
heads punching through time
toward the crests of silver
and gold—theirs, not the pose
of the gate, opening before
round hostels and dwellers

in the valley. Frederick,
such as we have we give
over to the other in the gate,
the entry where stranger
meets stranger,
of late our only entry.

Honorable Mention

Fran Lock
London

*Rita of the White Bees**

pray for us, for the girls like green splinters, their pierced reveal unfolding in small towns running on skeleton crews; for the pageant-hearted girls who burst like bright ideas into backseats, bikinis, the blessable dream of being human; for the too skinny stay-awake girls, living on rice wine and red light, whose home is the typical elsewhere of exiles; for the lip-glossed gonzo girls, those high femme fatalists, all cried out; for the lost girls, giddy and groped on, coked to their stoic ponytails, shiny and slick and swinging like whips; for the headlong girls, barefoot and bracing themselves in a bus lane, smiles like Saint Laurent scarves on fire, manic and vampire; for the girls who went waning in wraparound glasses to clinics and vigils; for the pub-crawled girls in packs, in parks and lanes, alive with the loitering joy of foxes; for the girls who fuck like stray cats come to sad anatomical terms in the spongy summers nights of cities; for the girls in ravenous warp speed, spinning, spun, till tears collect in their cartwheeled eyes like sparks; pray for us, for wasted girls with workshy serotonin, whose trestle cheekbones grind on air; for the peep-toed girls with broken heels and fake eyelashes, trafficking tears at a photo shoot; for the lookbook, look back angry girls, whose *bad day* is a black dress that goes with everything; for the bitch fight girls, their raw collided atmospheres on fire, all cellulite, venom, and celebrity perfume; for the girls whose hairdos are stairways to heaven, whose pigments shiver in vintage frocks, whose song is a storm in a borderline thought, who tend their fetishes like flowers; for the girls, most of all, who are their own witching hour, their jaundiced drama dragging them down in the bump and grind of a tightening gyre; for the girls whose vertigo is not the fear of falling, but the fear of jumping; who are so entirely sick of this mingy, yelping ethic men call love; for the girls who are no longer young, whose unmade faces are empty airports; whose bodies

are the quarrels they are having with themselves; for these girls, their madness lasting them out like a sensible pair of leather boots. Patroness of Impossible Causes, pray for us, that we might flip a decade's deadweight like a mattress; gather our Godspeed, walk away from ourselves.

*Saint Rita of Cascia, Patron Saint of Impossible Causes, and of abused women.

Honorable Mention

Martin Edmunds
Wellfleet, MA

Union Blues

Church bells hurt less, tinny from the cold
rain that's fallen through the last five days
(its sixteen-penny galvies barely graze
our faces through the thatch of grass and mold).

Burial was quickwork; quicklime burned
the sappers till our sockets filled with clay,
eyes shocked open as the blue waves turned
the tide at Shiloh, swallowed up in grey.

Re-enactors! *You* there! Kneel and fire
beneath the shattered steeple of this thistle.
Its scoured sunhead rekindles my desire
to kill and live from bone, muscle, gristle.

Before you hate or praise us, know that we
sweat out the dark like you. Scared. Bored. Free.
The years turn cartwheels. Hours fly by like lead
whistling Dixie to the Union dead.

Honorable Mention

Martin Edmunds
Wellfleet, MA

The Actor Reflects on Playing Lear

When I first attempted the role,
I focused on small things:
this button. My signet rings—
the part that stood for the whole.

I had to make up Lear.
Greasepaint furrowed my brow.
The wig—that fine white hair?
It's mine, now.

I no longer remember what
comes before, or after.
My tears, or the fool's laughter?
The moon's heat, the rut

of the sun are done for.
My footman, that small deer,
shorter than his tail.
I reek of straw and stale

I breathe against my will.
My lust is an oven. Smelt
steel. Feel what the fitchew felt!
until—until—until—

I alone am empty.
Everything else brims.
Even the pressboard Dover
cliffs, the tatty scrim

where the cutout stars
wobble into focus
after the storms, the wars,
the theater's hocus pocus,

all brim with what I lack:
life's in the warp and weft.
I'd give whatever's left
of time to have you back.

Rain erased my script.
I sheltered under bracken.
Wind blew. Fat haws dipped,
dripping. My heart was shaken.

Daughters, why did I father
no sons? My heart
came and went, a lantern
guttering through the heather.

Sad cockscomb Chanticleer,
nailed up by a spur,
the bloody crown you wear
can't ransom her.

Last night I dreamt Gloucester
dead, Kent blind, here
in the Actors' Home, a kind
of internal banishment.

Even this bone button
my fingers can't undo.
Cordelia, my Cordelia,
why can't I look at you

or wholly turn away?
Your generous silence is still
having its say.

And always my own death
waiting in the wings.
I'm ready, prompter. Show me
what the fifth act brings.

Honorable Mention

Martin Edmunds
Wellfleet, MA

Crowes Pasture

The salt marsh by the abandoned fish weir's
sunk boards at Quivet, wood silvered by a century's
muds and tides: the sky is iron, rusting
ground the edges; ravens settle like scorched
pages in the oak. Cordgrass, couch grass,
foxtail, poverty, teasel, needle-and-thread—
wind hissing frigid through forsaken acres—
each night Orion nocks an arrow to the bowstring,
Bear's gutshot blood burns bright in hips and haws.
White-hot talons of a dark-phase hawk
dive where tomorrow's blue moon has to rise.
Salt hay between the treeline and the ebline—
a lap robe fallen from the starry haywain
deepening wheelruts past the hunters' bowers—
elkskin pulled tight to the throats of rushes,
burnt umber in the wet, flat flanks; dulled gold
spine-tufts that stand up rising, falling
to ocean's onslaught twice a day from solstice
to solstice; amethyst dimming in the smoky lamps—
sea lavender's branching candelabra—
the temperature drops ten degrees in twenty minutes,
glasswort frosted, brittle underfoot,
all fall its scarlet kept throbbing through the fog.
Windgusts strumming dunegrass are the rippling
muscles of a lion running under
the wind; nothing for it but
over the top into the brunt, cast sand
rasping skin off my lids: hoodwinked, blindfold,
blooded on your stuff of silk and lace:
I could nose my way past Gloucester back to Dover
and find you in the dark with my bare hands.
I bend my neck and lean against the beach
blowing down the beach to Brewster, whitecaps
cracking me up—sideways waves
no longer water, not yet ice—

there, thrown on the sand, a torpedo fish,
ray-round, brick thick, snot brown, barbless, devil
tail with caudal fin (from this
to your Thane of Cawdor, a short hop
as the crow flies over Crowes)—a marvel
the gulls have already started in on, eyes
as always first to go. All's fair, Dan Cupid
or his blind old sea dog
come frisking to his whistle like a pup—
I don't know what I have in my hands.
Of course I have to lift the damn thing up—
bottom blanched white, a sucked cut, rose
feathering edges of the underdisc.
Step on one alive, 200 volts—
(hoodman blind played naked among the sea stones)—
each volt a tiny tooth from the dolphin's livewire
smile I saw last summer, close up and strung,
each one a fallen star, echo
of an explosion, faceted sapphire
anklet of electricity—
as when my hand closed round your ankle, taking charge,
the thrill of that first time still going through me—
now there's no going back or letting go—
the waves have worked their way around behind me—
that knot tied, shocking beauty.

Eddie Vega Prize Administrator

This year's competition had many firsts. It was the first time we reached out to poets strictly via social media and the response was spectacular, the highest number of submissions in the history of this competition, now its 24th year. We are very grateful to all of the poets who submitted and to their friends who nudged them.

Because of the special trust placed in us, we took extra care to ensure the submissions were sent to the judge blind, and any identifying information inadvertently included in a document were removed. All poems were sent in printed form to the judge by postal service.

As with any highly competitive endeavor, there are many more who do not place than those who do. And if you are among them and are feeling in any way dispirited, you should instead take heart. Competition often improves the performance of everyone who participates, and just as importantly, of the discipline itself. As I read the poems as they came in for printing and forwarding to the judge, I could easily imagine writers revising right until the very moment of submission to ensure their very best work was considered. The result of that level of care was a large group of highly accomplished poems.

Other firsts, the first time the first place winner won with a single submission, and the first time a poet earned three honorable mentions. It was also the first time we relied on an intern, Ashely Nieves, to help organize materials. Special thanks to her and to Andrew McGowan, the NY Yeats Society President, who provided guidance, administrative support, and liaised with the Irish Repertory Theater, which provided actor Adam Lamberg to emcee our awards event at the Barnes & Noble at Union Square in New York, and to Oscar, the events coordinator there, who hosts us year after year.