

W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

## 2005 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE, GRACE SCHULMAN:

Yeats's great poem, "Adam's Curse," first appeared a century and a year ago, but its criteria for poetry are still new. The poem opens on an intimate conversation:

I said, "A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

The finest of the poems I read in the contest named for William Butler Yeats have that manner of skillful "stitching" that seems only "a moment's thought." Those poems are beautiful. They "labour to be beautiful," in Yeats's words, and hard-won accomplishment is seamless.

Since the contest is properly anonymous, the winning poems were given to me only by title. Like you, I'm eager to find out who the authors are. As I savored my top choices, I knew they were all winners in a real way. Still, I had to rank them, and after an intense inward struggle, came up with a tie for first prize, "The Geography of Distance" and "Broken: Blue," both amazing for their unobtrusive skill. The first is set in a little town at dusk. I quote from the second stanza:

It starts when the clerk of the five-and-dime  
sweeps the dust from the floors,  
slips off her apron, flips the sign  
in the window to *closed*, locks  
the door behind her. Cars on the main street  
fade away, the grocery store empties,  
the lights of the houses go out, one-by-one –  
Then, distance settles in like an unlit road  
unspooling through years.

That deceptively casual opening suddenly

deepens as the town becomes a metaphor for  
the wilderness within:  
those stretches of deserts, of flatlands  
and slopes that inhabit the heart –  
the miles pulled forth by longing.

Once again I'm struck by the seeming  
effortlessness, the ease, of the inward turning. The  
statement is large, and it is made with neither  
rhetoric nor sentimentality.

"Broken: Blue" is very different from "The  
Geography of Distance" in manner and form but it,  
too, has the unmistakable look of "a moment's  
thought." As "The Geography of Distance" is  
conversation, "Broken: Blue" has the diction of  
thought. It is a startling villanelle whose expression  
of grief is deeper and stronger for its indirectness.  
"Broken Blue" has sprung lines reminiscent of  
Hopkins and a voice like no other. It is composed  
all in one sentence, and excerpting any part will  
not convey its magic. Still, I can't resist the final  
quatrain:

of a grief that cannot be wept, swept  
into kitchen corners, the pulse of your left temple,  
quickilvered-fish thoughts, blue-shimmered, lithe-  
blue drenching the sky, *drowning, this blue breath*

My choice for second prize is "Reading the  
Tideline." Here the poet layers image upon image  
of "the sea's leavings" to arrive quite naturally and  
inevitably at a concluding statement:

We  
try but can't articulate the pain  
of something undefined, yearned for,  
somehow never quite attained, a search  
inscrutably rewarding; prospect  
without incident or end.

I pick "On Skopelos" for honorable mention. The  
central character, a mountain-climber, apprehends  
the world around her in a new way and is

transformed by a quality of the light affecting her  
vision of rocks. The concept descends from Ralph  
Waldo Emerson's famous observation about the  
writer as "transparent eyeball": "I am nothing. I see  
all." Like the others, it is made new:

Then these  
filaments, like spearpoints, either reverse  
or vanish – as if, in the middle of a silence closer to  
whirlwind  
than calm, more like the rush of vortex or waterspout  
than true quiet, she has become all pupil,  
pure eye – and her look, her vision, if these  
are the right words, if they are what sight is, what  
*seeing*  
means, no longer goes out or comes back, but *is*.

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FIRST PRIZE

### The Geography of Distance

by Margaret J. Hoehn  
Sacramento, California

Every night, little towns like the one in  
which I live  
disappear. They leave only their absence  
in the creosote and sage;  
on stony hillsides, with grey-needled pines;  
along plains that sway with centuries  
of sedges and oats.

It starts when the clerk of the five-and-dime  
sweeps the dust from the floors,  
slips off her apron, flips the sign  
in the window to *closed*, locks  
the door behind her. Cars on the main street  
fade away, the grocery store empties,  
the lights of the houses go out, one-by-one –  
Then, distance settles in like an unlit road  
unspooling through the years.

How many pockets the night has,  
how many satchels it must carry  
because the space between the stars  
is never small or simple,  
and darkness is never just a lack of light.

And what is distance, but the world  
expanding in the darkness so far beyond oneself –  
or maybe it is the wilderness within:  
those stretches of deserts, of flatlands  
and slopes, that inhabit the heart –  
the miles pulled forth by longing.

Each sleepless hour is an endless road,  
a longing, a clock that turns  
overhead like a far away moon,  
like a sadness of muted light. Each hour  
is the estrangement of names, of memories  
and landscapes, and all their permutations.

All night, I turn with the hands of the clock  
toward the half-light of dawn, toward  
the moment when distance must release  
its clutch on these towns, must scatter  
them back, like pages torn from nostalgia,  
to the places where they belong.  
Then night will pack its bags,  
fold into itself, travel on.

FIRST PRIZE

### Broken: Blue

by Melissa Morphew  
Huntsville, Texas

Silvered-fish thoughts, blue-shimmered, lithe,  
too mercurial to voice, this grief, *nimble  
blue-shimmer, the sky can take your breath*

cold mornings, cloud weft, white rift

in bright October sunlight, leaf-dapple,  
silvered-fish thoughts, blue-shimmered, lithe,

sour milk-thistle grief cannot be wept  
into the nutshell of a silver thimble,  
*this blue-shimmer, a sky can take your breath*

like a silver perch catches sun-shift  
and your heart stops; a grief throbs your left  
temple,  
silvered-fish thoughts, blue-shimmered, lithe,

swimming round and round and round, fretted-  
blue-shimmer of this glass globe, trembling  
blue edge of a sky that can take your breath,

of a grief that cannot be wept, swept  
into kitchen corners, the pulse of your left temple,  
quicksilvered-fish thoughts, blue-shimmered, lithe-  
blue drenching the sky, *drowning, this blue breath*

## SECOND PRIZE

### Reading the Tideline

*by Paul Elisha  
Niskayuna, New York*

Intent on the sea's leavings, studying what  
the waves eject, we trace the tide's  
utmost reach, scan each scrap, dropping  
scattered discards in our wake. The sea  
is generous, haphazardly  
accepts what wind, wave and woe conspire  
to stow within its keep. An eccentric  
warden, the deep hoards the heaviest,  
sends the gossamer and filigreed  
back to catch an eye, seduce the senses  
until something catchier enthralls  
but all adds up to the same, flotsam.

What it breeds is seeded with nostalgia,  
overlaid, paid for by our fancied  
inclinations. Unlearned lessons  
prod us, still yearning for the peculiar,  
farther up the beach. Each find  
reminds us of another, once discarded  
prize we hoped to match, jettisoned  
too soon, more ruefully remembered  
by its absence; bits and pieces now  
endowed with inexplicable value, the  
slightest hint of iridescence sending  
glints beyond facsimile. We  
try but can't articulate the pain  
of something undefined, yearned for,  
somehow never quite attained, a search  
inscrutably rewarding; prospect  
without incident or end.

## HONORABLE MENTION

### On Skopelos

*by Steve Lautermilch  
Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina*

*for a friend, away for the summer*

She has been climbing  
the mountain for most of the morning now,  
and the better part of the afternoon; and as she  
pauses

she can feel the darts leaving her eyes, the hot dry  
flint of each look  
hitting, striking the targets in the waves.  
The sea, or seas, the waters

are all around, on every side, wherever

she sends her glance;  
and she feels the arrows of her sight shift in mid-air  
–  
something  
about the light, the sun on this mountaintop –  
and changing become fine threads, silver maybe,  
or gold – or maybe

some element  
even more volatile, more subtle and quick. Then  
these  
filaments, these spear points, either reverse

or vanish – as if, in the middle of a silence closer to  
whirlwind  
than calm, more like the rush of vortex or  
waterspout  
than true quiet, she has become all pupil,

pure eye – and her look, her vision, if these  
are the right words, if they are what sight is, what  
*seeing*  
means, no longer goes out or comes back, but *is*.

There are no trees here, only boulders,  
great heaps of scalded or blistering rock, though  
the  
little mosses  
and lichens cling in patches here and there to the  
stone.

Now she sees her footsteps,  
this trail of scuff marks she has left, even that path  
along the cliff edge  
seem to be grinning – as if the sea out there, the  
ocean

in here, are smiling.  
And she and the place are their mirror.  
Their candle. Their bed.

**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 8½ x 11-inch sheet without author's name; attach 3x5-inch card with name, address, telephone, e-mail. Entry fee is \$8 for the first poem and \$7 for each additional. Include self-addressed stamped envelope to receive a copy of the report, like this one. A list of winners is posted on our Web site around March 31. First prize \$250, second prize \$100. Winners and honorable mentions receive one-year memberships in the Society and are honored at an event in New York in April or May. Authors retain rights, but grant us the right to publish/broadcast winning entries. These are the complete guidelines; no entry form is necessary.

The deadline for our 2006 competition is February 15. For information on our other programs, or on membership (\$35 and \$25 per year, full-time students \$15), visit our Web site or write to us (see above).