

W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

2004 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE, GRACE SCHULMAN:

It did not surprise me that while I read for this contest my mind spun with Yeats's lines: "Irish poets learn your trade/sing whatever is well made." It did surprise me, though, that three of those words stuck and circled on and on: *sing whatever is*.

Whatever *is*. Whatever is alive, that is. For the poems I deemed best this year summoned me into their world by the life of language and by freshness of perception. I was struck by the range of this year's finer submissions. I thought of how Yeats, fresh from editing the Oxford anthology, might have marveled at it. Although I came to the task trailing many contest-juries behind me, the pride of this relatively small, 200-odd group of poems happened to show remarkable breadth. When I chose four as best-of-the-best the really hard work began. At least two of them provoked a decision crisis: Which of the two beauties wins the crown?

The two I selected for first and second prizes simply took my breath away. They still do. The first-prize poem leaped off the page and stayed with me, whispering its lines while I taught classes, walked down to the Hudson River, or sipped tea with friends. "All That is Glorious Around Us" refers only obliquely to the name of the Hudson River School art show and to one of its paintings. The real glory is driving in rain or sitting in a café while thinking of one de-

prived of oxygen. Reading it, I am led on a journey from light to darkness then back again to "the radiant world," and I'm with that traveler all the way. "All That is Glorious Around Us" has the form of a prose poem, an increasingly popular poetic model that demands the language, musicality, and rhythmic skill, of the best poetry but without the patterning of lines.

For second prize I selected "Wallace Stevens in the Bronx," which led me on a journey of another kind. The wonderfully unique central metaphor soars high over its epigraph, which is composed of lines by Stevens himself: "On Sundays I take walks/here and there." The writer imagines Stevens on local territory listening to nightingale song by a convent wall, opening a path across Mosholu to new villas where

roosters peck
in the courtyards and even the stones
wait for a voice.

For honorable mention I picked "The Yellow Fields." It has to do with a usually undaring mother who one day leaves her family for a new life. I like especially the last lines:

she didn't reckon
The waterfall of loss, how its pounding
Muffled the sounds and scents all around her.
Head bare, she walked out into the open,
Where the deer step at twilight, ears twitching,
Upwind of the hunter's scent, the scent of
Powder in the guns, and of grass burning. □

FIRST PRIZE

All That is Glorious Around Us*

by Barbara Crooker

is not, for me, these grand vistas, sublime peaks, mist-filled overlooks, towering clouds, but doing errands on a day of driving rain, staying dry inside the silver skin of the car, 160,000 miles, still running just fine. Or later, sitting in a café warmed by the steam from white chicken chili, two cups of dark coffee, watching the red and gold leaves race down the street, confetti from autumn's bright parade. And I think of how my mother struggles to breathe, oxygen cascading down our throats to the lungs, simple as the journey of water over rock. *It is the nature of stone/to be satisfied/* writes Mary Oliver, *It is the nature of water/ to want to be somewhere else,* rushing sown a rocky tor or high escarpment, the panoramic landscape boundless behind it. But everything glorious is around us already: on the pavement, where the last car to park has left its mark on the glistening street, this radiant world.

*Title of an exhibit on The Hudson River School

SECOND PRIZE

Wallace Stevens in the Bronx

by Diana Ben-Merre

*on Sundays I take walks
here and there*

He is passing on the high ground
looking west over the river (the bridge
still someone's dream) stopping,
listening, at the convent wall
where, just as they're supposed to,
nightingales sing. (The stones
crumble later; city houses block
the view.) He walks heavily,
beating out the time as river light
shadows his steps, up the avenue,
turning at the Post Road and thinking
how the stars could have wakened us
early this morning if they weren't so
glittered over by the sun.

If he looked back, and of course
he never did, that floating stuff
they named Mnemosyne would be masked
by what this day could only be called
azure, an azure firmament, as she
and her greedy daughters follow the path
he opens across Mosholu and the apple trees
that frame the Gun Hill, to the new villas
of New Rochelle, where roosters peck
in the courtyards and even the stones
wait for a voice.

HONORABLE MENTION

The Yellow Fields

by Zara Raab

My own mother was a small town girl, dark
And slim, unschooled, artless, and big-
hearted—

Who kept a clean house over a green hill,
And mothered her four children. That's all—
Until the day she unwound the turban
Of home and ran out bareheaded, leaving
Us for dreams, for the Idea of Love,
Small town life had turned stale and boring.

We

Had turned stale and boring. She wanted
out.

She wanted the new life she dreamed of
now,

Quick, she threw open the doors of her
Cell, and walked out into the yellow fields.
She didn't consider having to spin
Her powers to god, she didn't reckon
The waterfall of loss, how its pounding
Muffled the sounds and scents all around
her.

Head bare, she walked out into the open,
Where the deer step at twilight, ears
twitching,

Upwind of the hunter's scent, the scent of
Powder in the guns, and of grass burning.

'Sing what is well made'

- W.B. Yeats

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 a literary luncheon or tea in New York, a Saturday 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 2005 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).