

Sing what is well made

W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

2015 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE

One narrative characteristic of W.B. Yeats's iconic body of work is its concern with ancient Irish lore, and one formal characteristic is that (outside of those poems with multiple speakers), Yeats generally wrote in sonnets or symmetrical stanzas. So it is an extra-specially fitting pleasure to award first prize in his name to Idris Anderson, from Northern California, for her rich, lyrical poem, "Colman's Well," which concerns itself obliquely with the ancient lore of St. Colman of the Emerald Isle, and falls in three stanzas of sonnet length each.

Anderson begins this narration of a modern day pilgrimage to a hidden well in the woods by saying, "All rituals are strange customs of the desperate, / the hard look for meaning, symbols made / of ordinary objects, gestures to grace them," and we know immediately that she has twinned the act of writing poems with the ambition of ritual. As the speaker winds and bushwhacks her way up a "raw rock slope / to the spring that runs through mossed-over stones, / ferns flourishing big as trees," she continues to offset the Celtic tale with the Irish present—and it isn't pretty. She finds, hanging in the trees in that hidden place, customary strips of clothing torn from ill persons' outfits, and brought by a loved one in hopes of a "healing holiness," but which have amounted to "the trashed up / forest," and "a desecration of the Holy Well."

The speaker seems intent on regaining a connection with the *un*-desecrated, where "wildness itself claims and reclaims / body and earth, green breath in a bewildering / wilderness." Surrounded by untouched, ancient rock, she evokes the legend surrounding the "hermit-monk" Colman, that he befriended a mouse, fly and rooster, and maybe it's at this moment we begin to feel the sure futility of childlike faith, and of ever being able to escape despoliation by people, and experience. It's only after her party stops taking pictures and reading poems aloud (!) that she listens to the silence she finds most suited to the purposely isolated place, and likens herself to those who hung the cloth strips: "We've trudged up the king's clattering Road of Dishes, / hardly aware of our noise and desolation." Like many great poems, Anderson's makes its own brave pilgrimage, traveling through loss of the ideal and a critique of the self toward the authenticity of new revelation.

In another paean to the healing nature of, well, nature, Victoria Givotovsky's lament, "My Garden," which we are happy to award second prize, looks for solace not in the woods, but in the most cultivated of flora, a rose garden in New England. Beginning with the frank two lines: "My roses were magnificent / the year my son died," we know we are in the hands of a speaker who cannot help but observe. How to reconcile loss and beauty? Sacred text here is evoked in the name of the roses, "William Baffin," "Rosa Eglantina," and "Snow Owl," each species having its place in the story of his death and the grief following. "He was alive when his daughter stood / under William Baffin's great blossoming," though now, after his death, "Gone / / are Rosa Rubrifolia's slender red branches, that once hid coral blossoms, shyly

signaling // their presence, only at sunset, just when the sun / dropped out of sight at the edge of the world." In her last phrase we can see how the world and her grief have conflated, each coaxing the other on. Even though the speaker plants "New Dawn" to replace those that died, they don't take, and the whole garden—except for "Rosa Rugosas,"—the wide petaled, poppy-like kind that don't sport the tight, fuller plumage of the fancier ones—they all have "dwindled / under increasing shade from the massive white pines." The speaker feels doubly haunted, not only by her son's death, but by the dissolution of the rose garden that might have mirrored his life—one that might have survived hers. In "My Garden," Givotovsky asks the poem to help make meaning from the sorrows she owns, and it does.

Silicon Valley's Charlotte Muse also meditates on the relationship of the authenticity of the ancient. In "The Watcher at Chauvet Cave," an owl, fashioned by its artist using the dynamic of rubbed stone and natural light, is left in the dark for centuries to look out on its own, and only in one direction. The speaker begins one stanza: "Doesn't everything want to take in more of the world?" and ends it with "When a creature looks one way, / it wants to look another." In its considerations of unfathomable time, artists, artistry, and the condition of sentient beings, we salute this poem with an honorable mention.

Two poems by NYC poet William Leo Coakley (as evidence that I did not know who the poets were until after the judging) also earned honorable mention for their straight-talking meditations on the tenuous nature of both ancestral memory, and, less talked about, the sovereignty of women over their lives. In "Return," the speaker "returned to the country of the grandfathers," and notes that the names on grave stones "were losing strength" and "will disappear with the rains / . . . to be lost forever." And in "The Power of Women," which lists the global terrorization of women "In your California fields, / In your Ha Noi hovels," and their present-day enslavement of them in present day, the speaker refuses to let those victims disappear: "The power of women come to help you— / We will not forget you." Thank you to these poems for keeping alive these essential and urgent concerns, and for bringing them to this prize.

Jessica Greenbaum

FIRST PRIZE

Colman's Well

by Idris Anderson, San Carlos CA

All rituals are strange customs of the desperate,
the hard look for meaning, symbols made
of ordinary objects, gestures to grace them.
Consider modern strips of cloth hung in trees
by Colman's well, colors in touch with the body
of someone sick or dying, the dearly beloved's
sleeve carried in a pocket up the raw rock slope
to the spring that runs through mossed-over stones,
ferns flourishing big as trees. Flannel rags
of cotton, wool, polyester—the trashed up
forest a desecration of the Holy Well.
A dirty hand dipped and hung each clotie.
A persistent belief in a healing holiness Colman

would have wept to see, knowing all suffer and die.

We've walked a short way up from the road
in new boots and rain jackets. Hard to pick a way
through vines running everywhere on big stones,
wet mist dripping from leaf and stone lip,
mouth of rock. Ordinarily impossible to find
this tangled place, Colman's cave and well,
the oratory he built before Rome imposed
strict rule and order for monastic life.
Here wildness itself claims and reclaims
body and earth, green breath in a bewildering
wilderness. Colman wrapped himself
in deer-skins to keep warm, trimmed wild beauty
to animal essentials. A worried way to solitude,
the hermit-monk's discipline to let be.

Here under an eagle's eyrie in the burren
with his mouse to nibble him awake, his fly to mark
his last-read word, his rooster to remind him of time,
Colman prayed, chanted Celtic syllables, meditated
in the morning and followed the evening flight of eagles.
A wall remains, an arch. We settle behind it
in the shade and summon his name. Any word spoken
is resonant. Cameras stop whirring and clicking.
Michael, whose idea it was to bring us to
this place, reads his poem about Saint Colman,
who denied himself all comforts except words,
their warm precision flowing from his mouth.
We've trudged up the king's clattering Road of Dishes,
hardly aware of our noise and desolation.

SECOND PRIZE

My Garden

by Victoria Givotovsky, Cornwell Bridge CT

Who knows

The way out of a rose?

Theodore Roethke

My roses were magnificent
the year my son died.

He was alive when his daughter stood
under *William Baffin's* great blossoming,

shook the branches, petals falling like rain
onto her hair, shoulders and arms,

then into a small basket, where later
she rocked her well-worn "lamby" to sleep.

Now *Rosa Eglantina's* munificent sprays
have stiffened into thorn tangles. Gone

are *Rosa Rubrifolia's* slender red branches,
that once hid coral blossoms, shyly signaling

their presence, only at sunset, just when the sun
dropped out of sight at the edge of the world.

A remnant of *Snow Owl* clings to the sagging roof
of the tool shed. When younger, these roses

gleamed bright white in pale moonlight,
so virile and bold.

And who could not miss sweet *Sarah van Fleet*,
her lush rose pink petals smelling of cinnamon,

now living a half-life at the foot of my garden,
awash in spring rain, struggling to live on

into September, to toss a meager second-coming
of blossoms into the harsh and dry wind.

This spring I planted a few *New Dawn* bushes
to replace all the ones dead years ago,

but their branches did not grow strong, did not climb
up the fencing. Lavish blossoms never appeared.

Instead, in late fall, I gathered one rose bud.
Inside, it opened slowly, no fragrance at all.

Right now, out the window, I see my *Rosa Rugosas*,
the strongest of roses. On these seven plants

a slight snow is falling. But this rose bed has dwindled
under increasing shade from the massive white pines.

Next summer, there may be no blooming, no bees, leaving
as now, in my derelict garden, only this haunting,

this haunting of roses.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

The Watcher at Chauvet Cave

by Charlotte Muse, Menlo Park CA

The artist chose a space on the wall.
brushed off dust,
smoothed the rock with a rubbing stone,
knocked ash from his torch, brought
more fuel for more light, and considered
the idea of owl and the problem of stone.

With a few broad strokes scraped over and over,
he made the bird's back, its folded wings.
Then beak, eyes, a head swiveled
to look over its shoulders.

Stepping away to look at his owl looking back
he watched with pride and tenderness
as fire shadows taught it how to move its eyes.
That was the birth of the owl. When his light ran down
the artist returned to his harsh world
where he lived a little longer.

Alone the owl stared at the dark.
Years passed. A hundred, a thousand.
Other artists entered bringing
torches and a faint sense of day.
Bears stumbled in and clawed at the walls.

Thirty thousand years of dark came on
while the owl looked out from the wall.

Doesn't everything want to take in more of the world?
That's the neck's question. Birds cock their heads.
Flounders look up; eels peer sideways through watery eyes.
When a creature looks one way,
it wants to look another.

Did the owl trapped in night tremble
at the memory of firelight? Did the rock lessen its hold
on the spaces where the owl displaced it?

At the end of the world will come a shriek and groan
as cracks in stone zigzag across the earth.
Owl with a mighty jerk will rid himself of his maker's
balance and force the rock to make room. At last
he will turn his head towards the stone
and gaze into what he's made of.

The Power of Women

by William Leo Coakley

What was most important
Was we were women together.
After the terror and flames,
Over our charred bodies,
Something rose up to drive back the greed
That never ends. In the new world, O Sisters,
We will not forget you:
In your California fields,
In your Hà Noi hovels,
In Manila's back streets,
In Juarez in the airless rooms,
Yes, in New York still,
The new slaves brought over
To the secret places.
That is no scream you hear:
It is the voice of us women together,
The power of women come to help you—

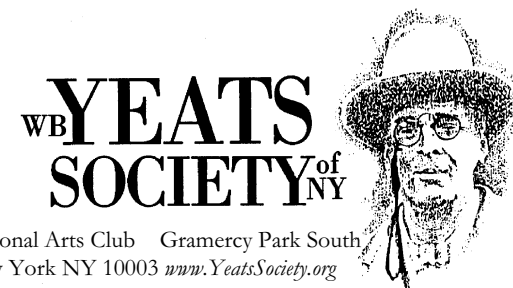
We will not forget you.

Return

by William Leo Coakley

We returned to the country of grandfathers
to find our house in ruins,
the stones used to build a world
that would never know us.
When we walked among the graves,
our names were losing strength—
soon they will disappear with the rains
into the earth to be lost forever.

Jessica Greenbaum, writer and social worker, is author of the award-winning collection, *Inventing Difficulty* (2000), brought out by the Gerald Cable Prize, and *The Two Yvonnés* (2012), chosen by Paul Muldoon for the Princeton's Series of Contemporary Poets. Her poems and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Southwest Review* and elsewhere. Her recent essays can be found at *PoetryFoundation.org*. She is poetry editor of "upstreet," and will initiate a poetry reading and writing group for 9/11 first responders this spring through the WTC Health Program at NYU Medical Center. She joins the list of distinguished judges of our competition: Billy Collins, Eamon Grennan, Campbell McGrath, Samuel Menashe, Paul Muldoon, Marie Ponsot, Alice Quinn, Grace Schulman, Harvey Shapiro, and Bill Zavatsky.



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, email. Entry fee \$10 for first poem, \$8 each additional. Mail to 2016 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 2016 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.