

Sing what is well made

W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

2013 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE

Last year I picked three poets from Massachusetts as winners of this contest; this year I have picked all women, though I didn't know that when I was making my choices, of course. A year ago I didn't hazard a guess about why so many good poets came to the contest from Massachusetts, but maybe it won't be out of order if I speculate on the fact that all of this year's winners are female.

I am not going to say that women are better poets than men. But women poets often have something that poetry deeply needs, and that many men don't have, or have in small supply, and that is a direct line to feeling. Men often spend a lot of time living in their heads. Women often primarily grasp the world with what C. G. Jung called the feeling function, one of the Four Functions in his famous system of human types that includes thinking, sensation, and intuition. We don't get a purchase on reality through only a single function, though, and Jung made this clear; the dominant function has a wing function that is almost as highly developed as the dominant function. Allied to feeling would either be sensation (how the world comes to us through our senses) or intuition—and of course the word “women's” has not been long joined to the word “intuition” for nothing.

I won't go further into Jung's system right now, but it's something that a poet—male or female—might look into. In his thinking these Functions are also directly linked to introversion and extraversion, whether one has an outgoing personality or lives more inwardly. After a little study, you might be able to find yourself in Jung's system, and discover that you are a thinking-intuitive type who is an extravert. At which point you can go to work on your feeling function and your sensation function, trying to create what used to be called a “well-rounded personality.” As we know, Yeats loved systems of this kind, so I don't feel that I'm going out on a limb by bringing in a few of Jung's ideas.

Alisha Kaplan, a runner-up in last year's contest, took first prize this year with a poem that begins casually, with its persons chatting about tattooing, and swiftly and skillfully brings us to realization that not all tattoos are frivolous. Indeed, they have been for millions a symbol of life and death. The poem made me remember when the Mill Luncheonette on Broadway near Columbia University was owned and operated by Jews whose tattooed numbers were impossible to miss as they handed you a dish of ice cream. (Today the establishment is called the Korean Mill Luncheonette.) I love the clarity and economy with which Ms.

Kaplan strategizes her poem, and none of it feels artificial or forced. And the feeling that the poem carries is powerful, no matter how simple the statements in it.

Mary Legato Brownell's second-prize poem has a cinematic quality, a step-by-step, highly detailed walk back into the past during which the poet's camera-eye misses nothing because the sacred place that is returned to must be approached with reverence for every memory it contains. At the same time in this return-to-the-past narrative, there is a philosophical drama unfolding. Can we ever return to place of joy that is now contaminated by experience, by loss? The language the poet (or her surrogate) drafts back into is the language of tears and regret. There *is* no going back, but poetry can recoup something of *temps perdu* because poetry is inextricably joined to memory. And poets are fated to remember, whether tears come or not. Again, the emotional power comes through the accrual of minute particulars that are charged with feeling for the narrator.

We get a bit of Ireland in Margaret J. Hoehn's poem, and maybe the difference between New York and Dublin is that messages there are still chalked on the sidewalk. (Here it is mostly hopscotch diagrams, directions to Verizon technicians, or Boticelli paintings in full color.) Ms. Hoehn's poem is a straightforward plea not to turn away from a mirror image of our own loss presented by chance to us in all its nakedness in the street. I liked the full-feeling here, the risk of sentimentality that in fact skirts the sentimental because of the first-rate employment of details.

Last year Victoria Givotovsky also won a runner-up award. She consistently writes excellent poems. In “The Door” we are led into a night world that is as disorienting as it is ours. Sometimes we are condemned to wander through our own rooms as if they were a prison of blacks and greys punctuated by disturbing sounds, our own hope that the darkness will eventually attenuate “into gray,” the first signal that morning is on its way.

“The river a shimmer, a trick of light atop green tow,” is the first line of Nan Becker's untitled poem. “Tow” is the “coarse and broken part of flax or hemp prepared for spinning;” or “a bundle of untwisted natural or man-made fibers..” So the river is woven or pre-woven here, a kind of art product. The poem's complex unfolding bears this out in a Stevensian way that echoes with music. But an inner narrative emerges that is not unlike that of Mary Legato Brownell's poem. “All that went before we met and after left,” she tells us; “we appropriate life gone.” “Hear it hear what would be here.” “What would guess whatever we had was separate.” So amid the rhapsody comes the sorrow, but as a dull regret and without tears; rather with the memory of birdsong and flight.” But now whatever the narrator and the implied listener had is “separate.” Whereas Ms. Brownell stalks and is stalked by every past moment, Ms. Becker has to fight through her visions (her poetry) to find the feeling, but the feeling comes.

Our last runner-up is Francesca Capossela. Her poem “Going south” appealed to me with its toughness and Kerouackian feeling. “Hit the road,” she tells us, but all the wild images that appear to the traveler on the road are frightening, sometimes even degrading, pushing one towards thievery and sex. This kind of travel is really flight, which I suppose leads to discoveries of a sort, but the discovery here, the poet tells us, is “transcontinental sadness, guiding you home” to, one supposes, another kind of static sadness. This poem has terrific movement and more than a little desperation. Its imagery is original and powerful, and more than suggests that a real poet is driving the car.

As we think about these poems and reread them, I want to thank Andrew McGowan and Don Bates and the other members of the W. B. Yeats Society who make this annual contest possible, and who have been kind enough to ask me to judge it for the past two years. I think that American poetry is traveling through a very rich period, and that this richness is reflected in the poems of these winners.

Bill Zavatsky

FIRST PRIZE

A-6876

by Alisha Kaplan, Brooklyn NY

It's Sunday afternoon
and we're sitting on my roof,
talking about tattoos.
Damian won't get one
because he likes the idea

of being pure. Lulu would
if she wasn't afraid of needles.
Jane has three and I think
they're all stupid but
I would never tell her that.

I tell them how I want to get
a Zen Buddhist symbol but
I wouldn't because I'm not
a poser and I couldn't be buried
in a Jewish cemetery and it would

probably kill my grandmother.
Then, as the Holocaust
often sneaks its way into
my conversations, I
mention her number.

Damian asks if she ever
considered getting it removed.
Jane says it would be a great
story to write about. Lulu

shoots her a dirty look.

I agree, it would be
a good story, but I don't
think it's one I could write
because my grandma would
never remove her number.

I know then that I can't
ever get a tattoo
because her number
will always be there,
a permanent souvenir

of pain far worse than needles,
far deeper than ink in skin,
so anything I write on my body
will be trivial,
no, an insult.

Though I never would do
such a thing the only tattoo
I could get would be
my grandma's number.

SECOND PRIZE

You Must Drift Back Into The Language That Is Your Language

by Mary Legato Brownell, Jenkintown PA

I turn from the curb on 17th near Chestnut and walk past the parking attendants, and remember having handed them the worn keys to my car when we would arrive, how kind they were and how naive I was as they opened the doors and lifted our suitcases, your computer, our canvas book bags, sometimes a grocery sack of sparkling water,

bananas, cashews. Two naval oranges. Biscotti I'd baked for you the day before your plane would land. All this I remember in a compression of images and sounds as iridescent and divisional as the cardinal I now watch each evening as he cuts the waning light of summer into startling facts, swooping across the small yards of my neighborhood in an endless

search for instinct's place to pause. Under a stone portico, the hotel entrance was framed in granite carvings of small leaves, and opened to an elevator paneled in rose walnut whose mechanisms of movement were so polished with lavender oil, I could not feel them, invisible as they were to any sense of my own body's gravity. Framed in thin strips

of pounded brass, the elevator doors closed to the disappearing ground and opened seconds later, thirty feet above, to the marbled continent of the lobby. I remember the flush and whisper of those doors, the domestic secret of being alone with you, briefly, for an inscrutable moment of tenderness, the way I felt as you checked us in

that the coming days and nights were to be an outlier's showdown, that I was an outlier, too. I know, now, that in a life you must drift back into the language that is your language. I remember the hotel bar, its arched entrance, and hesitate tonight, walking instead to the nearby Ladies Room to wash my hands and close my eyes. I remember telling

you about the startling power of the hand dryer’s force, how the skin over my fingertips vibrated as the moisture was whisked away. I loved that we laughed over that. I dry my hands tonight as I did then, and walk to the bar’s entrance as if there is a sound I have suddenly forgotten. Against the nearest wall, the same small couches are

upholstered in a soft red fabric woven in Spain. We settled best in public places – in churches, in synagogues, seats in restaurants, seats on benches, seats on buses. In hotel bars we ordered scotch; sometimes martinis. Coffee once. The bartender always brought a small white bowl of almonds mixed with raisins and sunflower seeds, and we’d lay out the ceremony of our pens and napkin scraps of words. Today I’m sitting on my side of the far couch. Deep pillows cushion the wood curve of its back. I have taken out my black pen, my paper, my list. The bartender has brought a small white bowl of almonds, settling it to the small table in front of me. A balding man

at a far-end stool tells the woman leaning to him that someday he wants to take a submarine trip, not in a glass-bottom tourist boat, where looking into the sea mirrors the inside of a well-groomed fish tank, but one in which the air pressure is countered, and the hallways are wide enough for only one person to walk along at a time. He tells her that his children are

nineteen and fifteen. She tells him she’s been to Hawaii, that he should go someday because he will never eat such fresh fish in his life if he doesn’t. He thinks she is dazzling. When the bartender brings my scotch, I asked her if I can sit here for a while, and confess that I am not a guest in the hotel. She smiles. Of course I can, and then I cry, drifting back into the language that is my language.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

For the Man Outside a Shelter in Dublin Who is Writing on the Sidewalk

by Margaret J. Hoehn, Sacramento CA

*Michael please come home
we love you the door is
unlocked and is always open*

The anarchy of grief can
clutch a man's hand
and set it in motion,
can compel him to kneel
on the sidewalk beneath
the cottonwoods' blur
of silver, and print
both prayer and poem in chalk
with words so bare
they throw open
the doors and windows
of his house
so all who walk by
can see inside the rooms
where he lives.
And in our looking
we might see our own
tired faces mirrored back,
our own shabby cupboards
of loss and regret.
How else to explain

why we look away
from this man as we skirt
around him, why we don't
hold him in our arms
and help him to stand.
How else to explain why
we act as if nothing is amiss
in a world where one of us
is missing, and another
is on his knees willing himself
to become the North Star
or whatever else it might take
to bring the lost home.

Untitled

by Nan Becker, Newton NJ

The river a shimmer, a trick of light atop green tow,
blooms sideways, ripples that answer the wind’s calling.
Eases then, when enamel still, yields as if it’s lost sight
of its persuasion, knowing neither trouble nor fatigue.
It does not seem to bother with breath but waits —suddenly
a great believer in surprise. Waves, the “theys” follow,
pools of themselves, silent shadows that move like an old
sadness changing its mind, gentled by passing —life after life
concurring to go through, to go on, all that went before
we met and after left, guessing though guessing, none of it
means terrible things, or joyous— we appropriate life gone,
unsentimentally, none of it meaning harm, although it does,
did, and like a bird’s tip-toe, *leaning*, it calls. Hear it hear
what would be here. Hear the downy drum behind a robin’s
slow *purdy*, hear the whomp of a heron flying low over a river
that streams a stone. Who would guess whatever we had
was separate.

The Door

by Victoria Givotovsky, Cornwall Bridge CT

as when you wake late into the night
and sounds sound strange in the dark

a door banging
somewhere the wind shifting where you can't see

and your feet find the floorboards
move carefully along the corridor until you reach

the other room
where you lie down on a sheet-straightened bed

still hearing the door somewhere
bump into its frame the noise

at unexpected intervals
startles you so you turn on a light

and leaf through a book but the print
does not speak to you in the same way

as the stuttering door speaks to you
so you turn off the light — the room suddenly

ablaze with black — and you listen
until the door stops its halting sentences

and your eyes see how the night has shifted
how the sky fattens into gray

Going south

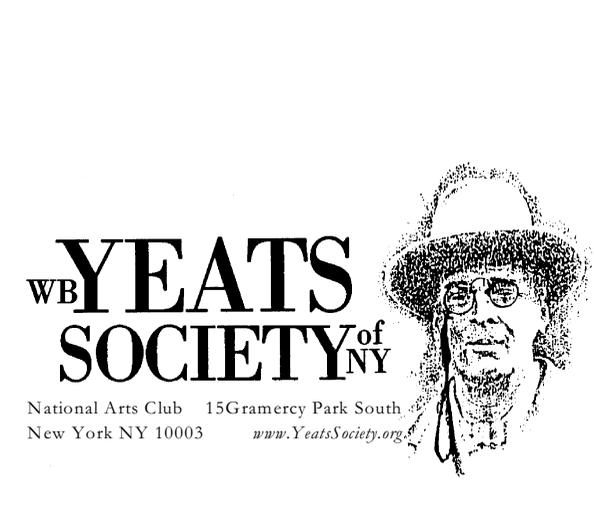
by Francesca Capossela, Brooklyn NY

Hit the road.
not hard enough to lose consciousness
but firmly, the way you would slap your lover, if you had the kind
of lover that needed to be slapped, or the guts to hurt someone,
so that when you pick your head up, pulled over on the side of the
road by the muddy Mississippi,
you mean to be there.

Reflected in hollow eyes,
the white lines glide under your tires like synchronized swimmers.
Like cellphones in outer space these open planes and everglades
are too artificial. Painted like a postcard, written like a slant rhyme.
You get tired of the open road
when going to go is dead and gone
and over the payphone your mom is belligerent and then
saccharine and
she wants you home again.

There are clichéd coffee grinds
and gas station loners that glide their greasy eyes over your
greasy body.
you pay seven dollars to use their shower and the soap smells like
melons and cigarettes and tears.
You’d like to steal the stars out of the bruised sky
like the candy bars you pocket in grocery stores.
You’d like to photograph the car lights moving to the beat of the
radio.

Hit the road
Because there’s nowhere to go but down.
Nothing to do but fall.
Watching Kansas fly by through the rainy window,
like a kid curled up in a sterilized sitting room or
on the floor of a hospital ward,
whispering to you through miles of traffic and hundreds of relapses
and seconds to spare till they know
This is your transcontinental sadness, guiding you home.



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 2011 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 2014 competition is 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.