

Sing what is well made

# **Yeats Poetry Prizes**

**2022**

WB YEATS SOCIETY OF NY

## REPORT OF THE JUDGE

One of the joys of reading these eclectic and often (too often!) wonderful poems was how many of them grappled in original and illuminating ways with the salient issues of our times. There were beautiful poems about racial injustice (“Nightswimming,” “Black Faces in White Spaces”), nonbinary gender experience (“Reflection at the LISD Eastside Aquatic Regional Swim Meet,” “I Do Not Write Poems about Gender,” “Trans Variations”), immigration (“Full Moon in Another Country,” “The Dead Don’t Eat Our Chickens”). There were two panoramic poems about wildfire and climate (“Rising Lea Refrain” and “A Net I Seek to Hold the Wind”). I was surprised by perhaps the best poem I’ve ever read about breast-feeding (“Bidden or Not Bidden”). A number of poems tenderly addressed aging, a subject sometimes resistant to aestheticizing, in loved ones and oneself (“Two Soldiers,” “The Fighter Pilot,” “You Are a Mountain”). There were several harrowing recollections of childhood abuse, reminding us of poetry’s power to muster our most explosive feelings. I was drawn to these poems for their courage and their contributions to the poetic discourse. Prize-giving is always in the end a somewhat arbitrary enterprise: poems inhabit their own climates of worthiness and the arrival of a good poem does not diminish its neighbor. And yet we have to point to one or another for a time, lest we be stunned by the totality of poems and not read any of them. So in the end I chose for the Yeats Prize this year poems that most fully inhabited their form and carried the reader—to my eye/ear—on the most transformative lyric journey. For First Prize I chose a very simple and mysterious poem, “Your Pioneering,” that astonished me with its internal rhymes ending with the closing line’s rhyme of the title, with the signal addition of “solitary.” The nearly iconic image comes into focus as the poem’s five couplets progress, like the rocking wagon on its journey, just in time to disappear, like the addressee, into vanishing traces. For Second Prize I chose “The Barley Child,” another mysterious poem, in which a phrase (a euphemism for a child conceived before marriage) is embodied as a magical impish presence, its physicality a kind of primal affront to the man who encounters it. In the poem, farming and fertility, the mysterious rites that try to contain them and the insistent unruliness of life (and sex) that they summon, wrestle briefly in a vividly convincing fable. I chose for Honorable Mention three very different poems. “My Enthusiasm” is a kind of defense of the mythical figure Narcissus, offered in a one-sided conversation, as someone tempted by, but unable to discern, the divine within. Speaking in a way on behalf of all poets, the poet asks their interlocutor if it is so easy to tell the difference between what we see as self-regard and, as it were, reflection. “Wonder and Possibility in Tucson” is a more plainspoken poem, in which a visitor finds in the austerity of the desert landscape prompts that situate them in an expansive cosmos. My third Honorable Mention is a wisp of a poem, “heat lightning and the blues.” I loved how it played with the illogicality and associativeness of song lyrics. The pair that emerges from the poem—a woman whose specialness is perhaps only seen in retrospect, a hapless drifter—is a timeworn trope of the blues, and heat lightning, flashing in the refrain as it does in the sky, emerges as a woebegone emblem of the poet-singer’s self-understanding—a wistful contrast to the more exalted vision of the poet suggested by “My Enthusiasm.” What these poems share is a close attention to the musical experience of the poem and an artful hitching of it to an unfolding inner revelation.

Ann Kjellberg

## FIRST PRIZE

### *Your Pioneering*

*by Robert Clinton, Dedham MA*

What notice of your tenancy opposes  
weather's ultimate erasures?

There isn't here a single piece of stone  
eternally an arrowhead,

overseen by rocking crows  
in the black sleeves of a cherry tree.

For how many days,  
the wagon having crossed and crushed

its wildflowers, will the field keep  
the traces of your solitary pioneering?

## SECOND PRIZE

### *The Barley Child*

*by Greg Rappleye, Grand Haven MI*

*Barley child (archaic): A child born within six-months of marriage. So-called because an average farmer plants barley and reaps it roughly six months later. In a broader sense, suggestive of a barley field as the likely place of an illegitimate child's conception.*

He hitched his mule and went to plow the field,  
the coulter making a first cut, then the iron blades  
splitting the fragrant grass, lifting the earth away,  
the mule's jaw lathered a salty foam, braying against  
bit and harness, against the soil's loosening grasp,  
until the field sang to the blades or seeming-so;  
until the grass was fully turned and the field cut  
in moonlit furrows. Then he sowed the field  
with barleycorns, and rains came and weeks rolled  
by and knowing what is sown by night  
ought to be gathered by night, he honed his scythe  
and went back to the field—whip-cutting the grain,  
binding the cut stalks, propping them up in tipsy shocks,  
until a barley child, slap-patted to a simulacrum  
of a true child, hidden in roots and tendrils,  
who had suckled mud and tumbled to a hapless shape,  
howled as the scythe cut deep in its thigh,  
and scuttled away as best a barley child could  
oozing blood from a grievous wound. And the man,  
raging at the presence of a barley child in his field—  
afraid to tell the priest, not wanting the shame of it,  
followed the blood by lantern light  
through the groundsel and dock and blackthorn  
until he lost the trail and turned back, unsure of what  
he had seen, but vowing to kill the barley child  
some other night—after his crop was stilled  
and barreled and aged—come the brilliant  
moons of the coming fall, or surely beneath  
some other full-moon rising.

## HONORABLE MENTIONS

### *My Enthusiasm*

*by Peter Fortunato, Ithaca NY*

If I tell you what I mostly do with words is praise  
a god in me, what would it mean to you? Maybe you shrug  
and think he's like that fool in love with his own shimmer  
on the surface of a pool, the boy who ignored all others  
including the dolorous girl in love with the beauty living in him,  
that he thought he might keep for himself when he embraced  
his reflection and drowned in it. As if time might be held  
by desire so great the housetops of heaven would fall,  
and the very stars melt into that water, where his bright eyes  
seemed to him immortal fixtures of the sky above him.  
When he went down deeper into himself than he'd ever imagined,  
he was fatally loved by what he was not. The gods must have smirked  
at his folly, as they will when people anywhere believe  
they can accomplish what only the immortals can, permanence.  
The girl, Echo was her name, had a sad fate, too: cursed for her own  
mistaken allegiance, she faded away until only her voice remained.  
As we say today, Narcissus drowned in his own high self-regard,  
which after all was superficial. He'd never learned to swim  
the depths where the soul abides, whether in love or without it.  
And so, when I claim that I'm seeking words that will remain  
with you after you've turned away to answer whatever else  
might call you, and if maybe, on second thought you reconnect  
to the whole story including the reason why a certain flower  
got its name from that sad boy who couldn't love anyone but himself,  
maybe you will ask if anything you cherish of your impermanence  
matches his misplaced fidelity? The gods esteemed his faith  
it seems, memorializing him by naming that perennial,  
whose paper-white petals, whose blood-bright centers bloom  
on long succulent stems, early signs of spring's rebirth.  
Where I live, in February near the bottom of winter  
we sometimes plant the bulbs in pots of pebbles, keep them  
in the dark until they shoot up green, and only then move them  
directly into sunlight. Their heavenly perfume fills the house.  
But this is important to remember: Narcissus needs the dark to grow.  
That's why with my words I mean to praise some part of me  
I sense as divine although unknown. Where else would god be?

## *Wonder and Possibility in Tucson*

*Judith O. Hoyer, Wayland MA*

The year ends with a lost javelina  
crossing East Hampton Street.  
I get disoriented too,  
ask the Santa Catalinas for directions  
to the bottom of my heart.

In the garden, lemons drop to their knees,  
gray water gargles under a mandarin orange  
and the bone-cold rosemary shrub  
knocks to come in where

ceiling vents breathe down our necks,  
the counter compost container's mouth  
is full of decay, and wires sprout from plaster  
in the wall where a doorbell used to chime.

Always a project at our son's "new" house.  
Go for caulk, metal screws, gravel, hollow  
door anchors, drip blockers.  
Go for the pleasure of small things.  
Go for love's sake.

White lights get gutter-strung,  
Braille for those of us whose  
vision of the future is less than 20/20.

Sirens, church bells and dogs  
compete, while three generations of us  
try to deny each other points  
in a heads down game of Scattergories.

I slip outside when light dims to talk with the sky  
whose lips will inevitably turn red  
like seeds scooped from a pomegranate skull  
discarded on the path.

*heat lightning and the blues*

*by Michael Miller, Edmonds WA*

she found me by the roadside  
she found something she might fix  
i never found much of anything

heat lightning and the blues

she wanted to call me darling  
she wanted to have my child  
i never wanted much of anything

heat lightning and the blues

she made the meals to feed me  
she made up the bed each day  
i never made much of anything

heat lightning and the blues

she asked me for my thoughts  
she asked if she should stay  
i never asked much of anything

heat lightning and the blues

heat lightning lets out a crackle  
heat lightning lets out a spark  
heat lightning ain't much of anything

heat lightning and the blues

**The Yeats Poetry Prize** is open to members and nonmembers of the Society of any age from any locality. First prize \$1,000, second \$500. Winners and honorable mentions receive two-year memberships in the Society and are honored at an event in New York in April (pandemic permitting). Poems in English up to 60 lines, on any subject, not published at the time of submission may be entered. We prefer entry through the Submittable website at *Yeats.Submittable.com/Submit* between November 1 and February 1. Do not include author information in the poems themselves, but enter name, contact information and a short bio in the Submittable entry form. Entry fees are \$15 for the first and \$12 for each additional poem. Postal entries may be mailed to the address below (check made out to WB Yeats Society of NY). Authors retain rights, but grant us the right to publish winning entries; however, winning poems accepted for publication elsewhere *after* submission may require permission from the publishing outlet.

For information on our other programs, and on membership, please visit *YeatsSociety.nyc* or write to us:

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