

1999 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE, EAMON GRENNAN:

As usual when I judge this competition, and before I get to the final dozen or so contenders, it is a great eye-opener to see the variety of subjects for the expression of which people turn to poetry. They turn to poetry—to the language of the poem, to the formal consolation or excitement of the poem-in-possibility—in order to bring into the world in a fresh way (and in a way that speaks to others) something in an individual life, some item of memory, of sex, of death (love poems, lust poems, elegies of one kind and another), some celebration of landscape, of tradition, of art itself. Poems about paintings, poems about mothers and fathers, poems about being mother or father or wife or husband or lover, poems with their own take on Yeats (learning to fence at the age of forty, for example, and with Ezra Pound as teacher!), poems that are as likely to probe in a spirit of nostalgia the countryside around Sligo as, in a more acerbic spirit, the anti-countryside—you might say—of Las Vegas. Poems that find *figures* in things—find metaphors in the natural world or in the world of objects—for emotional aches or raptures: crumbling marriages seen in diseased trees or a sturdy marriage seen in the evolution of a fancy garage to a “glorified garden shed,” or the body as a map of its own wild geography, or a dazzling (“tomato red”) pair of Italian sandals as Proustian containers of the bittersweet memory of a love affair. Poems, too, that reach for something akin to religious expression, taking the shape and sound of public exhortation, private meditation, or more skeptical, complex questioning. What I liked running up against, too, in so many of these poems—many of which may not have fully “worked” as poems—were individual elements—a surprising expression, a startling image. So in one poem I’ll find “the dark surgery of tides,” in another “there ought to be a rhyme against such weather,” in another “our talk/a Hindenberg adrift,” and in yet another I’ll be told how “blue eyed men,/cream-colored and slim,/flush pale rose.” Some of these poems, too, can explore consciousness itself, taking their readers on meanders with all sorts of turns and curves, the mind’s surprises finding a language supple enough to let us share the exhilaration or discomforts of the journey.

So that’s my experience of moving through a first reading of all the submissions, an experience, I might say, that is punctuated not only by a few groans as I feel a poem has run off its right track into a tangle of underbrush, but by moments of exquisite envy when I wish I’d discovered for myself, for a poem of my own, some particularly felicitous phrase or image or bit of rhythmic bounce. After all that, of course, there’s the business of judgement. This is more laborious, especially after the field has been narrowed down to a dozen or twenty especially worthwhile pieces. Then it is a question of being both truthful and ruthless (as well as a bit “ruthful” or rueful, letting go of a poem that has been admired for some special energy of expression or originality of intention and execution, a poem you know there’s a genuine poet behind). The end of that process left me with six poems.

Three of these are Honorable Mentions, which I liked for various reasons. I admired “A Modest Service” for the willingness its author showed to be a plain speaker and yet to work her plain speaking into a decisive formal structure, quatrains and rhymes subtly modulated, not losing the sense of an engaged, agitated

speaker behind the lines: “Mother and daughter, we may not color/Our lips madder or ghost our skin/Matte, immaculate, but we are trying/To make up, to smooth things over.” I liked “Leaving the Eccentric” for its own eccentric way with narrative, rhythm and sound, and for the quirky tale it has to tell of “The queenfish... carried away from her silvery coast... because of a whim to be... up to her eyes in the highest/spring on the fringe of fish/civilization.” And I liked “Lullaby Rub” for the lavish way it entered and moved around inside its subject (a father watching his wife bathe their two small children) and for its sensuous, celebratory conclusion as he takes the kiddies from the water: “amazed at the commotion of small/lights in your eyes before I ferry you away/like ancient senators in terry cloth togas headed/towards the fluid republic of dreams.”

Of the remaining three poems, I chose two as equal runners-up. Very different from one another, each one manages to *realise* its subject, to register its experience in an impressive and admirable way. “Dowry” has only four quatrains, but each one is elegantly sculpted out of deft phrasing, elegant rhymes, and a tone of voice that’s entirely apt to its occasion. What I especially love about this is the way the speaker is able to be at the same time relaxed (as you can hear in the colloquial ring of “Some still prefer,” “At worst,” “Sometimes, though”) and yet show signs of muscular verbal organisation, the way sophistication (dabbling in etymologies in a light-fingered way; rhyming across languages) and plain speech are married and comfortable together. It’s a poem that Paul Muldoon would like, I’d say, not least for its solid but enigmatic conclusion. “Night Talker” is a more nervously strung-out performance, but, again, executed with remarkable sense of focus, direction, and depth of thought. What I most admire about this unsparing examination of difficulty, this opening up to honest inspection of the interior of a relationship and the innards of consciousness, is how marvelously concrete the speaker/writer keeps everything, though temptations to abstraction must have been everywhere. Uncompromising in its language of physical fact, serious in its intelligence, able to make a language for the thinking mind and feeling heart, the poem is a succession of surprises—from its first bald but startling statement (“He dreams in fricatives”) to the way a question (“What language sleep knows?”) is transformed into a physical antagonist, but an antagonist close to what a lover has to be (“I’d like to clutch this language harder than sleep”). Different as they are, both “Dowry” and “Night Talker” poems inhabit that place where language has achieved some real distinction, making an experience in the poet’s world available to us, felt by us.

The poem I’ve chosen as winner this time is “Hospice.” On my first reading through the pile of submissions, I noted it as a piece with something special going on in it. I kept coming back to it, trying to work out what that special quality was, while at the same time aware that the very fact that the poem had this hold on me meant that I was telling myself something, that some pre-rational pleasure was speaking loud and clear, in spite of the dark, grave title of the piece itself. What I noticed first, I think, was the way the poem was reaching at its beginning for a language of scientific or medical fact that still managed to keep, as it were, the heart in view, that managed—by the way rhythm and language and image all stayed elastically alive to *what* they were saying—to knit the poet’s sense of the experience itself to an equally alert, always tactful sense of what the language could do. Further readings told me this wasn’t a poem trying to make easy consolations out of some articulate control of the hard facts of the represented life. Instead,

by its own strict but never constricting insistence on paying attention to the facts of life surrounding the single life of the speaker—paying attention to the mundane while in the grip of some heart-gnawing anxiety—the poem managed at once to celebrate the vitality and the formal grace of ordinary life (the construction crew who can be “whooping over/the usual curves” as well as assembling “the stairway that races its fragile/beat of steps like hearts”) and at the same time respect the sadness in things, a sadness contained in the single-word title and in the concluding vision of those “guests on one elbow in narrow cots,/staring out the window, wondering//whose cast and is it loved?” The *frisson* created by that last image—“whose cat and is it loved?”—goes beyond rational explanation. It does the trick: the hair stands up at the back of my neck. “Hospice” does many other lovely things, as you can see, among them a sudden but entirely right swerve into the past (“As a kid I loved construction”); an easy, self-aware but never self-regarding inclusion of the self (“sufficiently robust/to excite attention”), and a marvelous mixture of concrete and abstract in the last stanza, gathering “souvenirs of sadness” into a perfect alignment with those emotionally packed “piles/of mismatched vinyl suitcases.” This is a wise, complete poem: in its language (“hortatory bolts,” Lord!) and formal procedures, it has, I would say, wonderfully *used up* its factual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual matter. It was a pleasure to find it.

Hospice

by Rhoda Janzen

A late breeze rustles the tarp;
the workers have gone home.
I am surprised every day
by how fast they work—
walls up, windows in,
a shrubby flourishing.

Inside, the rooms repeat
like nascent cells that cluster
and divide. The familiar tang
of sawdust screws into my nose,
pale odor of a construction
that levels as it builds.

Mornings when I leave
I’m sufficiently robust
to excite attention. Or
maybe it’s boredom that clamps
the construction crew to me,
though I can hardly reconcile that

these same guys, whooping over
the usual curves, assembled
the stairway that races its fragile
beat of steps like hearts—
time running out, completion nearing, project almost done.

As a kid I loved construction,
the happy promise of corrugated
tin stacked sociably along
the dry wall, the hortatory

bolts. But I no longer pass
the site without blocks

of panic, the first to dread
the courtesy of change. Rentfree,
soon the rooms will welcome
forfeiture, loss, our modern plagues,
guests on one elbow in narrow cots,
staring out the window, wondering

whose cat and is it loved?
Into the body’s delicate closet
they shrink, stacking against
the door their souvenirs
of sadness, their piles
of mismatched vinyl suitcases.

Dowry for Joan & Danny

by Thomas O’Grady

Some still prefer to use *dot* (rhymes with *got*)
a loanword from the French—*dot* (rhymes with *go*)—
when referring to what a bride once brought
to a new union; not just her *trousseau*—

two settings of fine china, a hope chest
stuffed with cross-stitched linens—but *real* chattel:
four fertile fields, turf-rights to the best
half-rood of bog, a few head of cattle....

At worst, the *dot* might seal a legal pact,
add final punctuation as an end
it itself: a match made matter-of-fact,
a deal approved on grounds of make-pretend.

Sometimes, though, it paved way for the future.
Take that woman from slab-rich Liscannor:
her wedding day a point of departure,
she founded marriage on a flagstone floor.

—Limerick, July 1998

Night Talker

by Nikki Moustaki

He dreams in fricatives, gravel-carved intonations captioning our
bed
with a rumble, intervening sleep in the little hours, shallow
breath
punctuated with German imperatives: I’m not learning his
language fast enough—

here’s a lover with a point to make, sleeping with a silver river,
unpronounceable
mountains, history that pocks his bones: smooth acres of bomb-
killed children’s graves,
razor wire, a wall he thought would never topple, and an era still
inexplicable

to his calm young frame— it takes nine generations before
human DNA
is transformed so radically, it is unrecognizable in the tenth.
Nine generations to forget the nose, the hair, the skin of your
family before you.

After nine generations you won't be them, nine generations after
you, you'll be gone.

It's been almost three since 1945, and what of those
grandparents, those great-grandparents, that still perform on his
tongue? And if skin can carry war,

which part of him makes blame something to eat with bread and
a sharpened knife?

If language lives and grows, what part of war still exists inside
his throat, what part of sleep remakes the past, and the past's
past?

There's a zone in language that lay like a road blocked at both
ends;
when he opens his mouth, he doesn't know what will come out:
sighing, weeping, fire?
The same road in sleep, on one side an ocean, the other a forest:

and when he sleeps, does he know what language the trees and
water know?

What language sleep knows? I'd like to clutch this language
harder than sleep,
with two hands, wheeling down the road, taking the barricades
with me:

I sleep with a German and all his history, misunderstanding when
he drags
the covers with him, mumbling something he won't remember in
the morning
when he'll swear I know him, his past, and everything he says.

A Modest Service

by Peggy O'Brien

Your lotus blossom hand in mine,
The two of us like weary geishas
Who have given up at last on hate
And love, all for the sake of the mime.

Mother and daughter, we may not color
Our lips madder or ghost our skin
Matte, immaculate, but we are trying
To make-up, to smooth things over.

I admit neglect became an art
With me: the sadistic fit of symmetries,
Tit for tat, but even I, as you say,
As hard as nails can have a heart

Or in lieu of that generous organ a limit
To the suffering I'll inflict, even
To get even. Your brittle, bird bones
Once heavy, heaved, levered, hit;

But that was of no moment when,
Sitting in that waiting room waiting
For results, I saw your broken wings
Flapping in your lap, your sad talons

And my shame exposed. You've been alone
Too long and I orphaned by anger.
This is not a cure; it's just a manicure.
Even I can't file and polish pain.

Whose hand is it? Mutilated,
Jagged, ribbed and split, unregenerate,
These nails are mine, their high instep
Also mine. For the first time I see it.

You begged me to paint you blowzy
As a poppy, but taught me not to tell
A lie. I chose instead a mountain laurel
Beige closer to what's natural. "I'm sorry,"

I say, "I have to leave. Let them dry
Thoroughly, eat more, please, and take your new
Medicine." All you reply is "Thank you,"
As you stand in the doorway waving good-bye.

Leaving The Eccentric

by Larissa Szporluk

The queenfish visits the spring
every spring, and she does it alone,
carried away from her silvery coast,
the blue drum region, carried away
by the aerial ocean above,
the dipping and rising, sidling along
saddles of thawing mountains,
thrashing through caribou tracks,
past dens of bears, exposing herself
to countless dangers, because of a whim
to be in the iciest possible
water, up to her eyes in the highest
spring, spring on the fringe of fish
civilization, spring where the king,
who loves her, lives, year after year,
for this single visit, the look of pain
on his outer face as he remembers
he should eat her. That's when the queen
takes her leave, flapping her battered
tail, slipping her body under. That's when
the one who loves her screams,
sharding the spring with manic octaves
(like bells of mules setting hills
ringing with each beating)—what else
can they do but follow its law
in wonder, the law of the sun
which burns, pulling the world to it,
the paradox of equinox, when light

and dark, and less and great, are all
the same, and every answer
strings its questions up in space:
are blood and love just things that run,
and if they're not, do they belong
to what they are, or to the place
they're running to or from, and what
if that's the point of life, to turn
your back into your front
and mount the beast again?

Lullaby Rub

by Richard M. Higgerson

When I watch my wife kneel nightly
by the stone tub, the capitoline of bones

in her spine pressing flesh up
in a chain of small hills left

unconquered & see the spidered,
branching blue highway of veins

run in her back, a vision undiscovered
by her forever, I imagine the tight

& tortured route these two
children must have swum

& I'm possessed by dejagging the velvet
upsweep of all their lives. I've bumrushed

that narrow hall. I've already heard
the echo of the thousand cells pinging

in the dark. What does it do to me to
tell you that the secret of this love

affair might be our mutual fear, or
that I've seen the first room of their growth

laid out haphazard like some \$0.79 a pound
throwaway chop you'd think twice about

grinding into sausage, like something
beautiful I swore was her heart carved out

of her that lay beating on her knifed
& gory stomach while she lay under gas,

the sweat on my lip beading like a gift
of pearls come unstrung? I embraced

a feeling of swooning amazement. I knew
how to say *This is a galaxy* & when I said this all

the air left me. I said, *This is the blood-black
orb where it all begins*. They had made

a small room of sheets around her middle
& the nurses were ready to catch

me. The surgical specialist—who
the night before had stitched the ditch-rolled,

bumper-pressed, stray dog on my aunt's
kitchen table—gleamed a smile

& stuck her hand inside my wife to make
room for the room that had held our sleeping,

wet child she'd just removed. It has happened
twice this way. Kind strangers patted our children

dry. So this absolving nightly ritual of the bath,
the suds like halos ringing them, I love. I don't

question why water beads the way it beads
& prisms itself in the mirrored light into more

colors than there are words for. We
collect it. We make a city of it.

We stake our lives on it running clear & we
baptize innocence in it nightly. So when

I die children, I promise to surface.
I promise to fly out of all this

water. I promise to walk back across
the air to you. For now I promise to watch you

come clean from the tub, breaking the tense
skin of surface water, this reborn

amion, amazed at the commotion of small
lights in your eyes before I ferry you away

like ancient senators in terry cloth togas headed
towards the fluid republic of dreams.

*The W.B. Yeats Society of New York poetry competition is open to
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