W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

2000 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE, BILLY COLLINS:

I was honored to be chosen as this year's judge of the Yeats Poetry Prize, but I am afraid I cannot offer an honest complaints about the arduousness of the decision-making process. It is a traditional part of any judge's report to go on agreeably about the difficulty of making his or her decision. The judge's quandary has been caused, of course, by the vast number of outstanding submissions. I have judged enough poetry competitions, including this prestigious one to know that this is , more often than not, a piece of ritual etiquette–one I am eager to dispense with or at least bring in line with the actual experience of applying oneself to reading carefully a few hundred unfamiliar poems. In fact, the first reading for me is easy. Poems separate themselves into two stacks–one tall, one short–without me having to do much at all. Surely, this must be the experience of other literary-contest judges; otherwise, how would a decision ever be arrived at by the deadline? I cannot imagine such a lack of discrimination that would oblige someone to read the same three hundred poems over and over again, paralyzed with uncertainty. In my experience, very good poems rise to the surface like fish, for the recognition of a superior poem is a sudden as the effect of being fanned with cold lake water.

The ecstasy of judging is not the pleasure of being exposed to a plentitude of first-rate poems, and the agony is not the quandary of having to single out favorites among such excellence. The ecstasy is knowing that somewhere in that stack are lurking a few total eye-openers and not knowing with what turn of the page one of them is going to leap into view. The agony lies in narrowing the little group of 7 or 10 down to 5 or 6 then 3, the 2, then 1.

The poems in the little pile for this year's contest–the Millennial Yeats Poetry Prize we might call it for a bit of extra pomp–were outstanding for widely different reasons. At the dog show (mind you, this is a restricted comparison), the best-of-breed judge simply has to pick the best Yorkshire terrier from a line-up of Yorkshire terriers. But the best-in-show judge–which is what I felt like–must choose among a Yorkshire terrier, a Borzoi, and an Irish Wolfhound. So many different voices, each like a different musical instrument and , of course, each playing a different melody. I will say that toward the end of the process of sifting, I did find it difficult, if not arduous, to let go of many poems that conveyed high levels of craft and energy–poems behind which truly a poet stood. But finally, I settled on three poems: an honorable mention, a second place winner, and a first place winner. Let me say a few words about each.

The honorable mention goes to "On Looking into the Ladies' Room," which I was attracted to immediately by its zippy title with its mock-echo of Keats' famous sonnet about reading Homer in the translation by George Chapman. Set in the downtown Guggenheim Museum, the poem offers a voyeuristic glimpse through the momentarily open door of the ladies' room which is ironically located between two paintings on full display but clearly of less interest to the speaker than the swing of this intriguing door. Once the setting is established, the poem makes an expansive move to consider all those "worlds we cannot enter" and then ends with the melancholy regret that each of us can be in only one place at a time and that each has only one life to lead–a condition I once heard described as the "egocentric predicament." It is a poem that lifts us above the ordinary observation of its opening to a philosophical vantage point from which a stirring insight is delivered, but not without the semi-comic hesitations of dashes and parentheses.

"Woodsmoke in Aigues-Mortes: Late November," the second prize winner, performs an act of verbal hypnosis on its reader. The repetitions of smoke–whether rising from an outdoor fire, a kitchen, or a pipe–create a pattern within the poem's five octaves that draws us inside the landscape of the poem and its speaker's discrete sensibility. Smoke actually seems to drift through the lines of the poem. The French place-names form another pattern, their vowels and consonants adding an under-music to the poem's already tuneful language. The poem begins in sensuous pleasure and then veers off to consider one war safely locked in the historical past and another war threatening to erupt into the present. How the poem manages to return after touching on these disturbing realities to the pleasure of seeing (or not seeing) cows at night and inhaling the perfume of woodsmoke in the French countryside only attests to the steady hand and equipoise of this poet.

When I was in the final stages and had to now single out one poem, I attached myself to the "Portrait of a Woman with Her Marker" because it attached itself to me so forcefully. It was one of those poems that gets into your system immediately, and for days after reading it, it would visit me while driving or walking across campus. Among the poem's many attractions, I loved the way it mixes the comic and the deadly serious and finds a perfect balance there between elegy and farce. The poem changes gears so smoothly from the almost vaudevillian opening–with its jaunty Irish cadence–to a roll call of the dead, which cleverly uses the ethnically ambiguous name of Costello to modulate from Irish names to Italian names on the markers in a cemetery. Further along, the poem dives into a deeper, more personal elegiac tone as the deceased members of a family are listed as if in a public record, leaving only Mary to survive, to smile into a camera, slightly tipsy with her arms around her own gravestone. "Death is the mother of beauty," Wallace Stevens said, and death is certainly the mother of this poem's charming beauty and its touching evocation of life.

FIRST PRIZE

Portrait of a Woman with Her Marker

by Michele Madigan Somerville

Thinking it a fine joke in the autumnal chill,
having gotten a pair of vodka martinis into the old
girl, Mary, 85 in 1985, which left her
flushed and flustered, wild-eyed and
elfin amid the greenery, he posed her
where angels fear–"Come on, Mary,
how about a quick one with your arm thrown
'round the stone?" She thought of having the rock
inscribed well in advance of taking occupancy
below, of having the name carved in beforehand,
but the daughters said it was "tacky."
"It'll just have to wait until you're gone."
(Would you jump into my grave that fast?)
Mary was afraid someone might take her dark
spot in the common ground among the faithful
departed, among the consecrated bones of erstwhile
communicants: among the Evanses, McKennas, O'Briens, and
Rooneys,
among the Heaveys, O'Haras, Kennedys and Killarneys,
in the company of Mulligans, Fitzgeralds and Molloys,
O'Learys, Donohues, Riordans and Kinanes.
among Kinsellas and Costellos, for all her days
among DiGiornos, Dippolitos, Lucacentis,
Cartellis and Falcones, and Capuccis, Ruggieros, Trovatos and
Mazzones.
She was afraid of someone looking to cut
the line at the Gate of Heaven
cemetery, of someone coveting her
place within the verdant realm,
someone waiting to descend into her
dug out hollow in Valhalla's hallowed ground
which contains remains of her
mate, gone at 50, by his own hand;
daughter killed at 22,
son, drove off a bridge at 30,
girl, dead at 2, buried for Christmas–
Black Irish Mary with her way
(of all flesh) with her cold
eye cast–" Come on, smile Mary, darlin'–
How about a quick one, a shot
of you and the headstone for good measure?"

SECOND PRIZE

Woodsmoke in Aigues-Mortes: Late November

by H.R. Stoneback

We like the way the woodsmoke lingers
In late November in Aigues-Mortes
As the village draws on itself,
Folds inward for winter: tourists gone, fires stoked.
Behind the medieval walls, smoke lingers, stays.
In Les Saintes-Maries, wall-less by the sea,
The smoke of kitchenfires and *cheminées*
Is more diffused, is blown quickly away
Toward Africa, out there across the Mediterranean.

We drive over to Aigues-Mortes once
Or twice a week for the best tobacco,
For wine and cheese, for he *Herald Tribune*,
For fine fillets of Loup de Mer. Sometimes
We stop in Notre-Dames-des-Sablons,
Wet our fingertips in the font, salute
Saint-Louis, all golden in his chapel,
His candles singing in the dark, there in the church
From which he embarked on Crusades, aboard *Montjoie*,

His warship echoing the old French war-cry.
It is still my town, his statue whispers
On the quiet *Place*, as we cross the square
To the *Tabac*. I buy the last pack
Of my favorite pipe-tobacco, the kind
With the earth toasted aroma that lingers. My friend
Tells me he will order more, maybe next week
It will be in. We drive out the south gate,
Watch the last golden light on the ramparts,

Above the saltbright-marshes of the Salins du Midi.
We circle the walls, consider every tower
In its particularity–the Tour de Constance
With its message: *Resister*. The Tour
Des Bourguignons, where the stacked the corpses,
And salted them well, to keep the rot and smell
Down. After we stop at INTERMARCHE,
She reads the headlines threatening war from Baghdad.
Driving toward Les Saintes, crossing at Syveréal:

The full moon summons le Petit Rhône
To glory, to bedazzling joy. This moonlight
Makes it easy o see the white horses
In the passing pastures. The black bulls
Are hard to see. We are almost home.
Li Santi glows across the Marais.
Smoke from the last burning field of Fall drifts:
We like the way the smoke lingers, from afar,
In late November in the dark Camargue. HONORABLE MENTION

On Looking into the Ladies' Room

by Griffin Hansbury

In the Guggenheim Museum Soho,
when the door to the Ladies' Room opens:
Silver light for a moment, a mirror,
the few faces of women looking in,
brushing their hair, reapplying
lipstick, wiping their noses
suddenly here in this corridor between
the earthly curve of *Midnight Sun*
and dull unsmiling *Mao Zedong*
Reporting on the Rectification in Yan'an,
1951.
There is nothing beautiful
about the men's room (think of
the girls in high school, their cool clouds
of Aqua Net, green smoke of menthol
cigarettes, snap of spearmint gum).
No matter what we do,
there always will be worlds
we cannot enter.

Think of all those distant temples,
galaxies, centuries we'll never step into.
There is a certain sadness in every shift
from one thing to another. So much
is lost here and there, along the way–oh,
it's worth it, it's worth it, I agree, but–
(if I could just be everywhere at once!
Then I could be truly happy).
There is not enough to be
all things. So brief, these bodies we're given.
A door opens, a few inches, silver light
spills into the corridor. There, we see Heaven–
what we were, what we are not now (a door
closes), what we were never meant to be.

The W.B. Yeats Society of New York poetry competition is open to members and nonmembers of any age, from any locality. For information on the 2001 competition (deadline February 15), on our other programs, or on membership ($15 per year, full-time students $10), visit our Web site, www. Yeats Society.org, or write:

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