W.B. YEATS SOCIETY OF N.Y.

2003 Poetry Competition

REPORT OF THE JUDGE, HARVEY SHAPIRO:

Writing this report on the eve of battle, I think of Thomas Hardy's great poem "Channel Firing" written on the eve of battle in April 1914 and its concluding stanza:

> Again the guns disturbed the hour,
> Roaring their readiness to avenge,
> As far inland as Stourton Tower,
> And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

Traces of that poem are in much of the war poetry that comes after it, in Richard Eberhart's "On the Fury of Aerial Bombardment," for example, and in the infantry poems of Louis Simpson, both from the second World War.

In a time of turbulence, poetry can be a help, a momentary stay against confusion. Many of the poems submitted this year seem to have that as their subtext, as if in anticipation of what was to come and in memory of 9/11. One poet announces forthrightly: "Art is an antidote." Would that it were. But it is a shelter, and the honey of old poems a reminder that not everything is subject to the ravages of war and time.

Several poets this year make eloquent use of the poetry of the past. One takes on the voice of Lord Byron ("Primitive Man's Defense") speaking seductively in his parlor to a lovely woman. Another, borrowing some lines from Peter Ackroyd's *William Blake: an Introduction*, describes "William Blake's Last Days."

Two of the poets courageously invoke our great master Yeats. One writes about a teacher ("To an English Professor Long Since Vanished") who tried to make his young freshmen understand the pathos in the lines: "An aged man is but a paltry thing,/ A tattered rag upon a stick...." They were too young to be moved. Now the poet, led to it by age, understands what his teacher, though somewhat theatrical as Yeats himself at times could be, was trying to convey. And another lovely poem, "Climbing Knocknarea," has as its epigraph words from Yeats.

I think it takes courage in a contest such as this to invoke Yeats, because it might signal to the one who judges an empty piety, a poem that's just going through the motions of being a poem. But in the two poems I've already cited that is hardly the case. Nor is it the case for the poem I've selected for second prize, "Benediction." Here the poet places at the very center of the poem the line, "I will arise and go now." How could you find a Yeats quote more worn by familiarity? Yet in this poem it takes on a beautiful freshness because it is heard by an old woman whose ability to distinguish words is fading, the consonants and the vowels beginning to separate themselves.

> the t's like soldiers suddenly at attention startle her a little the s's
> spray from a cool garden hose soothing themselves into the honey
> of m's and the vowels the vowels luminous as fireflies

And after this we have the Yeats, no longer deadened by familiarity.

I like the quietness of this poem, the language that is inventive but not in a self-advertising way. Take the opening, for example: "How long has she been here, days washing into days...." This saying goodby to an old woman, who is also a writer, blesses us all with its quietness.

Quiet, too, is the poem I've chosen for first prize: "Moths; Night Fishing." (I see I too may have crept under the shelter of words to avoid the clash of arms.) I have spent many hours fishing, mostly surfcasting from the beaches along the easternmost shore of Long Island. Fishing is a lot like writing: you cast out into the unknown and when you've hooked something you know it by the energy that travels back to you along the line. Like writing, it's a way to find solitude. Once in a while, to keep the game going, you have to bring something back.

The poet who wrote "Moths; Night Fishing" is on a mountain lake, freshwater fishing. He begins with the clustering moths and turns them into a symbol of life, "like life's first breath." Then he moves to the joy of "sliding across this smooth surface in a boat, a skin of fog forming...." He describes the slender bass, sometimes as they leap "freeze-framed by a bolt of moonlight." And he concludes "the methods/ they choose to distinguish between my lure slowly spinning and the/ fluttering wings of survival are the business of the world made plain." So moths and bass come together at the end, both of them poised on the thin edge of survival, as are we all.

The two poems that get honorable mention are taken from life, though the second contains an argument with art. In the first, "Cascade Falls," we are into a little confessional drama in which a wife, addressing her husband, but only in her head, tells him about the many men she had over the years brought to a state park for a picnic followed by a seduction. Though the poem is in the confessional mode, the poet thickens its rhetoric, charges up the language and the emotion with references to Medea, Jocasta, Clytemnestra, and the poem itself reads not like a piece of self-therapy but a piece of literature.

The second honorable mention, "The Rules of Poetry," is also in a woman's voice. It begins with what looks like a straight statement of fact: "stevens' blue guitar is art;/ the pink foot of the newborn is merely sentimental." But this assertion is tested as the poem proceeds until at the end the poet says: "this child, this poem and play./ my boy,/ the one with my blue guitar."

This year's crop was a pleasure to read–and educational. One poet, in a single poem, had me scurrying to the dictionary to look up "dehiscence," "talion," and "foliar." A lollipop for anyone who knows all three.

First Prize:

Moths; Night Fishing

by J. Michael Parish

It's not their fault that their wings and mouths are selfish–
that they use them to make trouble all around this mountain lake
or that their lust for the warm places has them recorded
among the Johns of the world, seeking from lippy globes of lamp and
moon
nourishment, clarity, warmth, in all of which their brief faces shine like
life's first breath.

How pleasurable to be sliding across this smooth surface in a boat,
a skin of fog forming,
the immediate sound insects preening and probing, and the splash of fish
freeze-framed by a bolt of moonlight. Motor off:
the purest relaxation is the predator in his element–
civilization means we don't even have to purr anymore.

The slender bass, horizon-eyed, suspend in their aqueous humor
between gravity and the parabola of escape, and the methods
they choose to distinguish between my lure slowly spinning and the
fluttering wings of survival are the business of the world made plain.

Second Prize

Benediction

by Victoria Givotovsky

How long has she been here, days washing into days, months
since she has had the strength to hold a book, and now her eyes

frail clouded too often closed

Old age has taken to stuffing her ears with soft white feathers, but still
she knows them, her two grandsons, her great-granddaughter, each one

carries into her room a distinctive scent, an odor she bathes in, as each

reads to her words once so familiar, gradually separating themselves from
meaning, and now disintegrating further into their innermost parts–

the t's like soldiers suddenly at attention startle her a little the s's

spray from a cool garden hose soothing themselves into the honey
of m's and the vowels the vowels luminous as fireflies

I will arise and go now

how in each loved mouth they sound slightly different, but so much
the same

Sometimes her own work is chosen, past understanding now

but she knows her work, that particular
pattern of sounds, the rhythms and cadences she labored over

time and again, never quite

satisfied until now, issuing from the mouths of her children's
children, their voices growing more and more distant as she struggles

to hear the words

Honorable Mentions

Cascade Falls

Lieber State Park, Indiana

by Alice Friman

Every man I ever wanted
I brought here for a picnic. Walked him out

over these horizontal slabs to swish
our feet in the water. Packed lunch,

my breasts for dessert. I always drove.
It was a surprise, you see. But you

I never brought. Let's face it, you began
as understudy. I had to prompt your lines.

This was a big time. Standing Room Only
(those jostling trees). And O, the acting,

the Stanislavsky method working that green O.
The besotted cliffs echoing with a praise. Don't

feel bad. By the time you fumbled on the scene
the scene was Greek, and I, burning to bury

not *two* brothers but a regiment. I was Jocasta
stabbed with dress pins, Medea drenched in blood

not wet enough to wash the anger from my hands,
and Agamemnon's wife, so picnicked out, so wax-

papered in duplicity, I was without shame.
No, I never brought you here, even now,

for what if time's membrane did not hold
and the double axe of Clytemnestra's words

crashed through my teeth, and Jason
snarled again in your voice? What of

Aristotle's unities, not to mention our own,
for how many years of marriage shored up

is dike enough, dead-bolt and chain enough
when such tempting lines are practiced

and cued up on an unsuspecting tongue?

The Rules of Poetry

by H. E. Wright

steven's blue guitar is art;
the pink foot of the newborn is merely sentimental,
with its tape-thin nails and its smell of baby powder.

Now, the blood-lined pink of pigs' feet under cellophane,
to a vegetarian, is superb art–
because it makes us re-think the images which inform our values
as well as the values which inform our images.
one pink is mean, and that is art.
until you hold a baby–
that gadfly in the process–
you will never understand.
that poop and snot are not art
just because they are base.

but that the bow-legs of one who does not yet walk,
and blanket lint between the fingers and toes
mean this one's alive
and not going anywhere soon–
annointed into this world,
like nothing that can ever exist again.
such a pain, to be loved.
and also not to be loved.

god, we hope this kid is not a serial killer.
this child is so beautiful.
and i do believe, and profess,

that steven's blue guitar is art.
silk toes. and warm. like baking powder biscuits
on Sunday morning,
with honey. hold the butter.
but never the kisses:
hersey's or lips.
curses. foiled again.
this child, this poem and play.
my boy,
the one with my blue guitar.

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 8½ x 11-inch sheet without author's name; attach 3x5-inch card with name, address, telephone, e-mail. Entry fee is $8 for the first poem and $7 for each additional. Include self-addressed stamped envelope to receive a copy of the report, like this one. A list of winners is posted on our Web site around March 31. First prize $250, second prize $100. Winners and honorable mentions receive one-year memberships in the Society and are honored at a literary tea in New York, around the third Saturday in April. Authors retain rights, but grant us the right to publish/broadcast winning entries. These are the complete guidelines; no entry form is necessary.

The deadline for our 2004 competition is February 15. For information on our other programs, or on membership ($35 and $25 per year, full-time students $15), visit our website, *www.YeatsSociety.org,* or write us at the National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, New York NY 10003.