



2019 Yeats Poetry Prize

Leslie McGrath, Judge

WB YEATS
SOCIETY^{of} NY

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Judge's Report

Leslie McGrath

It's been a fascinating month of reading and mulling over the approximately five hundred submissions for the 2019 Yeats Prize. When I discovered who the entrants were, I saw there were submissions from across the United States, Canada, England, and Ireland as well as Japan and Australia.

This year there was more excellent poetry written in received form, from villanelles, heroic couplets, ballades, to variations on the sonnet. I also noticed an uptick in poems that addressed the issues of immigration and gender-based violence. And this was not only female poets. There were a number of well-wrought and moving poems by men examining masculinity and its influences on their lives. Of course some of this could be due to self-selection on the part of submitters (I'm a poet who writes on these themes), but I'll take it as evidence of what poets around the world are reflecting on and grappling with.

The poems that most distinguished themselves this year are varied in style, subject and tone. It wasn't easy to narrow the field to these seven poems. There were many that stood out for their artistry and the sheer depth of feeling with which they were written and entrusted to me. I'm grateful to every poet who sent me their work.

The winning poem uses one of Yeats's best-known lines as its title. "The Foul Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart" by Angela Narciso Torres is a Golden Shovel, a new poetic form developed by the American poet Terrance Hayes. Originally written using a line of poetry by the great Gwendolyn Brooks, Golden Shovels are now being written based upon memorable lines by other poets. In this Golden Shovel poem, each word in Yeats's line is used as an end word in each line of Torres's poem. The poem begins:

*I'm not just talking about the
sleepless days and nights, the nonstop nursing, the foul-
smelling diapers. I'm talking of how my body reeked, a soaked rag*

Using earlier poems as inspiration or scaffolding has been long practiced. It's a way to honor the work of those who came before us, extending its life and broadening its wisdom. Torres's poem is a beautiful example of poetry's ability to extend across time, as it embodies the life of a contemporary mother through the breath of Yeats's great line.

The second-place winner, "In a Dream, My Father Decides to Go Ice Fishing" by Greg Rappelye, is a free verse rave of language that makes me proud to be, as an Irish American, an inheritor of language this vivid. The poem turns a dream of father and sons fishing in miserable cold into a praise song to all of it: father, sons, fish, and cold.

*Da calls collect from Hell.
Says, spud a hole
Through the candy-ass ice.
Hammer our sign, blood-red, above the shanty door.*

The two poems that received honorable mention, "A Prayer and a Toast to the Dust Still Left On Your Skin" by Samantha Niedzielski and "Extant" by James Swansbrough, both speak to the suffering of those who continue to be overlooked, or worse, victimized.

Niedzielski's poem addresses a Guatemalan immigrant who could not make it back home in time to be with her mother as she died.

*When you finally
return you are changed, a rabbit in a sack. You arrived too late,
didn't hold her as she waded in opal rivers recounting what
she owed*

In a loose sonnet form sprung by the volta above, the reader not only senses the depth of friendship between the speaker and the young Guatemalan woman, but is brought near the kind of grief-laden guilt many of us feel at the death of a parent.

Swansbrough's poem is a long unrhymed narrative whose quatrains cannot—and perhaps should not—fully constrain the rage and sadness of a population that has suffered the predations of big business and the disregard of government.

*Our whole town's made of the kids who cried Olly Olly Oxen Free,
of us who never figured out how to seek, how to win.
We're the losers who couldn't break out during Red Rover,
getting caught the closest thing to a hug.*

There were three poems that I note with pleasure:

Pamela Yenser's "To Mary Shelley, Regarding Monsters" uses an epistolary approach to speak to the writer of *Frankenstein* about monsters both real and imagined, historical and contemporary.

David Dalley's "The Hotel Empty" is a wistful sonnet about what it might be like to live alone in a grand beachfront hotel off season.

Sandra Ann Winters's "My Irish Garden" is a delicious procession of rhyming couplets using an extended garden metaphor to illustrate a long and happy marriage.

About the Judge

Leslie McGrath has been called "an oral historian of the alienated" by critic Grace Cavalieri. Originally trained in clinical psychology, McGrath's literary influences are a balance of English and Spanish language literature. She is the author of two full-length poetry collections *Opulent Hunger*, *Opulent Rage* (Main St Rag, 2009), and *Out from the Pleiades* (Jaded Ibis, 2014), and two chapbooks. McGrath's third collection, *Feminists Are Passing from Our Lives*, was published in the spring of 2018 by The Word Works. Winner of the Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry and the Gretchen Warren Prize from the New England Poetry Club, she has been awarded residencies at Hedgebrook and the Vermont Studio Center, as well as funding from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts and the Beatrice Fox Auerbach Foundation. Leslie McGrath's poems and interviews have been published widely, including in *Agni*, *Poetry* magazine, *The Academy of American Poets*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, and *The Yale Review*. McGrath teaches creative writing at Central Connecticut State University and is the series editor of *The Tenth Gate*, a poetry imprint of The Word Works Press.

First Prize

Angela Narciso Torres
Delray Beach, Florida

*The Foul Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart**

I'm not just talking about the
sleepless days and nights, the nonstop nursing, the foul-
smelling diapers. I'm talking of how my body reeked, a soaked rag
of curdled milk, drool, and leaky nappies; &
how I'd wake already beat beyond blood, bone
& breath, the babe still at my breast. But when I pushed past a shop-
window the other day, I turned to do a double-take: a glimmer of
a woman I once knew. No, it wasn't just the
wind-tossed hair, the morning-weary face. But oh, the heart, the heart!

*a Golden Shovel poem using a line from William Butler Yeats' *The Circus Animals' Desertion*: "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." Each word from this line is an end word in each line of the poem.

About the Author

Angela Narciso Torres, author of *Blood Orange* (Willow Books Literature Award for Poetry), has recent or forthcoming work in *POETRY*, *Missouri Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Cortland Review*. A graduate of Warren Wilson's MFA Program and Harvard Graduate School of Education, Angela has received fellowships from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and Ragdale Foundation. Born in Brooklyn and raised in Manila, she's a senior and reviews editor for *RHINO* and serves on the editorial panel of *New England Review*.

Second Prize

Greg Rappleye
Grand Haven, Michigan

In a Dream, My Father Decides to Go Ice Fishing

Da calls collect from Hell.
Says, spud a hole
through the candy-ass ice.
Hammer our sign, blood-red, above the shanty door.
He's not here for crappies. Not come for bluegills,
big as your useless hands. He's trolled this trench
on squalid summer nights, has milted the eggs
and sunk a battered Nash to build a reef;
has nursed these schools from glow-worm sprats
and is going deep again—after bull huss and viperfish,
after alligator gar, after eelpouts and snakeheads,
all gilling across the silt of our secret spot;
their needle-teeth, their banjaxed eyes and grisly heads,
their hellish Miltonic fins. Whatever we hook
we'll toss, gasping onto lake-ice, scattered out between
the shanty and the sled. So cold they'll be, frozen
before they recall open water, as we smoke and shudder
and drink. And which of us, my prodigal, will
walk out under the wolf moon and blistering stars
tally the haul, and have a final sip as the other
drifts away? Who'll rise before dawn, stack the sled
with carcasses, and leaving the last to dream alone,
drag our dead back to the distant piney shore?

About the Author

Greg Rappleye's second collection of poems, *A Path Between Houses* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), won the Brittingham Prize in Poetry. His third collection, *Figured Dark* (University of Arkansas Press, 2007), was first runner-up for the Dorset Prize, and co-winner of the Arkansas Poetry Prize, and published in the Miller Williams Poetry Series. His fourth collection, *Tropical Landscape with Ten Hummingbirds*, which concerned the life and work of the painter Martin Johnson Heade, was published in October 2018 by Dos Madres Press. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School and the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Currently, he teaches in the English Department at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

Honorable Mention

Samantha Niedzielski
Berkeley, California

A Prayer and a Toast to the Dust Still Left On Your Skin

for Olga

We met long after you dragged your belly across the dirt,
your back a moonlit canoe against the Guatemalan border.
Halfway, in México, you tucked sheet corners, prepared carnes
among pop-up vendors and paper-crafted banners. You learned
to call me chilanga in the waist of the Americas and then laid
in the back of a truck for six days, a packed rifle. A three thousand
mile miracle we are here now. Side by side peeling oranges—until
the call comes through, your mother's cancer has spread wide
as the Sierra Madre. First one-way out of SFO. When you finally
return you are changed, a rabbit in a sack. You arrived too late,
didn't hold her as she waded in opal rivers recounting what
she owed, and opened the seven knobs into the arms of La Virgen.
Your guilt beats like the sun over a black house, seasoned pots
and wild chickens, the slight scent of corn in your hair as we embrace.

About the Author

Mexican-American poet and painter Samantha Niedzielski was born in Atlanta, Georgia. She has since then lived in Ohio, California, and Mexico. Her work combines memoir, geography, and observation.

Honorable Mention

James Swansbrough
Signal Mountain, Tennessee

Extant

Bad when even Hardee's can't make it here.
If it'd just been a Wendy's instead,
they could've kept the Hot N Juicy signage up
when it became a strip bar full of nobody's darlings.
Town square's now mostly bondsmen, liquor stores, and pawn shops,
payday loaners in buildings sunk past plumb;
once full of sharp angles, shining glass, unstained ceilings—
meant for something better that just didn't quite survive.
Steve Earle didn't sing "Someday" about this place;
rainbows don't even dare adorn these skies.
Only options over the ridge are the prison or the factory,
and both have turned us out already, time or two.
Our whole town's made of the kids who cried Olly Oxen Free,
of us who never figured out how to seek, how to win.
We're the losers who couldn't break out during Red Rover,
getting caught the closest thing to a hug.
We're the girls who never learned to dot i's with hearts,
who never cut photos from a Teen Beat or bridal mag.
These wrists of ours have never worn a corsage; just
maybe handcuffs or razor scars, truth be told.
If misery had resell value, we'd bottle and brand this shit.
But it'd be on the bottom shelf like the rest of our swill.
Most of us boys are all on something, or need to be—
ain't an Eagle Scout or valedictorian to be found.
Here's a different ditty, a different Jack & Diane,
Two American kids swallowin' OxyContin.
Diane's gonna be an unwritten memoir,
Jackie he's tweaked out in the back seat of a cop car.
No one tells you there's some cycles you can't escape,
that sometimes a baby's just another name for tax break, and
you gotta make do with SNAP and a paycheck full of garnishments.
That Minimum Wage is a lifestyle without the living part.
We all NCNS and make rich for the month tax returns hit.
Get just enough time to slap an In Loving Memory sticker
on the back window of a sedan off the no-credit lot,
cruise Main Street, then watch the Repo Man hook it away.

Cured of our wealth, it's back to punching clocks,
stocking shelves at Piggly Wiggly or wherever, maybe
changing oil or flipping burgers—serving customers who look
as likely to shove a shotgun as fries in their mouth.
But those cars will break down before we will; you grow up
hard if you're growing up at all in these parts. I mean, we've all
got a relative with COPD or diabetes, all have a dead body's
initials tattooed on our flesh. If nothing else, you learn to take the hits
and keep moving. Believe the glass is half full, pretend it's whiskey,
hope someone else is buying. We'll save five out of every fifty
for a scratch-off, our tithing to the lottery gods. Savor a moment's
hope for salvation before the coin proves us busted another week.
So go on, tell us you think we ain't shit—nothing new.
If we gave a damn we might care about your judgement,
but ain't any damns around here left to give.
We're all just ghosts that no one ever believed in,
haunting the chambers of our own empty hearts.

About the Author

James Swansborough's poetry has appeared in *Cagibi* and *Cathexis Northwest*. His short fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *The Write Launch* and the inaugural issue of *Please See Me*.

Pamela Yenser
Albuquerque, New Mexico

To Mary Shelley, Regarding Monsters

Was it a waking dream you had of *him*?
I've read your *Frankenstein* to take a look
at visionary art—its nuts and bolts.

How well we love that beast, technology.
What is this sweet machine called modern man?
I ask. Who made the monstrous heart of him?

The answer's in his zippered face and pants
and in his curséd Doppelgänger-ness,
that mirror that might let him see beyond

the innocence of nature's path to God.
As viruses project themselves into
relationships of love (postmodern love)

our DNA becomes a brave new world:
vast microcosms of homunculi—
brave little men at work in every cell.

It's written in your book of days and nights:
I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think;
My imagination...guided me...I saw...

What could you see? What Dr. Frankenstein
through scientific methodology would see.
That *horrid thing*, you say, *That odious work*

of love that begs for life—those monsters we
have hid beneath our beds, or up a sleeve,
or in the beating closets of the heart.

I see them still; you write, *the very room,*
the dark parquet, the closed shutter...moonlight
struggling through and the sense I had. You had?

Of what? *Realities*, you say. Oh, that!
Despite your mother's feminist tracts,
your father's male hegemony had held

To Mary Shelley, Regarding Monsters, cont.

you back from your accomplishments. Are we
identical to Eve? Her Siamese twin?
God's double take? You wrote to set it right:

*I began that day with the words, you said,
It was a dreary night of November.*
(An echo from Keats' "Sleep and Poetry!")

We woke in terror of the tale we'd tell
ourselves: not knowing day from night, was it
a fantasy or not—your Frankenstein—

and mine? As Godwin goaded you with cold
and calculating mind, so Father pillaged mine,
muck-mastering away my college funds.

Your father's love was deep and *half-obsessive*.
That word you chose! No wonder when I read
your *Frankenstein*, I saw my father drawn.

And so, we married misery and took its name,
as opposites attract, Ovidian
or Dante-esque, with interlocking limbs.

But don't mind me. My mind's a fractured Arne,
that river Frankenstein would thrash to reach
his *Mer de Glace*—his heart a sea of ice.

I've reached myself through Rich and Angelou
and found uncommon sense in Keats and Yeats
but even as I write, some monster takes

my hand. The ghost in my machine? It's mine—
not Dr. Frankenstein's. I can't save myself
by blaming him. I write you more, perhaps,

than Moore might say, but less than Olds and Plath.
Without their frank confessions, who would know
the depths to which we women sink each day?

About the Author

Pamela Yenser is a university writing instructor and literary book editor living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is a recipient of the Academy of American Poets Award and a finalist in the 2002 River Styx Contest and 2003 Many Voices Poetry Award, and her work has been nominated for the AWP Creative Nonfiction Award and the Pushcart Prize for Poetry.

David Dalley
Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

The Hotel Empty

No fanfare but a ripple by the sea
That tilts just so the needle of attention
And pricks the air, a moment's hesitation
Till everyone has somewhere else to be.
A boon to her who stays permanently
On a high floor, regardless of the season,
Who smiles in answer to the tourist question
How one can keep a room indefinitely.
To have each day the private promenade
And take the coldness as a kind of pleasure,
And little see but for the sight a treasure
Never adored so well, nor much to guard
As she drifts off the hotel empty stands,
Dark shape upon a darkened strip of sand.

About the author

David Dalley was born in Sydney, Australia. His poetry has appeared in *Salamander*.

Sandra Ann Winters
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Our Irish Garden

You weed the garden, a microcosm,
shelter the magenta hydrangea blossoms,
weave wisteria through the trellis,
the fragrant vine always zealous,
clip the bay laurel to save the blueberries.
You gather crabapples to make jellies,
prune the rosemary to garnish the lamb,
cut the sage to cook with marjoram,
gather the nasturtiums for salads,
trim the heather, save a chrysalis.
In the moist soil, the slugs take their chances
when you fertilize, manure and ashes.
You comfort me against the setting sun,
my seedsman, you blow a kiss on the run.

About the author

Sandra Ann Winters is the winner of the 2011 Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition, and a Pushcart nominee, having won numerous poetry awards and commendations in the United States. She is the author of a full-length poetry collection, *The Place Where I Left You* (Salmon Poetry 2014), and a chapbook *Calving Under the Moon* (Finishing Line Press 2013). Most recently she has been published in *The Deep Heart's Core*, *Irish Poets Revisit A Touchstone Poem* (anthology from Dedalus Press, Ireland, 2017), and *Even the Daybreak* (anthology from Salmon Poetry, 2016). Her poems have been included in the Winston Salem Writers' Poetry in Plain Sight Program, and she has been a featured guest poet in the Ó Bhéal weekly poetry event in Cork City, Ireland.

Eddie Vega Prize Administrator

Mr. Yeats was a student and practitioner of numerology, and some scholars have spent barrels of ink, liquid and digital, attempting to show how he applied what he learned to his work. There's no need to explore any of that in this short coda to the report of the 26th Yeats Poetry Prize. The prize celebrates the practice of poetry, not its scholarly analysis and dissection. But there is something about numbers, and this number in particular: 26. Twenty-six years.

What would Mr. Yeats have thought of it? Would he have *put on his knowledge with his power* and seen immediately that 26 was the gematric number, the sum of the Hebrew characters that formed the tetragrammaton, the name of G-d?

I'd like to think so—he certainly knew of it—but as a dyslexic, he might have taken an additional second or two for an *aha!* moment. (I am sympathetic: it took 26 years for me just to compose that last sentence.)

It would certainly speak to the notion, the Yeatsian doctrine, if you will, that poets are priests (a vocation open to all genders) *who spread their religion everywhere, and make their art the art of the people.*

So which pew does a competition take in that sacred space? What is its purpose? Is it to recognize accomplishment? But many of the poems that did not win were accomplished. Is it to select the best works? But if there were a universal standard for what is best, there would be no need for a human judge who makes selections based on personal experience, education, and sensibility, all of which will vary from judge to judge. A 26-cubit quantum computer-run algorithm could not ever do what our judge does every year. Or maybe it could, once in a trillion years to the 26th power.

The one consistent reason that has driven our efforts—I say we because Yeats Society board member Don Bates and I have been passing the administrative responsibilities back and forth to each other since the prize's inception and because Society president Andy McGowan has been instrumental in organizing the awards events at Barnes & Noble and at the National Arts Club and because board members have without exception been supportive—the one consistent reason has been that competitions elevate everyone's individual performance and, therefore, elevate the craft of poetry the world over.

This year, as she did last year, Judge Leslie McGrath, has offered another reason, one that is closer to Yeats's vision of *an art of the people*. Her selections and report offer a sense from the world's word masters what experiences they are thinking through. It's better than any Gallup survey. Better yet, it's like placing your ear on railroad tracks to listen for the sound of a distant locomotive and finding yourself magically removed next to the engineer sounding the chime horn.

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