



# 2023 JAMES WELCH PRIZE

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## WINNERS

*selected by Heid Erdrich*

**J. K. Tsosie**

*Brown Anthropocene*

**Kalehua Kim**

*Hā*

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## FINALISTS

*selected by poets from the board and advisory committee of In-Na-Po (Indigenous Nations Poets)  
with the editors of Poetry Northwest*

**Ibe Liebenberg • Annie Wenstrup • Tacey Atsitty  
Cheyanne Lozano • Mary Leauna Christensen • Aimee Inglis  
m. s. RedCherries • Nicole Wallace**

## HONORABLE MENTION

Stacie Denetsosie • Max Early • Ruby Murray • Josie Valdez • Anangooke Wolf

*Art by Lehuauakea*

J. K. TSOSIE

***Brown Anthropocene***

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*part i:*

i don't know why i deny  
    myself tenderness. so, i lay  
        the lavender on my bedroom shelf  
    he gathered with calloused hands  
i trace with my fingers  
  
their wandering boundaries.

he is wilderness, the sacred loam  
    untilled new mexican landscape  
        *big bluestem, wolftail, & sand lovegrass*  
    virgin earth caressed  
only by soft female rain


níłtsą bi'áád.

his eyebrows thick  
    midnight briar  
        his eyes quiet  
            flickering summer monsoon  
his mouth a desert prayer  
  
that created the universe itself.

so, i give in  
    i give way  
        into his constellation  
            blue room, blue bodies,  
& blue haematoxylin-stained  
  
nucleus.

*part ii:*

we are slow hearts  
    the weight of our bodies  
pinning time in place  
  
my skin against  
    yours, brown  
        nahasdzáán  
my mother's mother



my home.

the lineation of  
stone compressed  
over time

i am reinvented  
—auxochromic  
an incantation

the absorption  
& reflection  
of light.

your skin against  
mine, brown  
like piñon husk  
maternal cord caressing

our histories meet.

i am reinvented  
—as revelation  
two lost ends

fastened together  
now, whole  
finally knowing itself.

yours, brown  
mine, brown.

a geography of flesh  
& tributaries of perseverance  
fill to the brim  
silver canyons  
of wounds left

by conquests past

we are brown anthropocene.

✦



# KALEHUA KIM

## *Hā*

---

when I was born I was a girl  
I was a girl with a cord wrapped around my neck  
I had a cord wrapped around my neck and no breath  
I had no breath because until that moment, no one had hit me  
No one had hit me and it took time to unravel the cord  
It took time to unravel the cord but I feel its weight every day  
every day there is a weight, although its source changes  
the source changes because matter changes  
matter changes by transforming molecules  
molecules are in constant motion  
the constant motion of children, whose voices echo  
children's voices echo across canyons, leap from cliffs  
we leap from cliffs when we stretch to seek balance  
we stretch, balancing the past behind us and the future ahead  
the past of us and the future crawls across an x axis  
crawling across an x axis is only one way to look at time  
the only way to look at time is to refuse to see time  
to refuse time is to refuse everything you ever felt wrapped around your neck  
unwrap the cord around your neck  
unwrap the time it takes to catch your breath  
catch your breath  
catch your breath  
that is your voice

✦



IBE LIEBENBERG

*while we were quiet*

---

i wanted those hips that rose heavy  
and waist skinny to bloom

she only swole to a curse  
called my body sterile

doctors promised she was barren

teach me how to say it  
words that numb

how to sedate a space  
when a mother or child provoke  
and harass her

help me gentle the room  
so I can soften

and balance a flood  
to a silly commotion

then pretend her back home  
messy in our bed  
like the labor she wished for

✦



IBE LIEBENBERG

*birds at night*

---

the geese are lost now

circling one a.m.  
barely above trees

i cannot sleep

my elders say  
it is a gift to translate  
unspeakable things

all i hear is

*real labor*

*real pain*

in whatever tongue

they sing

✦



## ANNIE WENSTRUP

### *Ggugguyni in the Museum Parking Lot*

---

I watch her crow. Not as a crow crows  
but as herself. She's not here for the art.  
She's here for the minivans that devour

diaper bags, car seats, children. She waits  
for the doors to retract and expel fruit,  
Goldfish, and fries. Free for the taking.

She scavenges in lurching, crab-like steps.  
Like me, she won't appear human here.  
While her legs bring her from one delicious

scrap to another, I work my body's own  
accounting. Once my parents named me  
Swift Raven, a real Indian Princess name.

I flew unblinded, my hair in a blue-black  
braid down my back. Now, I'm ungainly,  
more harpy<sup>1</sup> than girl. My mouth, a curve

calling for carrion. I'm not here for the art.  
I'm here for the mirrors, to unpair earrings,  
to unclasp foil from gum. Here to crack


carapace from quiver. I'm like Ggugguyni,  
her legs like exclamation points propel her  
blue-black-comma-shaped body from one

small disaster to another. It's not that she  
refuses to fly. Only her blue-black wings  
would propel her too high. And here,

there's work to do under the shadows of men,  
their comma shaped bodies calling exclamation.  
Ravagers lurching. Their bodies the commas

between one cataclysm and another. See how  
Ggugguyni collects disaster's aftermath. See  
how I curate the moments before cataclysm.

While we work, Ggugguyni tells me a story  
*Once, my grandfather said, a long time ago  
there was a raven. He opened a door*



*and it was day. Then he drew his wing and shut  
it. What she didn't say, but what I heard: once  
he closed the door, and it was night. Today,*

I'm telling you this story instead: my mouth  
is a curved comma. My mouth is an  
exclamation,  
my mouth is my body holding open the door  
creating day again. See how the light appraises  
my collection. How the sunlight exposes  
how shadow bleached everything white.

✦

<sup>1</sup> Bird-bodied, girl-faced things they (Harpies) are;  
abominable their droppings, their hands are talons, their  
faces haggard with hunger insatiable. *Aeneid* 3.216





TACEY ATSITTY

*Nayéé' Goes to Therapy*

---

*Forthcoming*

Tacey Atsitty's poem, "Nayéé' Goes to Therapy," is a monster poem, and for the Diné people, winter is the season to speak of monsters and tell their stories. As such, this poem will be published in the Winter & Spring 2024 print edition, appearing in January, and added to the 2023 James Welch Prize online folio at that time.

# CHEYANNE LOZANO

## *Hosh*

---

*To pronounce, imagine you are a clay pot and as the air leaves your throat, something tightens before the tongue. Think “hole” but not bottomless. Now, with the gentleness of a parent comforting a crying child, call their name.*

I was raised by cactus roots,  
that in their eagerness for water,  
come loose during flash floods.  
They tumble down slopes and canyons,  
settling among new neighbors  
or alone in a barren crack,  
gaining a home wherever they land.

*When I showed shizé'e, my father,  
the one I found on my way to work, he replied  
'let's see if the soul is still there'  
as he placed them in a terracotta pot.*

I was raised by cactus spines,  
leaves evolved to pull  
moisture from the air.  
Condense it upon a needle's edge  
and trickle it down to the wanting body.

*When I searched for  
The Beauty Way Prayer, it says  
“Hózhóogo naasháa doo. Shitsiji' hózhóogo naasháa doo”  
which the internet says  
“In beauty I walk. With beauty before me I walk.”  
The dictionary says  
naasháa translates to  
'walking around,'  
which is a better choice if there is a cactus on the path.  
Shitsiji' Hosh naasháa doo might be bad Navajo,  
but I did pull over for the one in the middle of the road,  
plucking them loose from the asphalt.*

I was raised by cactus flowers,  
that grow from the same areoles  
as the tender spines. Their bright  
yellow and magenta petals  
invite chirping tsídii and crawling ch'osh  
before they fall away.

*Hoshyazhi, Little Cactus,  
whose fallen from the mountain and landed in a pot.  
Please grow.  
I wonder what color your flowers will be.*

✦



MARY LEAUNA CHRISTENSEN

*At the Casino Hotel on the Rez*

---

located in the lobby—a perfectly contained fire  
all black rocks & equally black marble

i'm wholly aware of myself  
tourist & old blood

i belong & unbelong in this place

\*

all that family in the cemetery  
on the hill above the house—  
the house my grandmother  
had built but never lived in

worn from lack of use  
there's talk i'll fix the house up  
make it livable & lived-in

i remind myself hill rhymes  
w/will—my grandmother was  
strong-willed

all we can do is what the dead  
would want

\*

i dream of red clay giving up  
what is buried  
a slide of casket & decay  
all the quartz native here

the finality an erosion

\*

i've buried so many  
i'm undone & reworked

\*

the owner of the place that sells  
marble & granite knew my great-  
grandfather knows the family  
cemetery & the holly ushes it's  
named after says my great-  
grandfather delivered gifts of food  
when in town—specifically fresh  
sausages the owner discounts  
two headstones—a double &  
a single—a parent/daughter set

\*

we two daughters motherless  
a father w/no daughter

\*

last time i visited i stained  
the interior of my partner's car  
w/red clay

cemetery stains

the path cleared to carry mother  
up the hill w/ease washed away  
months later

i barely made it to the gravesite  
a lone pallbearer

mother's silk flowers were stained red  
grandmother's too

\*

here now in december  
there is no snow  
just a wetness

a bone-deep-ness

like the lobby's fire  
i contain so much  
mostly it's death  
& the effects of it



\*

i contain so much    my blood is percentages  
quantum printed on a card in my wallet  
    the card so much like a driver's license  
    it can be used at the bar on the casino floor

an alternative form of identification  
in case i'm lost

\*

when i last talked to my grandmother  
a bird flew to me confused

when my mother told me she found  
my grandmother's body

my knees bruised against carpet &  
i don't think i ever wailed before

i was my mother's final phone call—  
we almost filed a missing person's report

before we knew she was lost  
but not that kind of lost

    how our bodies become statistics

\*

my mother was once in this lobby  
belonging & not belonging

& it's only a woman  
that looks like my mother  
who walks past now

‡

# AIMEE INGLIS

## *Coyote Poem*

---

I tried                                  to outsmart the coyote poem  
but                                        found stalking between the lines  
chose                                     to give in to eyes attentive

I live in coyote territory now                                  as most do  
When colonizers moved west                                they moved east  
They move anywhere    they laugh at fences

Fifteen years ago coyote                                        remained in the hills  
Now they welcome me home                                 to concrete desert  
They say, *I am here*    *to make this place wild*  
*and*     *so are you*  
*What you desire*     *will not be safe*  
Recently    a golden ring has formed  
   around my pupils

Put cunning cat eyes    on a dog to see through  
what do they see    what do they do

No human has heard    their low whine of submission  
They joyously     crack open Tanaka Farms' pumpkins  
A farmworker shrugs                                         *We're here to feed the coyote*  
We put out     rabbit food along the river  
to feed the rabbits    to feed the coyote  
who then eats the cats

They refuse to dig    in our trash  
They say, *Everywhere you go*                                 *consider who you are*  
Coyote rides along    with the Urban Natives  
Yellow cat eyes    set in the face of my grandfather  
You can guess his reaction                                    to being cornered

♣



M. S. REDCHERRIES

*playing america in win[t]er*

---

*hell turned  
onto dream*

*no swivel  
head no*

*come down  
this indian*

*watches cher  
watches sky*

*it is ok  
bc ur red*

*& so am i*



*example*

department of interior  
finds small film  
and puts

my braids on  
t shirt on mural  
under sidewalk

underfoot so  
as to look up

with my hair non  
stopping

my skin non  
passing

my finger on  
the pulse of america

& my own non  
existing





*chorus*

y     i am a city:  
          a whole town a whole  
          city in a whole  
          town

i     a bestial move:  
          -ment a dance  
          in the dark

y     i am white america:  
          -n more myself  
          you say

ppl died here  
i say

i don't know  
if they died here  
but they're dead now



*notes*

it's a marble  
farce a split  
habit

Congress clubs  
see spotted tails  
and real birds

hearing hare  
tarot lies on  
the stereo

seeing your land  
haven't seen mine

lifting heavy

pulled grass  
america's robotting

*he-robot go where dirt is*

*clean piss on the floor*

& misspell my  
name again

•

my life

undressed

& you've tied

your stand

to eggshell

marble

slowly moving

suited talk

you hold

my hand

under this price & show

(me) time

together the

bloomy tales

\$8 wifi

over america

n

soil sharing

five cigarettes

on america's hill

asking the ocean

for more breakfast

hot club soda

in first class

this broad cage

giving plastic

water to drink

your life a way

a life

below

white cross

ed

american

high way

& when they want you

to

disappear

why do you

stay

•

red this wild

give me such  
a strange hour

grab a chair  
see sound sit with  
nicotine

where things become  
good things become

*100 yeahs 100 years*

of time together

sitting time  
far from white  
marbled roads

& your  
starbucks 2000

*red and blue berries go wild  
in your green tea*

father's pills fall  
into uber

& you tell me

don't sleep with  
your dreams



i find cherry poison hitting jackpot on  
the national mall pornographic tomb be  
comes dental house tendon against palm  
i've seen the other window know  
ing stratagems knew his head and haunt  
ed house by day i see party in the drain  
knowing he's been there yet all i want is  
to feel your press down at my favorite  
bar & leave [r]his country by another road



[t]

now the water is  
clouds and the natl park  
is a gift

&  
dour wind

is this america's  
want

—to be  
a body to

buy my plane ticket  
home

& be ruby  
tax

&  
trustee I go  
sub

&  
—from  
our room

i ask you

to be  
my mother

to pay  
my rent

to have  
my baby

to be  
my father

✦

NICOLE WALLACE

*Inheritance*

---

in a past life      or maybe future

measured by voice

though i knew pieces of the plot

this time i let her tell the story

from above it was different

let me tell you what i want for once

we used to drive her to work in his pick-up. it smelled of gasonline, ice layered in crystals harsh on the windows, floor just the metal of the body. there was always something hanging from the rearview mirror, his keys, beaded leather nickel, gifts from his grandmother. he told me that someday when i grew up i would be able to name all of the songs on the radio, know all of the words



ginwenzh wii-inendi indede

ginwenzh

inde' inde' inde'

it took a long time

now he says someday i'll tell you the whole story.  
i'll sit down with you and tell you the whole  
story. everything that happened.

on omission with great clarity

count with me      one      two

ginwenzh gii-inendi indede

ginwezh

gide' gide' gide'

around the fire we peel bark from the branches

thin branches bent to tie

i'd just rather have a nice time

have a nice time

on a quiet night across the gravel road from the  
lake, we sit in chairs in the dark. the stars i  
point out to him. i'm trying to remember the story  
of ojiig. something to impress him.

i've come to understand this kind of music.  
i've known it my whole life. recycled words  
the space that exists between. what happens  
when you know the words songs fissures  
that cannot be mended.

he asks no questions. he already knows the story  
and what he has had to tell himself to get here.

i have run out of things to say

given to the ground

ginwenzh ingii-inendimin indede

ginwenzh

inde'min inde'min inde'min

we are standing in the water, a july afternoon, sun  
coming up just past the mid-day mark. high above the  
birches, to the east of where it will set later, a flock  
of smaller birds dart at a hawk, a predator to their  
nests. i tilt my head back and feel the light breeze  
from the southwest warm the orange-black of my  
eyelids. in it i see her face, infinite unfolding,  
her small feet kicking below the water. mine light on  
the sooted familiar bottom bring me up and sink down  
again. the cloudiness of the bottom has settled. my  
hands move through the water. rocks slicked over with  
algae.

the lifting up

ground beneath

beneath the water

holds what has returned

an accumulation of stars

light still travelling

in the dream that reoccurs, the house was the same.  
in the basement this time, he unpacked the boxes,  
her belongings at the edge of the window now. from  
each, he unwrapped pieces made by our grandmother.  
outside of the dream, when i left, i returned one to  
him. "i thought you might want this" and set it in the  
closet beneath the stairs, closing the door.

one two niiswi niiwin waabanong zhaawanong  
he unpacked them.

threaded yarn in alternating colors woven in a circle,  
her beads carefully threaded in, long swatches of  
yarn unfolded as each were removed.

i was numbering them one through five,

no four

a cardinal direction

to show but not tell the way forward

gide'min

gide'min

gide'min

rain at the window, train whistle in the distance in  
the sleepless deep night. how do you describe the  
feeling of the hours given small numbers inbetween  
and ahead of the dawn, when grasses grow damp and  
green dark beneath the sky toward the stars at the  
edges of the evergreen. wazhashk moving through the  
accumulation, a breath of air at the roots, our hands  
grasping the soil.