

2024 JAMES WELCH PRIZE

WINNERS

selected by Esther Belin

Kateri Menominee

from a salt(less) sea to you: return

Kara Briggs

Acknowledgment Two

FINALISTS

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

**Max Early • Mary Leuna Christensen • Kinsale Drake
Michael Wasson • Casandra López • Chris Hoshnic
Malia Maxwell • Ibe Liebenberg**

HONORABLE MENTION

Kalilinee Detwiler • Danielle Emerson • Lokosh (Joshua D. Hinson)
Yitazba Largo-Anderson • Santana Shorty



KATERI MENOMINEE

from a salt(less) sea to you: return

Here *love*, listen; to the sound of deer unmoved
by moonlight -their eyes- smoke obsidian,
smoke lake soused copper -their eyes-
ebbing cedar tips skull white.

-A herd drifts on birch shadow,
-move and inch to the left and they scatter.

From the porchlights of a salt-less sea, near limestone,
forest capes, and cliffside hazing pictographs, raw
colors are streaked, a birch basket of heart berries
stamped soft, blushing red copper, dripping from salt

-less sea crag,
unbrined and green.

And how *you* sang of red maple, while deer flies
puckered *your* back. You sang of bright sap dolloped
on lip bow, snowshoeing on a sand bar, and *your* mother's
stories. *Your* songs crackling deer tracks from isle to isle

-bluing lakebed, a deer herd -unmoved-
their nostrils spilling a smokey inlet fog.

Gatherers, where once spare islands, gardened
a land swelled in blackberries and crawling moss.
Where deer bleated chains, wheezing mantles
off sea caves -from Minong-

-The Good Isle,
The Good Isle.

Lone balcony of stone tiers; *you* cried; tears tea-spooned
on lake shore, tides hissing past petrified footprints. *You*
stand on Minong and run past shoal, to an island too small
to be called anything but Castle while deer breath

-lags sheets of ice, a muscled fog half-
hearting bleats spackled among the mists.

How bawls and grunts lacerate a beach, *you* whispered stories
between birch trees, of small bellies greening yarrow, zhing-
wauk, and red moss sponging stone scraggs. -Salt- less sea
spires, brindled rock, and claw marks speak of another time.

-A saltless sea lynx once devoured a woman, she cries
even now, her body unhatched in golden scales.



How she slinked from eggs shells to ore skin!
And the great salt/less sea lynx twisted her body
in an ice bath, maelstroms in her hair. Her whitefish
skin licked hot with rime and wintered spines.
-How a salt less sea can cast her jetsam,
amongst sturgeon bones inlaid in blood, bedrock;

Of mashkiigokamig, a yellow clotted causeway
splashed on lake rock. Lake glass polished her to a
pointed spear, an arrow, abalone. A boreal sky swing
latched her to a breast. *Waarwaate*, where the old spirits
-dance, where colors burn skies heron blue, fireweed,
a deafening violet

Uniting, as sky and salt—less water spoons deer hallows over
calcified tides. *You* sipped mashkiigobagwaaboo, dreamed
of quays, wharfs, schooners, and steamboats capsizing, white
water gutting them in twain. No women in bleached whale
-bone corsets sketching coastline, headless
bluffs scrawled in drifted woodland coal

To masquerade as another romance. Where Anishinaabeg camped,
fried moose tongue, deer liver, soured maple sugar mashing them
sweeter. Babies in cradleboards cooing in deer speech on tree branch.
An island heavy in fallow welcomes and softened thank yous,
-thus enough,
that's enough.

Ah Nature! Her helix, a continuous birth. *You*, my dear,
run to shaded island, and bewave *yourself* in treeline
from men, to Tír na nÓg, lost wonderland, you lost *yourself*
in fairyweather, phantoms, zhaagnoosh, the prison of pale gods.
-Pale idols of Bawating who darken streams, pine resin,
animal fur gelling their veins a fiendish red. Who were you

Far from fray? What would *you* say now? Unhinge old bone
from mud, ret your stories in a birch basket because there was grief
here. Grief was *she*, whose name is hum of newborn stars, opaline,
glistening a night sky; *your* hands flecking
-fawn coat stars against the darkness.
And will *your* stories then, mean nothing?



For here, Aapiji gwa ombiigwewe bezhigwan gwa bangate.
You are gone. *Your* body was a marsh emptied of wiikenh,
Of masted ships lost to lake gulf in the quell of winter purr.
Your songs were canoes shooting the rapids, and within them;
-farers, voyageurs, bishops who wore golden carapace,
reptilian vestments drank to lakebed, too wicked to treasure.

No moss bags bleeding swapped inside out. No swelled cat's paw
lesions on currents, peninsulas, the beach tongues sprayed dark.
Isn't this land a language nested between teeth? It is a viridian glade
its bramble and bulrush picking syllabics like a bone
-lost in a mouth. The stories once bitten into bark,
The birchskin now unpeeled, exposed on a stagnant hill.

No gillnets sewn with nettle stalk twine, braided unripen bass-
wood catching fish combs, smelt, pike, and sturgeon. No nets
ladling a salt less broth. Only *your* songs are left my love,
sculling shore, grand poems etching a soundless drag on sand.
-This home, always, *yours*, for that is all that is left.
An island cut from another, a starry ballad feasting.

No, this isn't a lament for a dying land, an island
pillared against Minong, its birthed child. This is an ode;
a red beamed glottal break, half-throated, translated
on a slab of sheetrock. "Or maybe this is a lament?" the -salt
-less- parts of *you* rumbled, agate and decayed logs anchoring
the many parts of *you*, returned to a boiled salt/less sea.

✦



KARA BRIGGS

Acknowledgment Two

America is my home and my hammer, and it's hammering me, uncle says as he plants his feet on scaffold, a round net big enough to catch the moon or a salmon leaping up Celilo Falls, quicksilver, shimmering blinding uncle's eyes. Muscles in uncle's arm still flex and bulge even if only triggered by remembering the river that isn't, the falls that aren't, the run that's gone, the fish that leaped into the night sky when the river ran backward that day the Dalles Dam concrete walls slammed shut. Rivers flow to ocean, not backwards, not settled into this series of reservoirs. The people wept as generations of salmon hammered their heads on the cement wall of that damn dam. Uncle bought a speed boat, took to casting lines and later gill nets on a flat-surfaced reservoir. What had become of the Big River, Nch'i-Wana and its ballet of salmon no longer leaping up waterfalls while uncle perched above waiting.

Uncle holds a well-thumbed yellow book on Oregon's revised fishing codes, the dog-eared page where it said except for Indian fishers. Uncle dug out a foot hold in the law where an Indian fisher could build a life. Uncle bought land on the riverbank, a pretty hillside where hazelnut trees still grow, where the sun baked dry the salmon, where his wife baked bread in wood-fired oven, where he and she grew old, their radical days recorded in documentaries, in interviews, in legal decisions won, lost. They are minor celebrities now, known to urban dwellers longing for old style protests, misinterpreting radical for what was just survival, and what wasn't all that romantic because the bullets were real, the arrests were targeted, the divorces were inevitable. Dying in Toppenish elder housing where he lived with his second wife, uncle stretched out his arms like an Old Testament prophet giving a blessing, told me to carry this story into a future he won't live to see, we might not live to see, salmon might not live to see, the Big River might not even live to see.

✦



MAX EARLY

The Stone Shaped by Song

Only once, at dawn, I unearthed a grinding stone,
beneath a dirt floor at the old horse corral, she sang
ya ab-nab clan songs when there were those songs

in the field, now barren and bursting with tumbleweeds,
the land parched as potted polenta or peeled paint.
Her skin, black lava. Her hair, shelled white corn.

Her body curved like a half-moon crescent. Her face
rounded smooth has thinned from wear like sand
the oceans washed ashore in the rise and fall of tide,

a Hawaiian black sand beach, the flavor of Salt Woman,
red seaweed and slender green, *sheet-drune yaka*
heirloom corn seed, planted on a warm autumn day,

sprouts then fades as songs wither into stillness or bushes
of sumac berries in the abandoned field, red fruits the deer
devour, tart and tangy as hibiscus lemon tea.

A mist arises when the stone recalls the clan women's voices.
Singing her songs, she remembers the rhythmic milling sound
of mano and metate. She craves, cornmeal and ground wheat.

She cherishes the last song sung to her. She hums forgotten
tones. I lift her up and say "come home with me,
rest in Cusco's garden.
Sing with me."

♣



MARY LEAUNA CHRISTENSEN

Ama/Agua

we have so many words for water
by we—i mean you & i—mother

isn't it comical to be raised in a desert
where water is luxury

where water can be a knife
glistening in hot sun

*

the phoenix metro area houses more than 180 miles of canals

*

grandmother called all canals *irrigation ditches*
said vegetables grown in arizona taste like sewer water

here—canals touch everything

*

integrated into city planning
canals can identify location—

mother you were close to home

north stars dug deep & parallel
to roads—

mother you were close to home

*

ama
agua

the words flow easily
despite my broken palate—

an opposite of thirst

*

in high school i ran the perimeter of a canal
twice to equal a p.e. mile

in hotter months tried not to inhale
the stench of empty canal—
fish decaying in their own mud

*

mother even deserts have unseasonable weather

it rained so much that week

*

ama
agua

there is an emphasis on *a*

a river—Salt, Verde, or Colorado

a pregnancy of water

a loss or lack of everything

here i ignore hard & soft sounds

here i refuse to measure hurt

*

still i am uneasy driving by canals
only to see fishermen & their sons attempt
to bond in urban desert

all i think are deformed city fish
mouths splayed open wondering
how they arrived in an irrigation ditch

*

ama
agua

accumulated rainwater

a careening car

a mother—*a* breathing in of water

here *a* daughter

♣



KINSALE DRAKE

First Date

I want
 my Luci Tapahonso cowboy
 with a shining belt
 and a good dog

he likes my legs in blue jeans
but even more,
 my poetry

we ride the moon's shirttails
 'til dawn
when we bless ourselves

and wade into the spring water,
 well-fed and wet-faced

& while the sky turns to meteors
holographing

we're still drunk off Tennessee Honey

my mom's Revlon
sticking to the sugar

we break curses
 kissing in the corner booth
baby-blue bras hung
 from the ceiling
with George on the speakers

this is a place
 for a good gal like me

slicked in the grass
 by his leaning boots

under the warm shower
 of stars

♯



MICHAEL WASSON

Murals Depicting a Lynching in a Courthouse to House the Idaho Legislature

For 66 years, two murals depicting the lynching of an Indian have been attached to a staircase in an abandoned county courthouse here.

– April 16, 2006, *The Associated Press*

To never represent an unknown historical event
is to represent an unknown historical event.
O vigilante artist, hold me against your hands
as I am to carry my body in & against your lord
so hungry. So full. Once, I walked to the edge
of a field of bellflowers & watched the thirst
in the earth turn my skin into the color of sky
honeyed in a blaze of dusk. American artist,
let me live to lie beside you, to plant my mouth
as though my beauty is enough to save my own
little life. Soft as honeysuckle parting between

our teeth. Warm as the back of the neck
I breathe beside you, *hanyaw'áat*, creator-
as-giver of this world. I am offered a nation—
ours—& told to make it last. Jurisdict me
within the law of your dutiful hands. Those
hours of American innovation like a lover
begging, *kiss your stars slow into my neck*
& *make me your history*. To sway, here
at the rate of creation: a body lifted, air-
borne, by two men in awe, surrounded
by this land of possibility.

✦



CASANDRA LÓPEZ

I Try to Write About the Sea but Instead Write Another Dead Brother Poem

Moompet/Person of the Sea,¹

How do I become like you, learn the language
of Ocean?

Nekaak/My Father,²

a relative remembers your brothers and
the Salton Sea, jumping
from your father's boat, plunge of bodies into—

Paar/Water,³

Father taught me to fish in man-
made lakes. He'd search brush for sharp hooks,
a bit of line, wrapped it around an aluminum can.
Is this way in our blood or in—

'Eyoo'e'en/Our bones⁴

the way we exist? Before
I was born, Father and family often fished off
of Newport Pier. Dawn lines reeled with hooked
halibut. Slept in Grandparents' old camper.
Named the stars—

Navaayoy Tokuupra/The Milky Way,⁵

an endless road. Is this where

¹ Person of the Sea, glides into the tides of our memory.

² My father houses stories in his limbs, his body roughed from time, a missing bit of finger & a dragged foot.

³ Water is measured, like drought.

⁴ Our bones click clack at history; they say listen to me.

⁵ The milky way is what we can see with our naked eyes. We wonder at the light pollution.



nepee'ech/ my younger brother⁶

lives an eternity? Our neighbor used to grow
bait worms in his backyard. He fed
the soil and Brother plucked
plump nightcrawlers with his brown-boy hands.
These days you can buy them
from Amazon organic with free shipping.
It seems so long ago when we spent our summers:

ahaavkomenga moomta/at the end of the sea⁷

with our toes curled into
sand. I never liked the grit. Except
the times when the grunions danced across
our feet. But Brother enjoyed

pahiiynok/dawn,⁸

when he could watch
the fishermen at low
tide. They say: the sand is thinning. Erosion. Rivers
damned. Threat of train tracks falling
from a cliff. We must nourish
the beach before it disappears.
Brother, do you remember

haachan'ar /the hunter,⁹

your last night? The stars could not
navigate you out of the swells of this
sea.

Tameevngeya tameevngeya/ Every year,¹⁰

we remember, like Grandfather, Brother
loved his boat. What were they trying to escape?
I regret never boarding. My body stalled
at shore, beached. I am here, at the edge—
moomet,¹¹ nepee'ech koy¹² honuukvetam¹³ in the distance.



⁶ My younger brother, this word in Tongva comes easily. I learn that kinship terms must always be possessed, connected.
⁷ At the edge of the sea, I stand looking out toward
⁸ dawn. I close my eyes and it comes each morning. Memories of
⁹ the hunter have grown distant but the wind/spirit does not forget.
¹⁰ Every year in Tongva is just year year; a year elapsing. Time turns
¹¹ ocean. I have swam in this grief from edge to edge, clocked innumerable yards
¹² and now I am wishing for a light toward my
¹³ ancestors. I learn in Tongva their is no singular for the ancient ones. There is not one ancestor but many.



CHRIS HOSHNIC

Something is rotten in the state of Trust

Here, while the 1868 treaty 'set apart' a reservation for the 'use and occupation of the Navajo tribe,' 15 Stat. 668, it contains no language imposing a duty on the United States to take affirmative steps to secure water for the Tribe.

– June 22, 2023, 21-1484 *Arizona v. Navajo Nation*

The desert whispered *Winters*
and I was awake.
This *breach-of-trust* a body—

I held to the night sage
to the flat leaves
the canal waves
I ribbed my fingers through it

the glitter below *boundaries timber on the land*
this *permanent home*
was it ever mine?

If I cannot have this bank cleanse in these shores
then swell the body with
snake mines
burrowing owls
flatworms
but they will not.

In this Odium between these three vessels
I exited the handles off my throat
the year of prickle and claw from the sky—



then Rainwater spoke *Set Apart*
abide by this tongue.

I sat up Alter my bedside table
 And drew on the drip edges of my root
 this worship spoke to me
 like tears off
 the cheeks
 of a Catechist.

I turned to you
hold me Cinderblock, come close—

You said to me *The binding is coming—*
 and I went
 into the brush,
keep me warm.

Yet I will still sing
 who is this
 body?
 When can it go
 home?





MALIA MAXWELL

Pō

ka pō [ki'a] 1) night: As in, the world starts over when pō lands on the valley: close your eyes or risk joining the long march, leaving your body to be found beside the road. 2) darkness: Haole demand Maunakea's total pō, bringing their men and their telescopes, hunting pō into extinction. 3) obscurity: Once, this beach was a thing of pō, where the wind patterned waves over the sand for the pleasure of the palms alone. 4) ignorance: In their pō, haole try to tax the earth that grows from under them, felling plumeria trees, boasting of strength; in their pō, they will not be ready when the earth opens its red eye and asks why it should keep them.

ka pō [kāhulu] 1) pertaining to or of the gods: Your mother teaches you of inoa pō, names that come to pregnant women as they dream; she tells you to keep the windows open while you sleep so the wind will find you, even if crossing the ocean takes it weeks. Listen or be cursed. 2) thick, dense, of flowers or heady fragrance: You were fourteen when you learned how pō grief is, casting leis into the ocean (where they reach the dead) and smelling hala on your hands for weeks.

ka pō [painu] 1) to grow dark: Time is a wave that crashes as the sky pō. 2) to involve in intellectual or moral darkness: Still us should we ever pō our tongues, speaking of the sky as though it were not listening. 3) to become a night so dark it bites with teeth: In this valley where the kalo grows, every midnight is a spell to pō: you must find your way home without stepping on shadows.

✦



IBE LIEBENBERG

quiet wolf

we are our names here
she once scolded me

through thick lips of ruin
chukilissa nashoba kissing air
to turn a mother tongue sour

she said *it is funny*
so say it while laughing

i hated the name
she used as a command

raising her voice at the quiet of behaving
slowing down with the wolf

like whistling a dog home

but she was my grandmother
and that was her way

even this easy boy hated her
now that she is gone

i want this ceremony of quiet

my name being called
while running away

♣