

2014 Roger M. Jones Poetry Contest
First Place: Elizabeth DeMonte

Phlebotomy

Years later, in my first real job, I learned to draw blood,
pulling questions in red for those who sought answers.
I couldn't even spell phlebotomist when we met.
You convinced me to skip a day of high school once.
It was February and cold, I followed you
clumsily
to a dirty diner I had never noticed or will ever return to.
I chewed tough pancakes, not old enough for coffee.
Ginger curls, crooked teeth. And that hood-slang-even-though-you're-from-Dexter
You were always too dangerous for me,
an expert in syringes and tourniquets for all the wrong reasons.
I also became familiar with how to tie the rubber band tight—but not too tight.
Mapping veins blindly on strangers' forearms,
feeling for cephalic, median. They say the best ones are felt, not seen.
The poke. Human skin yields easy to something sharp with a purpose.
But you knew that already.
It's cliché, the forearm. Vulnerable, delicate.
Transparent, you traced my blue lines from fingertip to shoulder,
asked me twice why I was so scared of needles.
And twice I wondered what you meant.
The first time I drew a stranger's blood, I almost forgot to wear gloves, almost forgot to breathe.
Like all skills, it became easier with time, routine, practice.
I wonder if it got easier for you too,
if you ever stopped feeling guilty.
Or if you numbed, stupid with visions and forgetting.
Somewhere in my naïve mind, I thought I could heal you.
Like soothing words spoken to unfamiliar patients, trusting their forearms to me.
I used needles to pull answers out, you used them to
put answers in.
You had no room for another heroine.
I spent time losing you and finding you again. I feared who you had
and hadn't become.
Our paths criss-crossed, a network of vessels carrying us to-and-fro.
You were lost. A dusty floor. Hamtramck. Needles. Then found.
Your death was met with a chorus of fond memories about a boy I didn't know.
I was mute; you were a secret, held deep in my mind, my veins.
Tore the letters you wrote me from jail, I never knew you.

I still fill tubes with red answers for strangers, spin them down, send them away.
I wonder if you've found your answers yet.

Apples

I made you climb to the top.
Shouting, “the best ones require effort!”
Hoping you wouldn’t mind bending over backward for me, again.
It’s chilly and damp, and I know your shirt is wet but
you are also taller; I have become familiar with your reach.
Our search for the best Gala reminded me of my search for you,
Finding one, ripe and rosy, close to the ground.
Too-good-to-be-true, and grabbing it
only to be met with sour brown flesh on the other side,
slime, lip curled in disgust,
and an overwhelming urge to wipe my hand on my pant leg.
No, you were the lofty fruit. The apple that requires effort.
I followed you up and we grew together, you ripened while I came to appreciate
your colors, your soft and hard, the weight of your sway.
You are still the best apple I have ever eaten.
The joy of finding one, you poke your head over dewy branches,
smile. “This one’s a keeper.”
I know it now because my heart skips with your syllables.
Your gentle tug trembles droplets onto my face, seeking upwards.
An awkward arm, yours, reaches, releases the apple and
as it falls, I am too.
My bag grows heavy with our fruits, eventually you carry that too.
You land gracefully after each climb, and I am left wondering if
you’ll ever need me to catch you.

Modern Art

I am a pulsing room full of tiny speakers,
suspended by tiny strings.

I'll whisper sweet nothings into your ear,
murmur everything you are dying to hear in
eight languages, leaving only
tiny spaces for you to fill in the blanks.

I am a red thread,
strung casually from window to floor.

I'll pretend to hold up the entire gallery,
a tender heartstring bearing this throb of ingenuity.

And you can pretend to understand my purpose,
stroking your chin, nodding.

I am a white canvas on the white wall,
garnished with white paint.

I'll reflect you, a clean slate
unblemished by prejudice or persuasion.

You'll scoff at my simplicity, question my worth, my existence,
but you're the one getting upset at a white canvas.

I am your modern art,
dancing across walls, too big to be bought.

I'll become what you ask, spin twisted forms
left open to interpretation.

You'll admire my novelty, wondering how you didn't come up with it,
but you'll never take me home.

Reflections on Writer's Block

I.

Sister,
my platinum blonde, Sparkle Plenty,
your presence is too large for any body of water I could put you in.
Your angel-kissed birthmark so striking,
a permanent flush, a burning I once longed for because
what girl doesn't want kisses and angels?
You are the ending to all my sentences,
but I absolutely cannot
write a poem about
how much I love you
when you are wearing my favorite sweater.

II.

Sometimes I read poems for inspiration.
A cure for writer's block.
Poems about trees, metaphorically.
Poems about death, hypothetically.
Poems about death and trees.
Let me just say,
you're all wrong about the trees and the death.
When we die, we travel up the roots of maples. Through the very
tips of the branches, squeezing through twigs, then stems, some more easily than others.
We sprout as samaras, the seed pods, whirlybirds. Helicoptering a spiral descent past the eager
hands of children. To the ground, to make more maples, more whirlybirds, more children.
We laugh out loud all the way down, finally fast enough to cheat death.,
before it takes us a second time.