

2018 Roger M. Jones Poetry Content
Honorable Mention: Kate Arnson

Deer Beds

The breeze tugged his hair out from between my fingertips
Like the gusts whipping up across the prairie
Teasing out milkweed silk from spiked teardrop hulls.

He'd grown his hair out for two years now,
In part to hide his vicious cowlick swirl
That looked like the matted tangle of grass of a deer bed -
The gentle hollows we learned about on a first grade field trip
When I was scolded for falling asleep in one
To the imagined whisper soft snores of a doe.

And how the snow would collect in those woven grass basins
Tamping down the bowled edges in the winter,
Surrounded by impressed tracks in parenthetical sets
Like pried open mussel shells, or miniature pairs of lungs.

Now his hair looked like mine, the same medium brown,
The color of the tiny little petrified flowers clinging on to dried-out stems,
Shafts bowed sideways under weight and wind.

I pulled his mane back into a thick plait, layering soft strands,
Bending streams of near liquid fibers over and under the others.
When I went to bind them up in an elastic band, it snapped.

Hot

My body is hot. Everything.
I can see the sun outside of the window
through the cracks in the blinds
and it feels so far away.
But I am still hot,
like my insides are swollen and stagnant.
It is September. The leaves are gone,
dried out husks from last fall
still taped to your wall where I left them
when I moved out, my hollowed-out haven
becoming yours, but for my leaves
blanched by the sun to parchment slips.

I have a cactus sitting on my floor.
It too, is dying in the sun, all of its spines shed;
it has loaned all of its prickle to the
leafless winter bush in front of my house.
It sits on the floor, naked, shaved.
I sit on my floor, naked, unshaved.

I am confused. The cactus should be happy here,
and I feel like the dying golden light
reflecting off of the blue house next door
should not even be hot, it is too late in the day,
but I can't fit my ring on my finger
and the crease of my elbow is sweating
and I take all of the blankets off of my bed
because I feel like a nap will help.

All I see are the tired shadows spinning on my rough ceiling,
the same three-eared bunny of my childhood bedroom
dancing and taunting, at 7A.M. in the summer, at 6A.M. in the winter.
The room belonged to both of my brothers after,
but they were never scared.

Never scared of the woman
in the wallpaper of the mudroom bathroom,
her branched back arched in anguish,
flower bud belly button straining upwards, screaming.
And even after the wallpaper was replaced,
new leaf layers pasted over her floral howl,
I heard her in that thin blue line
tracing the toilet bowl to the sink
that looked like the bare space

between the water and the sky.

I lay still and silent,
internally boiling over,
the steam release soaking my brain
with hot tub water that smelled like the acid my mom
once spread on the soles of my feet and my brother's
to treat our twin waterpark warts.
He would cry when she scraped,
trying to carve out the hard kernel
and I would wait my turn
and sit still and silent,
scared to be the woman in the wallpaper,
bent and burning,
over the sun-faded blank space
between the branches below her.

Bob From Produce

Your hands were warm and dry
Like the old man who sold produce
At the store down the street.
His rough, kindly palms cupping
Moss-skinned kiwis and blonde-haired peaches
As if offering precious presents,
Bestowed with a price tag, not bow.

His hands were warm and dry
And large enough to hold armies.
Like he could grasp a whole stack of unwrapped straws
Somehow keeping the central ones from slipping.
But yours seemed not as strong as his,
With matte moon-shaped fingernails
Whose tips must have been pinched flat at birth.

My hands are not warm or dry,
I have my aunt's hands, cool and clammy
Like the underside of a stone
Or the handle of a door in the freezer aisle
With long fingers flared in slight slants,
Neighbors with heads bent in close for whispering,
It seemed, somewhat shameful words.

Holding your hands always reminded me of
Receiving gifts from the mitts of the produce man.
Granted under a gentle smile peeking out below greying brows,
An apple with its bar tag uncoded passed
Between our conflicting textures,
Which I would then baptize in spit and
Rub clean on the hem of my shirt.

But you were not selling me any fruit.
And though jealous of your hands,
Warm and dry, I did not delight in them.
The same way you did not delight in mine,
But held them tight anyway. Desperate and disparate.
And I chafed under rubbed knuckles and stroked palms,
Affecting gestures that fell far short of convincing me of anything.

To think you believed me when I answered
That holding your hand meant nothing to me.