

2017 Roger M. Jones Poetry Contest
Fourth Place: Kate Arnson

The Porch

I stood on the porch to watch a neighborhood boy dribble a basketball on the sidewalk.
I didn't own an outside basketball anymore,
And our porch steps were covered in salt.
Salt to melt the snow that never came after that first time.
It just sat, crystalline, crunching under our feet,
Leaving milky white ghost shadows on the hardwood,
Tracing delicate lacy outlines of treads on my rug
And on the blanket at end of my bed.

It followed me everywhere,
Sticky sweet rubbed in my knee-skinned wounds,
And underneath my steel-stained fingernails
And in the dark pencil-smudge creases under my eyes.

The sun set early and the orange light came in through the windows
Between the stacks of books in the library and blinded me,
Spawning little salt spots that eroded my vision,
Popping and taunting, and I rubbed eyes with fists.

And I ran down the stairs, scared of the mawing of the escalator,
Three half flights, and down the hallway after too,
Out of breath, panting at the landing.
After the porch light burnt out I stood and felt for my keys.

When I came home the house was empty and dark.
The ghosts clustering around the doorway smiled at me,
And the cigarette hanging on a string above the dining room table
Spun lazily in the cold air, my breath its smoke,
Like the ghosts were puffing and dancing
In the swing step diagrams left on the floor.

I stood on the porch to cut your hair.
The trimmings graced your shoulders and the steps like soft black confetti.
I tried to sweep them up, off into the bushes
With the cans and bottles and light bulbs dying there,
But they were left to mourn untouched, their briny tears solidifying on the stairs.

Blue House

I could tell they left the light on by the hole in the kitchen floor,
the Big Al basement love calling out from the cracks.
When you put a milk crate there to block the rays, everybody tripped,
tipping heads towards the totem pole book stack in the corner.

If you stared at the ceiling long enough, you could see through it,
like all your joints were aching and taped over roughly.
And you heard the pitter of the shower in the walls of your room,
but it didn't matter, it was all cold anyway.
The doorframes covered, as if scared, painted sticky pale blue,
like white glue covered everything to keep it from shivering.
The inside of my door was left bare, deep toned wood proudly hidden
until I shut everybody else out.

You kicked the tall baseboards, and switched out the light bulbs
that eternally cast sickly yellow shadows. Felt the stare
of that pocketed door, the baby's halved head worn proudly on its lintel,
when you crossed the threshold. Stairs squeaking endlessly,
the house kept talking to you, and you knew you weren't supposed to leave.
Shut up. It had a hold on you. You ran thumping up the stairs on hands and feet
and they yelled louder. You crept down the sides of the steps and they whispered
through the angled part of my closet where nothing would quite fit, so that
I knew the sound of your fright if you woke up in the middle of the night,
but the stale air in my room put a spell on me, and I fell in love without you.

Our neighbor punched a wall and his fingers drooped
like long wildflowers wilting some days,
others like the frozen hard stalks of the scary bushes
scraping at your shoulders on the walk home.
All the pins and needles implanted - was it worth it?

Six sad fish eyes alternated stares between my window and the door.
Which way out? They both were cardboard, rough cut confidences
swinging on false hinges inward where there was no clearance.
Leave. Please. You sat along the wall and hoped they wouldn't see you through
the glass of the dining room table, through the glass of my desk,
through the windows; there were two panes and somehow the air still got in.
It just wasn't fair. So you signed the lease and moved away.

Marrow

Bone-thinned volcanoes boiled over on the side tables flanking your low bed,
their ashes spreading thin clouds over the striated desert throw.
You just watched as the lava slid through the slats,
falling as molten stalactites in the basement.

The floor was dirt and lonely and the little drips
left cigarette burn holes in the backs of the arms of your sweaters.
She tried to pick up the singed loops with thread pulled taut
through your loose secondhand skin.

You wondered out loud if the price tag was still left on the sole
of your prep shoes stolen six years too late,
long after you should have shorn your hair up past your shoulders.
Like your mother told you, you bought used.

The melting pith smelled sort of nice, like a candle, not the sweet,
brown sugary kind, but the kind that seemed like potted plant stems,
pressed between broken-spined books to dry out for some days
in the dark on a closet shelf you couldn't quite reach.

So you let the marrow ooze onto trays, filling up centimeters thick,
pressed your palm down into the scented slip, pretending it was lotion.
Drawing a hand out, smooth and pale, fingerprinted creases rendered useless
and you just couldn't hold on to anything anymore.