

FIRST PLACE: Rohanna Ssanyu

AN AFTERMATH OF EMPIRE

A warehouse store
Smells like salt and heat.

cactus leaves
watercress
white cheese

We are shades of sun,
Hair black and thick, braided,
Or covered in hijabs, headwraps,
Prayer hats, and weaves.

tea
frozen coconut
ndizi

The fathers love to bring home
Chocolates to their children.

pickled mangoes
apricots
anchos

We fill our homes with warmth—
Fresh rice and friendship.

greens
pitted dates
nectarines

Newcomers buy foods that heal
Longing that makes their stomachs sorrow.
The old-guard's tongues crave blueberries
But cry for the meals that made them.

jackfruit
cassava flour
ginger root

Children wear thick winter jackets
Covered in cartoons. We shop for

yucca
guava
okra

Our mothers' foods.

Judge's remarks:

*Many of us have wandered the aisles of a warehouse grocery store, like the one described in this poem. I can say, after reading *An Aftermath of Empire*, that I will always think about it differently. We are all living in the aftermath of empire, but how does it feel to search for your motherland in a store dominated by giant boxes of food, characteristic of the oppressor's culture? The writer invites the reader to shop for "your mother's food" as one considers where this food comes from and what it might mean.*

SECOND PLACE: Beth Brody

The Spectrum of You

I still make time to look for you:
in corner seats along the wall of small
cafés that smell of weed and Morning Glory muffins.
I look for you in gestures of the shopkeepers and pastry chefs
whose working hands so deftly knead and braid. A tilted head

of contemplation shakes my memories. I see you in dense hedges
at the park where we once strolled. An ear, a lock of hair, the moon
reflecting off your glasses – you lurk
between receding sprigs of evergreen and ivy.

I see you

in the accidental dent of my front fender,
the rainbow oil slick beneath
the wounded chassis of the classic '67 Plymouth
we drove flat out top down. You're sprinkled particles of dust

dancing in a golden glow, riding round and round
on ridged black records. Together
we listened to the static-noise of time-scratched melodies,
worn to extinction.

I remember back when we were starlings –
we dipped through green-blue winter skies, soared
through bare-boned branches. Earthbound now,
I search the space between the sun and clouds:
misted light reflecting back
your eyes
your brow
a wisp of cheek
a mirrored shard of mouth.

Judge's remarks:

In The Spectrum of You, the writer writes of how what and who we lose continue showing up in our lives—in shadows, reflections, fragments—where do our dead try to find us, and where do we look to find them? This beautifully crafted poem walks through grief and into light.

THIRD PLACE: Arlene DeMaris

TURKEYS

Two of them at the end of my street, far enough away
that I take them for children, their mother
having dressed them darkly that morning and now
they are getting off the bus and coming home
to a funeral.

They march solemn and deliberate, grey scale
of their heads bobbing, others coming down
driveways to join them as if each neighbor
had been keeping one or two
and were just now

releasing them to join the flock.
In another life I plucked them laid out
on a picnic table, pulled the shot
from their pale and puckered skin,
draped bacon

over their lean white meat for my then
husband, a hunter. And if we found
a stray pellet between our teeth it was
proof we lived closer to the land
than our friends, killing

what we ate in silence, boiling
the bones for soup. Once we almost
had a child. Now I don't know
where he lives.

Here ten turkeys are pecking
the ground, jakes, gobblers and hens
turning each eye to look me over.
As they pass my house unafraid,

I get in line behind them.

Judge's remarks:

I love poems that take unexpected turns, making meaning from the ordinary moments in our daily lives. In Turkeys, the writer weaves a narrative below the surface of the poem, drawing unexpected, poignant connections between a line of turkeys and the human experiences of fear and grief.

HONORABLE MENTION: Polly Brody

WITNESS

At the pharmacy drive-through,
my idling glance noticed you
poplar sprout
you, foot-high youngling
whose tender not yet woody stem
has put out six spring-fresh leaves.
You, born of chance seed, perhaps in dove guano,
dropped into just enough rain-washed detritus
lodged in that roof gutter.
The encoded future that you carry
promises a sky-reaching mast, stout and straight,
canopied in wide-palmed, fingered green.

But there's scant provision in that gutter.
Your rootlets will not sink deep into loam
but soon will cramp against aluminum and dearth.
Perhaps a year more you will add a few inches
and another half dozen leaves,
then starving will wither you.
My mundane pause in queue
has made me witness to your doom.
I carry your small, brave start
away with me.

Judge's remarks:

Some of the most memorable poems are those that point out the beautiful things all around us—the flowers that peek out from beside the pharmacy drive thru, the seeds forming that will one day bloom in the field beside us. Witness accomplishes this, drawing us into a poetic moment.