

The 2003 Editors' Prize Contest Winners

THE
SPOON
RIVER Poetry Review

Ada Limón
Honorable Mention

The Echo Sounder

“echo sounder n. A device for measuring depth of water by sending pressure waves down from the surface and recording the time until the echo returns from the bottom.”

—American Heritage Dictionary

1.
She enters the world a ready-set-go girl.
She comes with a list of things she cannot see, she comes with a language restricted by its own inability to name things as she sees them. She believes that there are two worlds and she lives in the one that is separate from the other, the seed that comes up outside the garden, the one door with no handle, the shingle in the roof with the weathervane, the arrow flying from the quiver, the child who can balance on her palms and is hated for it. She wears no shirt, still no one speaks to her. She speaks to everyone. She has a bicycle and a family, but it does not matter. She is difficult to catch, she knows all the names of all the fish, she is aware of them dying all the time, upstream, the sockeye and the coho, upstream, the chinook and the king, upstream, to the sand and rock nest of their death. She thinks the bodies decay too quickly.

2.

When she is eleven years old, she thinks her body will be like that of a fish. She does not want to decay before she uses it. She is confused in the dark. She is never scared. She is convinced that she can talk to God and she asks him a question. She does not get an answer, so she makes one up. She believes the answer is: everything stops, the food is in the mouth, but the mouth is not there, the water flows, but there is no creek. She understands now that bodies can swing from trees and whole families can be locked up, that people die the way fish do starving sometimes, gutted and tortured by children who think they are being scientific and responsible. She thinks God must know this and therefore he is ugly. She decides God is no good, but he must exist, he must exist so she can hold him accountable. She decides this and then forgets.

3.

At one point she decides she is in love, the way she woke one day and thought she had dreamt up the word Philadelphia, that there was no other word in the world as beautiful as Philadelphia and how she planned to make it mean something like the way everything can touch you at once, the billboard with the mason, the old theater's neon sign,

the water towers next to the cross,
the curve in the road where the school bus
stopped, the wet smell of boots and dirt,
the feeling when all those things get to you
and you want to cry or pray and because
you're no good at either, you
tell everyone to leave you alone so you
can go on feeling the world climbing around
in your body like you were just as much
a part of it as it was of you, maybe, she thought,
she could call that feeling Philadelphia.
She fell in love the same way.

4.

One week she thinks about offering,
how it is difficult to offer something of yourself.
She thinks it should be easy, how she
has an echo chamber in her chest. What
she sends out should reflect and return.
She goes to the creek on one
trip home and sits there for longer
than she planned. She decides to estimate
how long she will live and then she says,
this is when she will die. She says it again,
“This is when I will die,” as if the repetition
will endow the words with nonsense, the way
a word becomes no longer a word, but a strange
sound that animals make, she takes comfort
in her animalness. She wants to go on
being an animal, not something that represents
something else, but the original object, the
thing before it is named, the fish before she
knew it was a fish, when it was just another
lost thing, individual and shadowy, working
its way toward its own end.