

JUDGES' COMMENTS

A powerful, winning poem. It captures the devastation of forestry/logging practices in contrast to the grandeur of the pines. The structure works extremely well to fracture (like the logging of the forest) the historical trajectory of the pines. This is not a standard screed about environmental desecration. While it is both elegiac and polemical, decrying the destruction of the western forests, the poem's tableau is larger, more pensive. The poet "ponders" the immensity of the trees themselves, the immensity of settler culture's impact on nature, and the immensity of nature's agency. The couplets, arranged into the three parts of a triptych, are rings, one leading to the next, through which the author voices his fears and hopes for the trees' survival. His belief is strong.

Ponderosa Pine (Pinus ponderosa)

JORDAN MOUNTEER

(I)

Cerebral sway of root mass and trident fascicles
anchored by a hundred-metre nerve

to the earth's temporal lobe—
giants engrossed in their namesake, *pondering*:

a 14th-century definition implies an estimation of worth,
as if the colonial practice of naming could foresee

the relegation of a species to the thrall
of stumpage rates and market prices.

You have charted strata of etymology,
concentric as the rings on a back-cut stump,

and entered into language like an invader
intent on possessing.

(II)

Our philosophy of trees has always been utilitarian.
In 1953 the US Forest Service toppled 145 pines

in a national park, transported them by truck
to Yucca Flats, and cemented them upright in holes

before dropping a 27-kiloton nuke above their heads.
To understand the effects on forests.

You cannot interpret the shape of trees
as anything other than a collective memory:

centrifugal dispersion of branches
in a fallout of chlorophyll, their silhouettes

mythologizing the atomic bloom.
Trauma's singular proof of heredity.

(III)

You return to what you know to be true.
Spring-thaw still white on the clear-cuts.

The distortion of rain clouds slugging down
the gulley above your parents' homestead

where a solitary grove soldiers in the wind,
bark-sleeved, ancient bushfires welted

on their wrists. Intense heat flexing
half-buried cones to lift their wooden gills

into germination. A process called serotiny.
You return to what you know,

that certain species will emerge from the wreckage
stronger than you left them.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

"Ponderosa Pine" is a stunning, complex exploration of our relationship with the environment. In each triptych, we face a different human force: control, experimentation, surrender. It is hard to look away from the image of a man-made forest facing a nuclear bomb. Long after reading this poem, the moment echoes, as does the question: what have we inherited? In the sharp language of its first two sections, this poem keeps us at a distance, refusing any sign of sentimentality. In the third, we find the speaker themselves in the woods, and the final gesture of the poem is a gift. A reminder, quietly woven, of resurgence, regeneration, and biodynamic possibility. —Alessandra Naccarato