

***Rented Chickens*, Candace Hennekens 1st Place**

“Chickens see in color,” Candace Hennekens writes in her stunning chaplet, *Rented Chickens*, which employs the ground-vision of animals to address subjects as complex as loss, politics, and hope. Even with its title, the collection suggests generous self-awareness: these chickens are rented, not owned. The speaker discloses what she learns through caring for animals but never asserts that she is an expert of any kind. While observing these animals and the landscape, Hennekens pushes beyond what can often be seen in nature writing by refusing to conflate the issues facing the environment with her own. In the title poem “The Summer I Rented Chickens” the speaker admits, “my husband could have lived or died / the summer I rented chickens,” which works as a thesis towards the end of the text. Once we reach this point, we can return to the earlier images of dirt baths, zucchinis like “long green boats,” and chicken dances to understand how the joy of raising animals works to represent another urgency: grief, and what we take on to survive it.

***Everything About Breathing*, B.J. Best 2nd Place**

B.J. Best’s *Everything About Breathing* is a chapbook of stunning contrasts: “nostrils like barn doors,” decapitated fish heads like a “mound of old gum drops.” The juxtapositions throughout this work create a pleasant instability, not dissimilar to the process of attempting to control breath. This collection centers on themes of love—love for the romantic partner, for family, for snoring old men. Compassion floods these poems with “starlight and roses.”

***Benediction and Baseball*, Ed Werstein Honorable Mention**

Werstein’s chapbook delivers the concrete details of a specific place known intimately to the speaker in his youth—carting jugs of iced tea and Dixie cups to a field of men. These poems deliver simple experiences and actions disguised as one-dimensional narratives. “German Style Lunch Break,” for example, illustrates the young speaker bringing a sandwich and a beer from his mother to a man on a “still idling” tractor. “The whole thing takes less than three minutes” Werstein writes, describing the situation at hand, allowing the reader to fill in the empty space with their own impressions about the conditions of farm work.

***Bird Religion*, Jan Chronister Honorable Mention**

In *Bird Religion*, crows “scavenge roadkill / like shiny robed priests / examining our souls.” Chronister’s speaker is a “waitress” to the crows in her garden; she speaks to them through prayer. This adoration for birds is often hinged with declarations of love for poetry itself—words held tight in talons—which works to link the act of writing with the physical nature of flight.