

A COVID Supermarket in Indiana

Nathan Marquam

Ginsberg! I have some bad news about the grocery store.
It is bigger now and I don't think anything of it. I wander
the gleaming aisles steered by no one but myself, looking for chocolate
hearts to gobble. I could say I bought it for a lover, but the lover is me.
I'm not ashamed of being alone, nor of not being alone.
Ginsberg, I dated the grocery boy. He smelled like onions
and rotten milk. I unbuckled his belt in the parking lot
behind a flashing billboard and tried to feel nothing. I think of it now

and shiver in the electronics aisle as I paw through a bargain bin
of movies in search of an angry fix, a five-dollar distraction to pair
with a six-dollar wine. But you're not invited, Ginsberg. Not tonight.
You'd want to probe and question, turn the shrink-wrapped cases
in your large hands like you're examining a steak.
There's nothing to do but fill myself with images—slick-muscled boys,
girls of slender curves, some glorious in-between. I consume it all
as I wobble across this endless off-white, a rotund and sexless creature
fading to the edges of myself. Ginsberg, the whole world is screen

except me. I'm flesh and more flesh, rolls of it. Every city
I might have escaped to covers its windows and coughs as I pass.
All day I sit around wishing I did not exist, or that I wasn't scared to die,
or that this landscape of screened faces would smile back at me.
We mustn't linger too long here. Everything could kill you. Hurry through
this tundra of refrigeration and don't stop to examine the cardboard pizzas
in cardboard boxes, the pre-cut, pre-cooked frozen vegetables I have eaten
hundreds of times without tasting. Hurry through the checkout (you scan
the vegetables twice, the pizza not at all, and don't even wink). Follow me
out to the parking lot that refuses to darken and try not to breathe in
the fluorescence that hangs in the air like mist, shrinks you down
until I can carry you in my pocket, play you through earbuds.

As sidewalk crumbles to road, I walk the concrete line between grass
and traffic, between your world and mine. I almost go over the edge,
but you are holding me steady—your voice at my command,
our lips moving together, no difference between space and time.
When I am home, I'll let you speak the way you want to be heard,
through the jumping static crackle of a five-dollar forty-five.
I'll set aside the movies, the pizza, the wine. Tonight, I'll watch
you spin, Allen Ginsberg, and try to untangle my mind.