



## Supermarket Poem Exercise

If poets like Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov and Wanda Coleman have taken a crack at writing a supermarket poem, why not you? Poet as witness would include specifics: is it organic? Is it from the bioregion? What is the price? Is it on sale? Are you lusting after bag boys or girls? (Bag men? Bag women? Gender fluid bag person?) The things you notice always reflect your own personal mythology, if you stay clear of abstractions and give us the luminous details of your diet. Gluten free? Lactose intolerant? Vegan? Allergic to what?!? (What things do you avoid?) How did it get from wherever it was harvested to your neck of the woods? Did you forget your bag again? Do they nick you for a store-provided bag?

Do you bring a poet ancestor with you like Allen did:

### A Supermarket in California Allen Ginsberg

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

*Berkeley, 1955*

Do we get to know someplace exotic via your supermarket visit like Denise Levertov:

### A SUPERMARKET IN GUADALAJARA, MEXICO

In the supermercado the music  
sweet as the hot afternoon  
wanders among the watermelons,  
the melons, the sumptuous tomatoes,  
and lingers among the tequila bottles,  
rum bacardi, rompopo. It  
hovers like flies round the butchers  
handsome and gay, as they dreamily  
sharpen their knives; and the beautiful  
girl cashiers, relaxed  
in the lap of the hot afternoon,  
breathe in time to the music  
whether they know it or not—  
at the glossy supermercado,  
the super supermercado.





Can we find any of your vital organs in the frozen food section like  
Wanda Coleman:

**Supermarket Surfer**     Wanda Coleman

— *after Allen Ginsberg*

what bohunkian images i have of you  
crash against my niggernoggin as i shiver and stroll  
long air-conditioned aisles at 2 a.m. the liquor  
under lock and key, the lettuce full and moist with  
a fresh spray of mist and neon  
my cart wobbles giddily on crooked wheels as i sputter  
between the confused and the absurd as i cruise for pudding  
and citrus-free hand lotion. there's plenty of disabled  
parking outside. it is lonely here though the  
automatic doors never close and a bleak phosphorescence  
never dims and bananas are going at two pounds for  
the price for one. the bin of avocados is small  
and most of them more like plankton-stained golf balls  
or too rotten. somewhere, i am detected via camera  
lens while picking over pepper mills between  
the spice racks and the baking soda  
hang ten toward checkout is a certainty  
the only Walt here is Disney  
the pork chops are killing me  
i am a nobody angel  
my heart is a frozen delicacy

Would your routine errand make for a hit pop record like The Clash:

I'm all lost in the supermarket  
I can no longer shop happily



I came in here for the special offer  
Guaranteed personality

I wasn't born, so much as I fell out  
Nobody seemed to notice me  
We had a hedge back home in the suburbs  
Over which I never could see

I heard the people who live on the ceiling  
Scream and fight, most scarily  
Hearing that noise was my first ever feelin'  
That's how it's been, all around me

I'm all lost in the supermarket  
I can no longer shop happily  
I came in here for the special offer  
Guaranteed personality

I'm all tuned in, I see all the programs  
I save coupons from packets of tea  
I've got my giant hit, discotheque album  
I empty a bottle, I feel a bit free

The kids in halls and the pipes in the walls  
Making noises for company  
Long distance callers make long distance calls  
And the silence makes me lonely

I'm all lost in the supermarket  
I can no longer shop happily  
I came in here for the special offer  
Guaranteed personality



Your task, should you choose to accept it, is to go to the supermarket with a grocery list and a notebook. Your grocery list could be part of the poem. Always use specifics and this poem may call for hyperspecificity Nate Mackey-style. Could your poem be a Recipe Poem for how to shop at your particular market, or a store you've wanted to go to but haven't or rarely shop at? You could do a Cover Poem and taking a poet with you like Allen and Wanda did might help guide the direction. You could also consider the local café, where coffee speak might add some color to the poem, or hardware store, Costco, or other place where you wander around. Wanda kept her poem to 21 lines, just sayin'.

### Works Cited

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Recipe-Poem.pdf>

<https://paulenelson.com/workshops/cover-poem-rewrite-new-arrangement/>

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