

Three Poems by Andrena Zawinski

What Could Have Become

What could have become my first book
of poems never got a shot at even a title,
became nothing more than a bit of bad luck
and worse judgment when my lover,
after combing through it, uninvited, interrogated
my fidelity and drove me straight
to the corner's brimming 7-11 dumpster,
out of the relationship, into the common
theatrics—letting the ficus die for water, littering
the curb in a flea market keepsake array
of chintzy costume jewelry I collected,
rococo night stand we meant to refurbish,
teapot in its cozy right alongside
all the empty threats, wild gestures, and tears.

Every time I pass one of those metal nightmares
with its waste management sticker and gaping
mouth, I wonder what's in it for freegans
foraging with night lights—a worn coat
perhaps to warm up an evening suddenly turned
steely cold, capful of gin to steady the hands,
warped guitar with spent strings that might again
sing, runt of the litter that never had a chance
once tossed in with my first book, anger,
desperation, its pages flapping high on the pile
with an unexpected night wind kicking in.

I imagine now that somehow, like a lobster
might be thought to scream when membranes
burst as its cold body gets plunged into

the shock of boiling water, maybe my words
were torn loose and sent belting out their final
soliloquies on a cheated fate, away from me and
all the metaphoric misinterpretations,
or wheezing inside a darkened sky blinking
bright with stars on the backhanded slap
of distrust, or how they might wince
in pain as the crusher grinds them to pulp,
wedged between the discarded Slurpee
and Big Gulp cups, lamenting what could have
been, calling out on a long last breath:
No, oh no, this is not the way I wanted it to go!

My Mother's Rings

Right after that first good job, that first real move away from home, the one with the seal-of-approval that tucked girls away in dusty government offices—not shackled up this time with some blond beach bum in a string of Ft. Lauderdale bikini days living on diner orange juice, Danish cinnamon swirls and sun, young runaway face hamming up the local nightly news,

this time I had a bank account and a paycheck to buy that first ring for her, small diamond chip bookended by two garnets sunk into a thin silver band. The second one came in a weave of rubies and gold for Mother's Day before her heart began to fail and did.

Now I am the one wearing those rings. Sometimes they hug my finger in an unmistakable warm, warm as the flush of her cheek against mine. Sometimes cold, cold as her flesh the last days of the body's viewing when parish women sent her off on an acapella sea of song, sent her off like some queen to sail into night but without the riches of jewels, and not even wearing those two rings.

So many years later, I still can see her slack-jawed, the terror in her gaping eyes, after the heart attack as white coats ran wheeling her through hospital halls, her nightgown breezy with their star shaped live-forevers, ringed fingers swatting the air, as if to dodge darts of words: ambulance, gurney, funeral, plot.

She never said what to do with the rings in a note marked "What You Never Wanted to Hear," no instructions in the dresser drawer, just church dues

stashed behind my picture, phone numbers for the
Orthodox Archpriest and Szal-the-Undertaker.

The biggest job was to get her into the ground—
where she said she wanted to go—next to my father,
his father, his father's wife, his brother and his first wife,
people she never loved like me, the one who wanted
to own the shell and boney fragments of her, wanted to
rub them between palms, across pursed lips, then scatter
them everywhere I would travel, places she had never
been and did not dream she could ever go.

I cannot wear those rings for more than a few moments,
must return them quickly to the little red velvet sack
the mortician pulled from his pocket at the gravesite,
her rings jangling against the heart medallion
I sent from Sacré Coeur, talisman for her weak heart.

This woman lived once, I think, as I tug at the rings
on my swollen fingers. A dead woman wore these day
after day through the years, rings taken from her, taken
against my wishes, left as a cold inheritance from a
woman I never wanted to see go into the ground.

Vanquished

(Assemblage from Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* on Japanese internment)

Houses are boarded up.
Their newspapers and mail
litter sagging porches.
Abandoned cars sit in driveways.
Weeds sprout where tulips wilt,
laundry clinging to lines.
Telephones ring and ring.

Perhaps they were sent to work sugar beet country,
or marched single file across long wooden bridges
to faraway cities, or sailed zigzagging torpedoes,
or crowded into windowless cattle cars to the camps.

Lights are left on.
Stray cats wander left in distress.
A listless canary sits in a front window,
koi dying in a pond. Everywhere
dogs whimper in sleep dreaming them.

And by the first frost letters cease to arrive,
their faces blur, their names elude memory.
And they no longer linger in thoughts
and we know that we shall not
meet them again in this world.

Andrena Zawinski's latest collection of poetry is *Landings*. She has two previous books: *Something About* (a PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award) and *Traveling in Reflected Light* (a Kenneth Patchen Poetry Prize). Her poetry has received accolades for lyricism, form, spirituality, and social concern and has appeared in

Blue Collar Review, Progressive Magazine, Quarterly West, Nimrod, Dallas Review, Verse Daily, and elsewhere. She is Features Editor at PoetryMagazine.com and on the Poetry Board of The Literary Nest. Zawinski , born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA, lives in the San Francisco Bay Area where she founded and runs a Women's Poetry Salon.