

## Three Poems by Andrena Zawinski

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### What Could Have Become

What could have become that 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, and 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 looming 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 with a raise 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, her ringed fingers swatting the air, as if to dodge darts of words: ambulance, gurney, funeral, plot....

She never did say what to do with the rings, no note  
in the envelope marked “What You Never Wanted to  
Hear,”  
nothing in the instructions in the top right-hand dresser  
drawer,  
just church dues stashed behind my photograph, phone  
numbers  
scribbled for the Orthodox Archpriest and Szal-the-  
Undertaker.

The biggest job I took on 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 rings  
day after day through the years, rings taken from her  
taken against my wishes, left as a cold inheritance  
from the 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 oceans 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

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