

2010 Roger M. Jones Poetry Contest
Second Prize: Jessie Carr

When the Phone Rings

The edge of the bathtub is cold against my thighs.
The lights are off and my eyes adjust slowly.
When the phone rang I turned on the light,
Scrunched my eyes tight against the brightness,
Stars erupting behind my eyelids.
I wandered into the bathroom with the phone in my hand,
Listening to your ragged breath as I held mine.
And slowly I start to be able to see
The last wet droplets, sliding down the tile wall.
I remember the aching feeling inside
But looking back, the words escape me.
The words that were so important in a way I couldn't grasp.
Your voice is shaking,
Like something frail on the edge of a cliff,
About to be swept away and plummet down.
I tell you everything I can think of
But you are so far away –
I couldn't get to you,
Could only say what I could say
There, perched on the edge of the bathtub.
I don't know where you called from that night.
I only know that I got the call the next day,
That they found you, too late.
I thought I had talked you down from the edge of that cliff,
I thought when you hung up you would be okay
If only for one more night.
But I didn't
And you weren't
And now when the phone rings I can't answer it.

Dancing with Skeletons (the Feeling of Flying)

Once, while taking out the trash, I ran into a family of skeletons.
Their expressions were hard to read – after all, they had no faces.
I was about eight years old, and I remember being terrified, at first.
But then two of them started waltzing together,
Finger bones interlacing, heel bones clicking on the pavement,
And so next to the garbage bins, I danced with skeletons.
At six years old I ran outside to the deck of our cottage
And watched as a pontoon boat grew fins and flippers.
Even as it happened, I knew it made no sense –

As is often the case in dreams –
But every time I see the Van Curen's boat across the lake,
I still remember seeing that green carpeted 'Sweet Joyce',
With the pots of petunias on each side, diving deep into the water.

Most often I flew. For years I flew every night,
Sometimes over volcanoes that erupted with flamingos and silver fish,
Or oceans filled with pirates and characters from Disney movies.
Sometimes I flew over city streets, through the corridors of skyscrapers,
In places I'd never been – Paris, Hong Kong, Dubai.
I knew the feeling of flying so well
That waking up was almost a disappointment,
Returning to a world where I was for some reason robbed
Of what I liked to do best.
I once tried to show my favorite cousin
(at thirteen years old almost twice my age)
How I did it, how I flew.
And the skepticism in her smile as she listened
Hurt almost as much as failing to get off the ground.

Last night I dreamt of my midterm –
That I forgot to study the circulatory system,
Which was thirty percent of the material.
The night before I dreamt my housemate didn't do her dishes,
And woke up more than a little irritated.
I have forgotten the sensation that was once so real to me,
The feeling of flying,
And my brain tells me I could never have truly known what it felt like.
But sometimes, when I take the trash out to the busy, noisy street,
I secretly look for skeletons.

Princess Papulli

They hitchhiked to Florida, the four of them, in 1948.
Mary and Phyllis waitressed at a diner, Lil got work as a stenographer,
And Louisa, well, Louisa danced the nights away.
They drove a car to San Francisco for a rental car company,
Then went to Chicago by train, then New York
In the backseat of a car that belonged to a sailor named Jim.
He taught them to sing 'Princess Papulli'
And the four girls, twenty-one and innocent as children,
Gamely sang of Papulli's papayas
And how much she liked to give them away.
They went to Paris by boat, took pictures in front of the Eiffel Tower,
Smoked French cigarettes and learned to like wine.
They came back home, eventually.

Louisa ran off with a salesman, Phyllis got polio.
Mary and Lil married brothers - Ross and Jack -
And lived as if they'd never traveled the world
And didn't miss it.

'Your grandmother...' Lil sighs, 'I wish she could tell you these stories.'
I am sitting across from her in a restaurant booth,
Listening to her raspy voice, watching her fuchsia lips,
I am twelve years old and wishing I knew that Mary,
Instead of the one who spills food down her chin
And can't remember my mother is her daughter.