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Museums

KATIE HARTSOCK

and the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

—Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts"

On the way home from an OB appointment
the week I turned forty-one,
I sat in a funk at a red light when the van
two lanes away exploded—

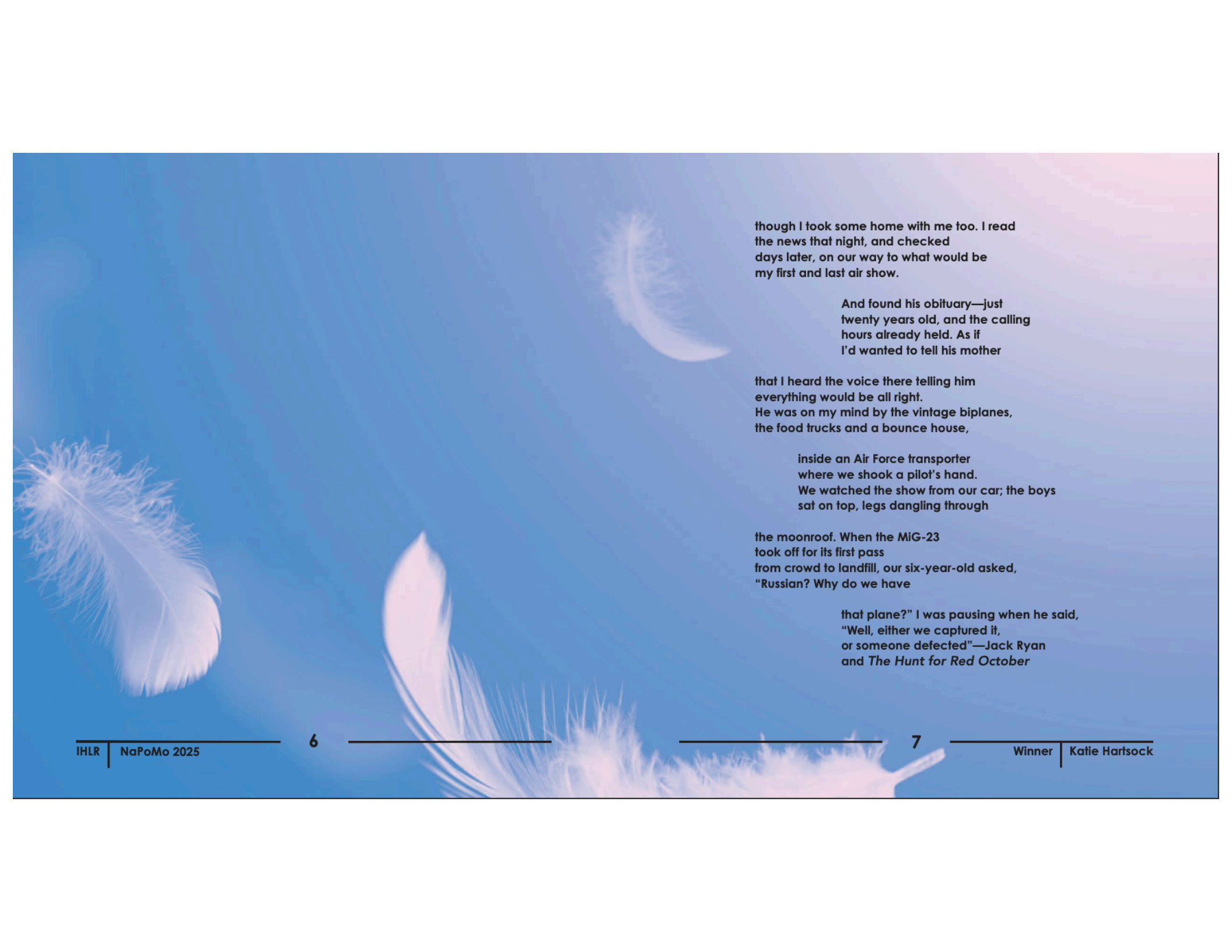
but no, then I pulled over, saw
the motorcycle smashed,
the van caved in, the rider thrown
almost fifty feet

from bike. Had my gaze been facing up,
I'd have seen *something amazing*,
a boy falling out of the sky. I stood
by his shoe, fallen off

and rolled into a parking lot.
Someone else was at his side,
back blocking his helmeted face, hands
clutching his to his chest.

He was shaking. I saw his foot,
white sock a little smudged.
The auto shop guys gathered, said
they heard him coming way

too fast up the hill. The neighbors who'd been
just walking dully along
called it his fault as an ambulance
carried off his shaking,



though I took some home with me too. I read
the news that night, and checked
days later, on our way to what would be
my first and last air show.

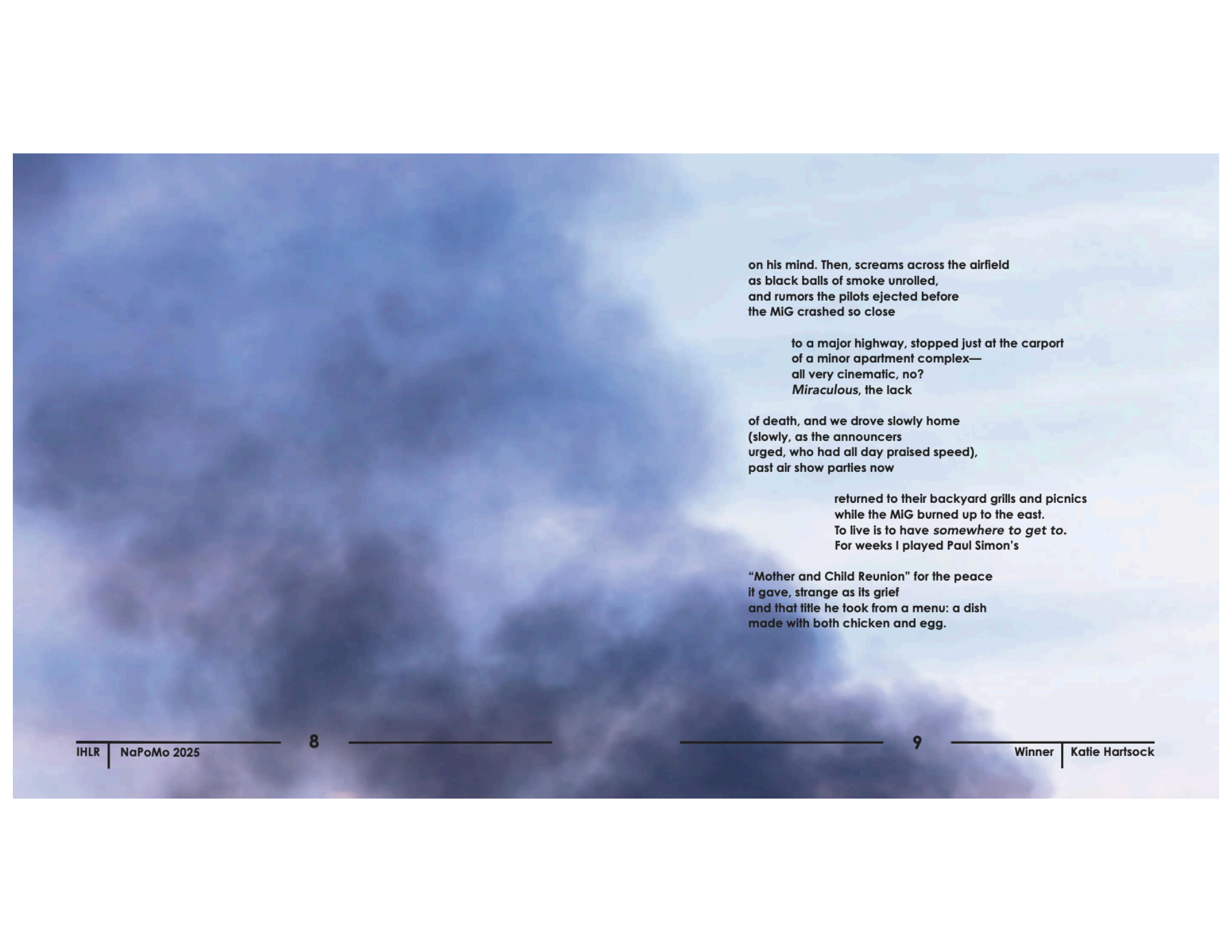
And found his obituary—just
twenty years old, and the calling
hours already held. As if
I'd wanted to tell his mother

that I heard the voice there telling him
everything would be all right.
He was on my mind by the vintage biplanes,
the food trucks and a bounce house,

inside an Air Force transporter
where we shook a pilot's hand.
We watched the show from our car; the boys
sat on top, legs dangling through

the moonroof. When the MiG-23
took off for its first pass
from crowd to landfill, our six-year-old asked,
"Russian? Why do we have

that plane?" I was pausing when he said,
"Well, either we captured it,
or someone defected"—Jack Ryan
and *The Hunt for Red October*



on his mind. Then, screams across the airfield
as black balls of smoke unrolled,
and rumors the pilots ejected before
the MiG crashed so close

to a major highway, stopped just at the carport
of a minor apartment complex—
all very cinematic, no?
Miraculous, the lack

of death, and we drove slowly home
(slowly, as the announcers
urged, who had all day praised speed),
past air show parties now

returned to their backyard grills and picnics
while the MiG burned up to the east.
To live is to have *somewhere to get to*.
For weeks I played Paul Simon's

"Mother and Child Reunion" for the peace
it gave, strange as its grief
and that title he took from a menu: a dish
made with both chicken and egg.

There Is the Sea,
And Who Can
Drain It Dry?

KATIE HARTSOCK

asks Clytemnestra, her voice rich with murder
in a house that does not know how to be poor.


Her king's arriving home from war—a long one,
the big one—but this is about his queen and a rug:

she will give him a bath and the best of her axe,
but first she persuades him to walk on the rug.

I don't know, do you want to like call me or
something, if you want more of the story? After eight

it's quiet, but once we get the kids to sleep I'm done,
usually, except Clytemnestra can wake me up

like a glass of red will wake the night.
And the rug, the rug is purple, which is why



the king doesn't want to cross it, and why her line
about the sea is a real monster, showing how far back

it goes: the brass antiquity of human insistence
that what Earth gives is inexhaustible. Purple, royal,

because the dye was costly, exclusively sourced
from Mediterranean mollusk secretions, a substance

rare and dear as silver, since the harvesting
was hard, scarce. So when she says, *Go on, darling,*

trample it, trash it, we can always get more, maybe
that's the poet saying: *This is how some people think,*

even now, thousands of years ago. Tell me
something good, when we talk, about the sea,

another potential ghost in the trilogy, who gets
this dirge of a question I want to ask again, after

asking almost nothing of it, in classes where at best
theatrical classicists would explain mollusks.

FROM THE *Horse's Mouth*

a conversation about ballads,
lineation, connections, and
passivity with Katie Hartsock

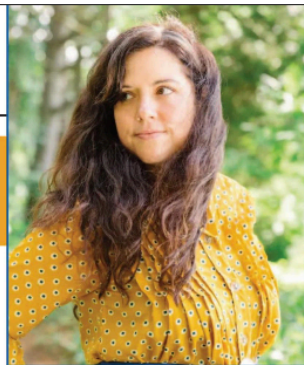


photo by Lisa Mancuso Horn

IHLR: A striking element in your winning poem "Museums" is its form—a series of quatrains staggered across the page at regular intervals. How did you arrive at this shape?

HARTSOCK: In early drafts, the scope this poem wanted for itself felt precarious, as dizzying as some of its events. I needed a form to shape it, both in cutting what needed to go and creating the space of rhythmic mandates for the connections that weren't yet there. I tried blank verse and free verse tercets, and I actually resisted the form that ended up inspiring the final version, unrhymed ballad stanzas, because I'd been using it often. I love how unrhymed ballad quatrains evoke the ballad's history of mysterious narratives (from poems like "Sir Patrick Spens" and Hardy's "The Workbox" to Emily Dickinson's implosive reinvention of the form) and create a subterranean expectation for rhyme, which it then denies.

The poem is not strictly loyal to the ballad's tetrameter/trimeter pattern; some pentameters remain from earlier drafts, and few lines are wholly iambic. But I hope this creates a tension between rhythmic order and disorder that serves the poem. The indentation allowed for a sense of motion, or uncertain meandering, almost like muddy footprints.

IHLR: Speaking of form, your lineation throughout the piece makes incredibly careful use of space. In moments like "they heard him coming way // too fast up the hill" and "Miraculous, the lack // of death," the breaks often carry as much emotional weight as the words themselves—the silence of that gap, that pause, conveying what words alone cannot. What poets have inspired your approach to lineation?

HARTSOCK: Linda Gregerson (her enjambments, but also her indenting and moving stanzas away from the left margin), Laura Kasischke (the first line of her poem "Fatima" may be one of my all-time favorite lines/enjambments), Lorna Goodison (one of our greatest praise poets), Louise Glück (especially in *Averno*) . . . and that's just the women poets whose names begin with L! And with most of whom I've been so lucky to study. It's hard to choose; I feel like I learn something about lineation from every poet I love, but I'll add some old favorites—Robert Hass, Constantine Cavafy (even in translation), H.D., Carol Ann Duffy (I love to teach her "Eurydice" in my mythology class after we've read Virgil's and Ovid's accounts of Orpheus), Paul Muldoon ("Cuba" takes my breath away)—and some newer: Ama Codjoe, Natalie Diaz, Diane Seuss, Tyehimba Jess.

It's fun to study lineation with students in the work of the Modernists, where the smoke-plumed steam train of free verse arrives roaring at the station. Or maybe meter is the steam train, and free verse is electric or diesel? Hmmm. . . . Anyway, it's hard for us who grew up with free verse as the dominant mode to really appreciate how exciting it must have been to decide for yourself when to break the line, instead of working toward a number of feet, especially with rhyme in mind. It's great when students understand how some of Marianne Moore's poems can look like free verse, but are scaffolded by strict syllabics. Many of my students are equally drawn to form and free verse; they like the challenge and the skeleton of form when they realize how differently it asks them to work than free verse.

IHLR: The narrative of "Museums" winds through a variety of settings, taking the reader from an OB appointment to an automobile crash and, soon after, an air show. What unexpected connections did the writing uncover that helped tie these locations together?

HARTSOCK: There was such a swirl of events and locations that insisted they belonged in this poem; the work was more about choosing what to cut, to let a better clarity of connections emerge. Initially, there were more details about the OB appointment and the Paul Simon song. And I was reading, perhaps a bit obsessively, about the young man killed in the motorcycle crash, and from details in one article, I learned he had lived less than a mile from me, pretty much in our neighborhood; I could even tell which house was his family's. Sometime after his death, my young sons and I were riding bikes past their house, which sits just where the road starts to decline into a small hill. I yelled to my sons on their

bicycles, "Slow down!" and then I saw a man—I assume he was the young man's father—in the front yard. He heard me and saw us; I felt like an accidental torture to him, a cruel reminder of his grief. What if someone had shouted at his son to slow down?

But as you can maybe tell, this part of the story lends itself more to prose. I tried to find ways to include it in the poem, but once I took this and those other elements out, the cohesion without them became clear.

IHLR: "Museums" contains multiple allusions to well-known artistic works, including an epigraph from W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," an aside on *The Hunt for Red October*, and a concluding image borrowed from Paul Simon's "Mother and Child Reunion." How is the poem in conversation with these texts?

HARTSOCK: Auden's poem is one of my great beloveds, deeply etched. When I pulled over and crossed the road and stood by the young man, I saw the terrible distance between the site of the motorcycle's impact against the van and where he landed. Almost immediately, Auden's line—"something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky"—appeared in my overwhelmed head and heart. In that poem, Icarus falls and drowns, and no one notices or cares; in contrast, I was preoccupied with what I'd witnessed, and one of the ways I tried to lift myself out of my darkened mood was listening to Simon's "Mother and Child Reunion." The concluding image is not from the song itself, which is vague in its evocations of grief and hope, but from an article I read after becoming curious to know more about it. The title, which is so lovely (and reminds me of Demeter and Persephone), has a strange origin; Simon took it from the name of a dish, which he saw on a menu, that contained both chicken and egg. That oddness, and the sense that the title's source was almost incompatible with the song's beauty, became the way for the poem to end.

When my son, who had seen *The Hunt for Red October* by the time he was six (my husband's decision—I was not consulted!), suggested that the Cold-War-era Russian helicopter at the air show had ended up in America because of someone defecting (as Sean Connery's Russian naval captain does with his submarine in the film), it immediately became part of the poem taking shape in my head—and that was before the MiG crashed! My current manuscript, *The Last Crusade*, takes its title and touchstone from the 1989 Spielberg film, so I'd already been using a movie to think about heroism and boyhood.

IHLR: The language in this poem shifts between two distinct states: lethargy, à la the speaker sitting "in a funk" and the neighbors "walking dully along," and energy, as in the animated repurposing of "something amazing, / a boy falling out of the sky." What role does the tension between activity and passivity play in the poem?

HARTSOCK: Passivity shares its root with such a range of words: *passion*, *patience*, a *patient*. All of them connect to the Latin root *pati*: "to suffer," as in, "to undergo or endure." (It's one of my favorite etymologies: my first poetry collection is titled *Bed of Impatiens*). I think the poem wants to blur typical distinctions: we can seem active (the ploughman in Brueghel) and actually be passive, in that we are simply enduring our usual tasks without engaging anything. And we can seem passive (a driver at a red light staring off) but be quite active (she is balancing several intense concerns at once). The passive is usually the inevitable voice of accidents and disasters. We say they "happen" when there is no easily identifiable subject who makes them happen; they just do.

IHLR: After witnessing the automobile accident that resulted in a young man's death, the speaker notes that "an ambulance / carried off his shaking, // though I took some home with me too." Talk to me about this moment and what the shaking means to you.

HARTSOCK: It's amazing how reverberations can translate bodies. How you can physically sense your tires losing their grip on an icy road below you, or how a frog can feel your footsteps through earth, approaching the bank of his creek, and so he hops in. It's less explainable, but when I saw the young man's foot shaking, I felt that shaking in my own body. *Buzzing*. And when I would remember it, I'd feel it again. It might be a way of responding to Auden's critique of the human capacity to ignore others' suffering—I couldn't ignore what I saw, and it stayed with me. But I also had to find a way to move past it, to be the ship "that had somewhere to get" and sail on, if not entirely calmly.

—JENNESSA HESTER
column editor