**Bittern**

My father never liked to talk too much,

but even over those goddamned cell phones

I could feel his breathing, his listening.

Forty some years back he probably said,

kneeling in the green canoe, “Let’s go see.”

Scrubbing pots with sand, we’d heard sucking air,

suggesting plumbing, an abrupt “Ga-gunk”

across the darkening big quiet lake,

two sports at camp the only souls around.

We skirt reeds and cattails, pushing gently,

easing the stalk-scrape on the canvas hull,

avoiding gunwales, prying the reeking

blooming bottom muck with careful paddles,

until ten yards in front of us: “Ga-gunk.”

In that dense weave of green vertical stripes,

one line bobs down, curving, giving itself

away with that wild prehistoric call.

“Bittern,” my dad says. We watch silently.

“Bittern,” I told the two old sports at camp.

Next morning one of them took our picture,

the one shot of both of us from that week.

I’m a gawky twelve; my dad looks like he

used to, before the skirmish years over

haircuts, smoking dope, damn nigger music.

Then the blue hand wobbled on the cane knob,

no more wedding ring ticking ash handle,

just fused lumbars, submission mossed our rocks.

In that unfamiliar bed he nodded,

smiled to that wild call we dreamed one more time.

**Tar**

A road runs north of me for two fine miles,

to a vanished farm gone back to brambled shades;

the town line we pass over is not marked,

no guardrail or paint border or define;

it’s soft gray flannel through a hardwood arch,

the stage of family walks and lone escapes;

these ghost towns must not be on speaking terms;

there’s a mile without a pole or telephone line.

So I’m shocked sudden reclaiming machines

rend asphalt blacker than it’s been in years,

a line of Mack’s, one, loaded, strains away;

heat-blowing diesels torque and grind huge gears.

Frost heaves, pot holes scarified like nothing;

a shred of clods trails over startled weeds,

a grader peels brown earth, searches a crown;

old cobbles fractured, flung on thistle seeds.

Huge German teeth have overpowered my road,

into somewhere else’s smooth new journeys.

I’m chilled with loss, but gradually recall,

how heat of years has scored my memory:

For me, that bear will always lurch loose-skinned,

a bag of smoke and elbows up that slope.

Beavers will spar with town crew for that stream,

in spring those engineers give tadpoles hope.

Thunderstorms still make July pavement fog,

my keen tow-head’s eyes remain jubilant,

sheltering proudly in his small white palm

the tiny cool red eft, black spots vibrant.

A stroller wobbles blithely in those dusks,

still holds my brood who rides, sleeps, sings, cavorts,

or holds hands with that now-no-longer-wife,

who’s tanned up to white linen summer shorts.

The old Hmong couple still kneels in the bog,

stuffs trash bags full of April’s fiddle heads;

microbursts blast oak crowns; honeysuckle

and barberry invade; ash borer spreads.

Old pastures get some brush-hog each bird season,

so genteel gunner, upland Orvis gent,

bags his game-farm-pheasant from nice pathways,

imported breeches by no thorns are rent.

Each vernal equinox the fireflies swarm,

so thick our gyroscopes lose up and down,

we lean back on warm car-hoods, let our gaze

rise into the roil of that twinkling crown.

My frail-skinned child on shaky roller blades

accelerates down that one off-camber pitch,

into October sunset slanting hard,

around a sandy corner, out of sight.

My love and I park in that once-door-yard,

strategizing our new life in golden light.

*Tar* received Third Prize and *Bittern* received First Prize in the 2017 Acton Memorial Library (Old Saybrook, CT) Poetry Contest