

The Floor

I can't explain
the taste of the floor of the room
on Chase Road. The taste
of the dust or the blood
or the tears or the skin
of her knuckles. If I say
bitter
or copper
or salt
will you ask me
why didn't I tell?
If I tell you I tried, but I failed,
could you even believe me?
Children believe. They try
to make sense.
Keep talismans, charms against evil.
Lost teeth wrapped in cotton
and patron saint medals
and razors that fit behind baseboards. Advil
and Ativan, half-bottles of wine, forgotten
and easily stashed.
Gather the evidence. Measure
my innocence. Sift in
the blood
and the dust and
the skin.
Fear is the catalyst.
Fear makes it rise.
Bake in the hollowed-out pit of a belly.
Follow directions. Swallow your dignity.
Eat up your pain and get down on all fours.
Close your eyes tightly. This is
what you asked for.
Now we both know
the taste of the floor.

Wanderlust

North on 390, 7 AM,
radio broken, I drive listening to my head.

The highway south turns toward me, lifts
her great, unseeing face, shrugs and dusts
passenger cars from her shoulders.
This vast creation, huge, tentacled beast,
has no body, only arms and fingers,
breaching every town and city
marching upright like some grande dame
past courthouses, town halls, then sidles sly
around a corner
to stop behind a biker bar.

We all know what she's doing back there.

Loves her finery, festooned
everywhere with sparklers,
red and green, yellow, white, and blaze orange
fingernails sprout
at each construction site. Willing
to go anywhere you like,
and some places that you won't like
and some places no one ever should.
She is patient, but insistent,
slithers, creeps, opens passageways,
offers paths,
"Take me," she whispers,
"oh, take me," she moans—
for god's sake,
at this very moment
there is a road, smiling like a harlot, sprawled
at the end of my driveway.

Who am I to refuse her?

Pragmatism

Do you still love me, Michael?
Even though I carved your heart out?
Even though I left a blood trail
as I sashayed to the road?

It was quite an operation.
And I used no anesthetic.
And the knives I used were rusty.
Did it hurt much? You sure hollered!

I'm not known for tactful contact. I'm not famous
for compassion.
You're not even my first victim.
You are likely not my last. But,

if you still love me, Michael,
I could use a ride to Dallas. I could use
that hundred dollars.

You *know* how I'll pay for gas.

Jennifer Maloney began writing again in 2016 after a twenty-year hiatus. She currently serves as president of Just Poets, Inc., a literary organization based in Rochester, NY. Her work has been anthologized in two volumes of the Poets Speak... While We Still Can anthology series, in volume 2 of A Flash of Dark, a volume of speculative flash fiction and poetry, in ImageOutWrite Volume 7 and in September 2018, she won the Women Speak Project contest created by Nancy Smith Fine Art, with her poem, Learning. Jennifer is thrilled to have found her voice once more.

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