

POETRY CONTEST WINNER

Rosa Lane

Apogee

Day after the fourth chemo, our father
sold his lobster boat to a young man,

laid the money on the counter, then
mowed the neighbor's lawn for a couple bucks.

We kept eye on the bob
of his shiny bald head afloat

above the chokecherries and the blades
that spun him across the yard

of an afternoon, his confidence
restored along cut edges of grass. We

turned away for a moment, set the table
for tea when we saw the tractor reel

against the bird house post. One arm
hooked to the mast, he stood

on the tractor's seat, one free hand, thick fingers
poked back the nest as delicate as he imagined

a mother made it. He knelt, pinched up
three babies fallen in tufts of straw – still beating life

behind gray lids, wrinkles of yellow beak
oversized and hungry, rearranged them

one by one as if their mother might not notice.
But this fourth one, a small flit, no more

than a knuckle of life lay limp in the crease
of our father's double palms. Broken,

weeps slip high-pitched from the taut tube
of our father's throat, compressed

in his hands stained with accident and nicotine
sucked to places too late to change, he

turned to his daughters – gulps of air
heaved inside his canister chest

this marksman, who once boasted of trophies,
12-point bucks and bear, he confesses his life

to this miniscule feathered face wedged
between thumb and forefinger, arrested

head to head, eyes, windows of heaven
open against the sea of clover, yarrow

and mustard brushed in meridians of light
his boat floated back around the side

of the house, the piece the young man
could never buy. In it our father drifted away

the flick of bird pecking his path ahead
re-tracing everything he had taken

better than whole again.