

honorable mention, poetry

Horse and Woman Plummeting from the Sky

by Suzette Marie Bishop

Horse, woman, a small tank, the horse races up the plank, the woman jumps on his bare back, and they fly head-first down into the small tank of water, like Selene descending into the ocean. The horse and woman swim to the surface, the audience, a collective breath held. I want this plunge with another, take me

down

down

down

hitting the water, the horse's legs paddling, and we rise up out of the water together, gleaming.

The car steered across the land bridge, ocean on either side; one jerk of the steering wheel and we would plunge into the water. How many cars are already down there?

Sonora Webster Carver was the first woman to ride diving horses at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City.

My mother has lost most of the vision in one eye because she has macular degeneration. I hope she can still see me the next time I visit her. And she can't walk very far without needing to rest. In my mind's eye she's always in her forties, and I forget that she's actually in her seventies, frail, nearly blind. Yet, she still has the quick humor that is mine, too, sight in a different way.

She and her horse dived 40 feet into a tank of water.

I had forgotten the sound of the ocean, like an opening up, driving toward it, a break in the rock cliffs, and that sound—seagulls, voices on top of the sound, children yelling and laughing, but underneath, the sound like wind in the trees, static over the phone.

For them, it was just this momentary feeling of weightlessness, then making sure to buck their head down to protect themselves.

After her horse, Red Lips, lost his balance during one dive, Sonora Webster Carver was blinded. She entered the water with her eyes open, detaching her retinas on impact. She relearned to dive by listening for the hooves thundering up the ramp, feeling for the place to jump onto his back.

I think my parents first met at a beach, at Coney Island, my dad spotting my mother in her bathing suit. She was smoking with her girlfriend on a beach towel.

The sense of weightlessness diving down was the same sighted or blind.

My sister and I take nearly an hour to go through the haunted house on the boardwalk, mostly an empty warehouse, totally dark. We feel our way around with our hands. I think we will never get out.

They could fall to their death in the ocean.

My eye exams keep showing high fluid pressure on my eyes, the first sign of glaucoma. I have to wait to see if my peripheral vision diminishes, the black curtain gradually pulled closed.

She barely keeps her body on the horse as they go down, her legs flying off the horse, hanging on to the horse's neck and the harness, the horse looking straight at where they need to go. The crowd and other horses watch. Men clench their hats, their legs splayed, and men and women stand, leaning over the people in front of them.

They each had their own style of diving, one would wait a good five minutes before jumping—he would hold his head up and watch the seagulls fly by. Some dove with their front legs straight out, while others tucked up their legs as if they were going over a jump. One horse would twist in the air and land on his side, making it dangerous for his rider.

A gray motel room with harsh lighting, a smelly bedspread, water stains on the ceiling, a forest waiting out back, and bird song in the morning. Maybe it will be the last time I see my mother.

After making so many jumps, he no longer waited for his rider. He would charge up the ramp to the tower and take a running jump off the diving board, leaving the rider behind.

Notes:

Sections in italics are from:

*"Steed and Steel, Amazing Thrills,"* Carrie Stetler, Star-Ledger, Sept. 24, 2003.

*"Blind World"*, George Cassell, June 9, 2005.

*"Christmas Essay: The Diving Horses of Atlantic City,"* Susan MacDonald, May 6, 2005, June 9, 2005, [link here](#).