

# Patricia Dobler Poetry Award, 2017 Winner

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## Sorrow I Will Lead You Out Somewhere

By: Deborah Allbritain

Sorrow is not a person. If you ask sorrow to pick up  
dim sum on the way home, sorrow will not wait in line.  
Sorrow will drag the chef to your front door,

hold him at gun point as he fills the things you love into shape,  
rotates each at the waist until your wonton sits nicely on the plate.  
Sorrow is not a person. If you tell sorrow to pick up

a bucket of chicken after work, sorrow will not take the drive-through,  
sorrow will break down the chair legs wrenched from their seats  
swinging the knives and busboys through your front door.

Because you live on the edge of disturbed, sorrow  
remembers that you ate an entire man in one year with  
sorrow flattened across your bed like a zillion pressed violets.

Nothing says you must lie down in the scribble of its mangy hair,  
the weight of books you read in bed beside sorrow, enough  
to kick the flimsy out of your screen door. Whenever you ask

sorrow to give you a break, it gives you one more reason  
to overeat. Sorrow is not a person, but if you ask, sorrow  
will at least join you for Chardonnay and brioche,  
a mungo sun rutted on the steps of your front door.

## Judge's commentary

Poet Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, the judge of the 2017 Dobler Award, wrote this about Allbritain's poem:

"I am always taken with forms refusing—turning against fixed: the villanelle that misbehaves. The title 'Sorrow I Will Lead You Out Somewhere' suggests threat, a reprisal, abandonment or worse to come. But the poem never fully abandons the fixed form. Instead, it twists the title's threat, again and again predicting the ways sorrow will not be ghosted. (Indeed, the word sorrow appears 15 times in the 19-line villanelle.) Sorrow becomes an animated excess, haunting the poem, not quite held at bay by form. That is: this ballading—guided measures through which the speaker moves us, leading us out—cannot arrest

shape-shifting sorrow's progress, or our knowledge of its being, despite declarations meant to counter its personification. Rather, the poem acknowledges the speaker's (and our own) likely engagement with sorrow, delineating here a life bound by heaviness and consumption that lists from sustenance to surfeit. 'Sorrow/remembers that you ate an entire man in one year...' The poem locates us 'on the edge of the disturbed,' while insisting, 'Nothing says you must lie down' here. This central tension—the possibility that a banal desire 'for dim sum,' 'for a bucket of chicken after work,' might veer towards sorrow's barking madness dragging the chef home at gunpoint, 'kicking the flimsy out of your screen door'—strains the initial (A1) refrain to an adynaton of 'sorrow flattened across your bed like a zillion pressed violets.' Here the poem delivers on the wildering its title promises! Though via the second (A2) refrain we are returned to familiar repetition of 'your front door,' by the time we reach it, sorrow's been converted again, to a figure no one could have anticipated: a 'mungo sun rutted on the steps.' It will not give us break from its strange, transmogrifying beauty. I am transfixed by the transformation."

### **About the author**

Deborah Allbritain holds a master's degree in speech pathology from University of the Pacific. She hopes to begin study next fall at San Diego State University's MFA program in poetry. Publications and awards include: *The Antioch Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *B O D Y Literature*, *Front Porch*, *Verse Daily*, *One*, *Michigan Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Eclectica*, and others. Her poetry has been anthologized in *Stand Up Poetry: The Anthology*, *The Unmade Bed*, Harper Collins, *The Book of Birth Poetry*, and *In the Palm of Your Hand* (Tilbury House). She received two Pushcart Prize nominations in 2015. Her poem, "The Fire," was a finalist for the Wabash Poetry Prize.

### **About the judge**

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon is the author of *Open Interval*, a 2009 National Book Award finalist, and *Black Swan*, winner of the 2001 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, as well as *Poems in Conversation* and a *Conversation*, a chapbook collaboration with Elizabeth Alexander. She is currently at work on *The Coal Tar Colors*, her third poetry collection, and *Purchase*, a collection of essays. She has written plays and lyrics for *The Cherry*, an Ithaca arts collective. She was one of ten celebrated poets commissioned to write poems inspired by Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series in conjunction with the 2015 exhibit *One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Works* for MoMA.