

ARITHMETIC
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Honorable Mention, Poetry

In the psychiatric ward, she waits for breaks-
eight cigarettes daily, one cup of coffee,
no chemicals to split her body open, walk in her skin,
make her hear radios and jump out of windows.

to flip off the sound. She smoked two packs a day
before checking into this blue room,
the color of a thread diving through the mottled carpet
in her mother's den. Little obsessions

playing hopscotch in her head
remind her of a marionette dangling on it strings.
She swears someone's pulling it across a painted sky,
inching it closer to the shadow of itself,

but she can't stop the dance
in that direction. Twenty-eight days until it returns.
On her fingers she scores
loops in the wire screen,

seconds until a nicotine fix
and slides her hands above her head
like abacus beads to calculate the minutes,
wondering what other colors

swam through that carpet. Mauve, maybe gray,
she can't remember,
but the fibers spread like glass
breaking open on the maple tree in the yard,

webbing into a crackled system of roots.
She didn't want to count the shards,
molecules of smoke dusting a .22 caliber handgun,
bone handle inlay—

her father cradling the metal against his forehead,
still alive. He'd kept it hidden
under a stack of handkerchiefs in a drawer.
Seeing the polished steel body

sleeping in its bed, she couldn't bring herself
to touch the curving torso,
afraid of what it offered. But he did,
and forty years later she remembered

powder singeing nose hairs
as she thought about this significance
of double panes, stairwells.
How many floors to the first? She needed

a measuring tape to record the footage,
break the spell of distance,
somehow make the action more accessible.
But she couldn't open her window

to the sky floating behind glass,
a child's watercolor framed and hung,
and so she moved into the hospital-
these four walls folding and looping,

a paper chain linking her to the infinite degree,
the final act, her committal to it.
Had she qualified the range
between the barrel and cranium,

between father and gun,
would she have thought to jump? Would the event
have repeated itself? Ticking away
the hours until leaving this space, she wonders

how'd she'd feel to face the man who'd left her
aiming at the voices bruising her head
in rounds, each breath she draws
a grille across the page of clouds.