LITTORAL ZONE

Marion Deeds

— First Prize: Short Fiction —

Nina was right on Tim's heels. He heard her light footsteps over his panting. When they'd parked in the turnout, the sky was blue, the air warm, and a big drop of sweat had rolled down his temple as he led the way. Now it was cold, and the air was gray. He wished he hadn't left his windbreaker draped over her camera on the front seat.

Tim knew some streak of competition with her made him turn off the marked trail onto the deer path, even though he wasn't a physical guy, and their innkeeper had warned him that the way was steep. Nina got up at four-thirty every morning to spend an hour on her treadmill and another hour doing yoga. She worked out at the gym four nights a week. She wasn't even breathing hard.

The trail dropped for the third time, a random stair-step of enormous rocks. Tim's calves ached. He climbed down slowly, using his hands. Nina slipped down the boulders after him, lithe as a fox. He lost his balance, stepped left to catch himself, and ended up with his foot in a clear rivulet that carved calligraphy through the sand.

"We're here," he said. He shook his wet foot and stepped onto the sand on the other side of the water.

Her gaze took in the mist-wrapped outlines of trees and rocks. "Lovely," she said.

"Well, sorry. I don't control the weather."

She looked over at him. "No, really. I like how the fog covers up things. It's very… Japanese." She pulled her phone out of her pocket and took a picture of the rocks and the stunted willows that lined the tiny stream.

Tim stepped across it. The beach was covered with small smooth stones, curving around a mottled cliff face, its base planted in the gravel like the roots of an ancient tree. Nina stopped to take a picture. The cliffs held the beach as if in cupped hands, and the fog thinned. Wet silvery sand gleamed for a long way out, past two pinnacles of rock spun and shaped by centuries of water. They looked like guardians.

"Is that a cave?" Nina said.

He craned his neck to see where she pointed. The mist shifted, soughing out toward the ocean, and he could see a deep shadow in the cliffside. "Looks like it," he said.

She lifted the phone again. He felt the pinch of irritation in his gut, pushed it aside.

"It doesn't look very deep," she said. "It's probably not a real cave, just an indentation."

"Nina," he said. "The soul of a bookkeeper."

She walked away without laughing, leaving him stranded, one foot on wet sand, the other on gravel. She headed toward the cave, and he took the moment to watch her, the pendulum arc of her hips, the long tail of her black hair pulled through the notch in her baseball cap, swinging in counterpoint. He spent hours, too many, trying to describe her hair in a way that wasn't clichéd. He eased his notebook from his shirt pocket, clicked the pen and wrote *pendulum hips, counterpoint.*

The moist briny air felt good on her skin, nourishing. Nina stepped over shining piles of kelp, her nose wrinkling at the rank odor. Colonies of gnats hummed in the twists of the slick vegetation. The cave probably wasn't very deep, but the curve and the shadows looked mysterious. *The soul of a bookkeeper.* It was the fourth thing like that he'd said to her since they had left Stockton two days ago.

She wondered how he found out about this place. It wasn't an official beach. They had climbed over a rusted, sagging barbed wire fence to get here. She followed, him panting and trying not to stop when he obviously needed to rest, her trying to figure out how to suggest they go back to the graded trail without hurting his feelings. Without damaging his manhood. Without slighting him. *Soul of a bookkeeper.*

At first, she had been excited by his abrupt detour. It reminded her of hikes with her father when she was a little girl. He would lead the way, wide-shouldered and confident, his shirtsleeves pushed up on his strong arms, "We're having an adventure, Princess!" And she would stride behind, working to keep up. She had never trod on her father's heels the way she had with Tim this morning.

The circular stones clinked under her feet, and she slipped a little. She stopped near a mound of dry kelp and empty clam shells to snap another picture of the cave mouth. Tim had been sitting at the window counter of Black Dog Coffee the first time she saw him, writing in a notebook. The artsy spotlighting called out the chestnut glints of his tousled blanket of dark brown curls, and his work shirt, sleeves casually rolled back from nicely-shaped forearms, made him look outdoorsy. She sat next to him and asked what he was doing. He told her he was a writer.

Only he really was. He had a novel published. She bought it, a slim book, less than two hundred pages. It had been reviewed in magazines. One of her photography classmates had heard of it. "Oh, Tim Horn. He's a master of compression. "Nina had no idea what that meant. "He just needs to write another couple books and he'll be big."

Nina made it to page thirty in the book. Twice. And he wasn't outdoorsy. He just liked blue work shirts.

Tim wrote all the time, filling pages after pages with words. His bedside table was stacked with open notebooks the size of hardbacks, pocket journals nested on top of them. When she made the bed, she turned her head sideways to read the

words. Sometimes an entire page would be blank except for, *fish tacos purple toenails,* or *curtain river of black starless*. When he wasn't scribbling in his notebooks he was on the computer, with headphones. He wouldn't talk about his work. It was too tender, he said, and sometimes they could sit at the same table, and he might as well have been on another continent

The fog glided back from the ocean. It came in slow and even, as if the cave was an invalid breathing against pain, grayness massed around its curved mouth. The indentation ran back a short way, forming a Vee, its south side stacked with driftwood, kelp, and rounded rocks. She stepped inside. The ceiling, at first, was high above her head, and a memory emerged of stretching to touch the ceiling from her father's shoulders. It was so vivid she had to stop for a moment, blinking. She tilted her head back and reached up, but the curve of rock was far above her fingers.

If her father had been here, he would have explained what kind of rocks these were, and why some wore away and some stayed, creating tunnels and caves. She would have said something like, "Is there pirate treasure, Daddy?" He would have said, "Probably not, Princess. The only treasure here is you."

She walked farther in. Even in the near darkness, she could make out lines of various colors, striations in the rocks. Red, brown, and tan, they slanted down from the top of the cave, beckoning her. She took a pair of pictures. The striations created an illusion that the cave ran back farther than it did. She thought of calling Tim to show him, but the image of him

scribbling in his little book, looking away from the rocks, away from her, stopped her. Sand crunched under her feet as she moved forward. The cupped shape of the indentation changed the acoustics and the ocean sighed around her, filling the space with its measured invalid's breath.

The black rocks held pools of clear water, lined with anemones; green-tendrilled, gold and red. He knelt on the rough stone and studied them, his face close to the surface. They were welcoming mandalas, their velvety tendrils drawing in unsuspecting sea creatures to be eaten. Sea stars, dark red and brown, crusted one wall of a large pool. As he stood, a pair of tiny crabs skittered away from his feet. A gull landed a few yards away, studied him from one eye.

He looked out. The horizon vanished just beyond the guardian rocks, white surf melding with the silver mist. He could hear the sighing of the waves. The evening before, on the balcony of their hotel room, they listened to the breakers roll in, thunderous, commanding. He had wanted to feel the heat of her against his side, smell her hair, but she had her fancy camera out and kept jumping up to take pictures of the waves.

He wrote *pair of crabs*; *gull tracks in wet sand like writing from a dead culture*. He thought of calling Nina over to see the anemones, and looked toward the cave, but he could not see her. He wondered if she had gone back up the trail, tired of waiting. He imagined her crouching over the pools like a bird of prey, aiming her phone, clicking, clicking.

Stepping off the rocks, he felt the sand smush under his shoe. The gull gave a plaintive call and flapped away over gleaming sand littered with tiny shells like fluted hats.

Nina was beautiful. It wasn't just her hair. She had a narrow, wolfish face dominated by blue eyes. Usually she wore her hair pulled back in some version of a ponytail, but when they went out, she would leave it down and sweep it over one shoulder, stroking it like a pet.

Sometimes he'd look up and see an expression on her face that took him awhile to associate with his grandmother, his father's mother. Every Thanksgiving and Fourth of July, at some time during the family get-together, Grandmother Horn would look around the table and announce, "Men are useless. Only good for one thing."

His mother would usually say, "They're good for more than one thing, Evelyn." Grandmother Horn would say, "If you can get them to take out the garbage, that's *two* things. Hah!" After she'd slugged down the rest of her Seagrams and Seven, her gaze darted around the table, daring any man there to disagree.

The curio cabinet in his parents' house held five silver-toned, "Salesman of Year, Grass Valley," trophy cups, but the dealership had closed Tim's high school freshman year. His father got a job at a big box store in Rancho Cordova and wore his red apron like a garment of shame.

Nina didn't drink Seagrams. She drank six-part cocktails concocted from ingredients like basil-flavored vodka, herbal infusions, and elder flower, but after a couple of those, Tim would find her giving him that look, Grandmother Horn's look. Somehow, instinctively, she knew that he was just one more in a long line of useless men.

Tim stood with his eyes closed, feeling small drops of moisture on his face, trying to find the words for the smell of the ocean, the whisper of the surf.

He wrote*, delicate deadly emerald tendrils*.

It wasn't completely an illusion after all. The cave did extend farther than she expected. At the back, the passage turned at right angles to the opening. The ceiling cantilevered down and she had to stoop, but once she ducked in, she could straighten up. She stood coffined in darkness, her chest tight, her pulse laboring. The passage was nearly silent for a moment, the only sound a steady dripping of water, before the rush of the surf returned. Her eyes adjusted to the light that glimmered on the floor and the wall to her left. She activated the flashlight app and held out her phone, below waist level. The tunnel smelled fetid, she shivered and edged forward, flatfooted.

She saw light. The passage opened in a few feet, water trickling musically down onto the sand. It was a small opening and she squeezed her way out, blinking. The ocean continued its steady soothing rush. She walked onto the talus. She could see the shadow of one of the spires. She was slightly south of the beach they'd come down to, on the other side of the sloping cliff face.

It looked easy enough to walk up the slope back to the trail.

She thought about taking a picture of the silvery surf, but with the mist, she doubted she'd get anything worthwhile. If she had brought her SLR camera, she might have been able to capture something, but she had read irritation in the set of Tim's shoulders and chosen to leave it in the car instead.

"Tim?" He was nowhere in sight. She wondered if he had already headed back up.

"Tim?"

Foam frothed around his feet. He took a step back. The tide must be coming in. The beach disappeared when the tide came in. He stepped back, then back again. Another tongue of water lapped at his feet, swirling, then rolled away.

He walked back to the tidepools. "Nina?"

There was no answer.

Some fluke of the breeze had blown the fog away from the indentation. He followed his own footprints across the sand to the gravel, and entered the cave. Nina had been right. It wasn't much of one. The hollow was about as large as their hotel room, ending in a curved wall at the back, marked by slanting lines, layers of stone a memorial to the battlefield of two tectonic plates. He glanced around the space. Nina must have been disappointed. It wasn't up to her standards.

Distantly, a gull called. For a moment, it sounded like his name.

Mendocino Headlands: A Gift for Shara
Charane Sirrine
Oil