

H. L. HIX

*How would you change your life if you could?*

As a kid my favorite food was shrimp.  
*Must have rubbed pencil lead in your eyes.*  
 I liked what my dad liked; he liked shrimp.  
 The welts on my belly looked like eyes.

*Must've rubbed pencil lead in your eyes.*  
 Alcohol for turning twenty-one.  
 The welts on my belly looked like eyes.  
 She listed my symptoms to the phone.

Alcohol helped turn me twenty-one.  
 Thank god someone had stayed in the room.  
 So many symptoms into the phone.  
*Get her to the emergency room.*

Thank god someone else was in the room.  
 Anaphylactic shock swells your throat.  
*Get her to the emergency room!*  
 Sooner or later you suffocate.

Anaphylactic shock swelled my throat,  
 my lips went numb, I flowered with welts.  
 Sooner or later you suffocate.  
 They make interns work those weekend shifts.

My lips went numb. My skin bloomed with welts.  
*Sounds like allergies, take off your shirt.*  
 Interns pinballed through those weekend shifts,  
 fistfight- and car-wreck-filled Friday nights.

*Sounds like allergies, take off your shirt.*  
 Shrimp, bloody mary, then lobster, beer.

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Bar brawls and car wrecks for Friday night.  
I thought first I could just take a shower.

Shrimp, bloody mary, lobster, and beer.  
As a kid my favorite food was shrimp.  
I thought if I could just take a shower.  
What my dad liked, I liked; he liked shrimp.

## *Do you believe in ghosts?*

*He knows your name? You told him where you live and where you work?*

*A stranger confesses double murder,  
lays out plans to kill his own wife, and you give him your card?*

I could tell friends what happened, but not why.  
I'd spent a Fulbright year pursuing Peru, wooing it,  
learning how little I'd known about light,  
believing weaving outstays stone, keeps more constant color,  
thinking this place might make mortals mistake  
themselves for gods, twenty thousand feet from snow to the sea.

I couldn't get my suitcase open. I'd sent some things on,  
but this was a time of terrorists there,  
the guards inspected everything, matched passenger to bag,  
let nothing undefended on the plane.  
When they asked how much I'd spent in my stay, I caused delay  
by telling the truth (a mistake), and had  
to explain I'd spent six hundred, yes, but been there a year.  
So I'd been a long time in this office  
before we got to the bag I'd had to sit on to close,  
and now couldn't open, nor could the guard.  
Even after a year there I was naïve, kept trying  
to open the suitcase so long they had  
to hold the plane for me before — at last — I realized  
that all it took for the guard to see things  
my way was a bottle of pisco from my carry-on.

They had to open the door again to let me on board.  
They seated me beside an older man  
(I was young then, all men were older) and we didn't speak.  
The flight from Lima was how long? nine hours?  
with a layover in Panama. I was tired. I slept.  
At some point they handed out the customs  
declaration form that asks how much you're bringing back.  
I had seven thousand dollars on me,  
all the savings of the woman from whom I had rented  
my last months in Peru, trusted to me

on my promise to send her daughter in the states a check.

Not having asked then why the cash couldn't go through a bank, I couldn't construct now a good guess what to declare, and the man beside me saw my hesitation. *Just declare a souvenir or two.*

If it had grounding, it wouldn't be trust. I didn't say how much I had, but did ask him, *This line for cash, what's the best way to fill it out?* He showed me his form that said \$25, then smiled and opened his vest: wads and wads of bills, like in the movies, with bands around them. *Don't sweat*, he said. *I'm a businessman, I carry twenty or thirty thousand to Chicago all the time. No one will ask.* That started the conversation, some Spanish, more English, even a little in German.

He hadn't learned how quick he was with languages until the war — they had taught nothing so fancy in school where he grew up, and then he was motivated, it made him useful to the officers, earned him details as safe as anything there at the front.

It helps now in business, he said, but then it meant much more: a little distance from the line of fire.

*North Pole, Siberia, Antarctica,  
no place gets colder than Germany in January,  
has wind so penetrating, snow so deep.*

By then he'd forgotten me, focused his eyes somewhere else.

*They were our allies — "they" were the Russians — but rations were scarce, and their icons didn't make them saints, read how many German women they raped when they took Berlin.* He and a buddy were transporting two Russians on foot, he didn't say why.

Reunite them with their unit, maybe. Wasn't the point.

He and his buddy were scared and hungry, afraid of frostbite, of getting lost, running out of food.

They decided to kill the two Russians.

It might have been exactly what they were supposed to do, just orders that can't be given out loud.

By this time his chin was quivering, and tears streaked both cheeks.

*The look on their faces. They'd trusted us.*

*All these years, I've tried to justify it, tried to forget.*

But misery follows misery, and guilt follows guilt,  
 so he wasn't through. He had bodyguards  
 in Peru, everyone with money did, kidnapping had  
 become a common crime, though bodyguards  
 didn't always stop it, they could be corrupted, become  
 the kidnapers. He had a family  
 in Chicago, a daughter he loved, a wife he didn't.

He was in love now with someone younger.

Divorce would give his wife sole custody of their daughter.

His wife came with him to Peru sometimes,  
 he could have his bodyguards hand her off to someone else  
 to do her in. He had it all worked out.

Still teary-eyed, mind you, which is why my friends were worried.

All I could think to say was, *Anything*  
*that began that way couldn't end well, that's not how you want*  
*to start a life with the woman you love.*

He thought for a while, a long while, said *You're probably right.*

The layover in Panama ended his reverie.

Back on the plane, I showed him the molas  
 I'd bought, listened to him dismiss folk art, then tell about  
 his collection, prints and master drawings.

That's it. No other dangerous intimacies, shocking  
 disclosures. The import/export business  
 is dull, really. No later threat confirmed my friends' concerns.

He must be dead by now. He trusted me  
 with his story. He gave me his card, so I gave him mine.

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H. L. Hix teaches in and directs the creative writing MFA at the University of Wyoming. His recent books include a poetry collection, *Chromatic*, a collection of essays on poetry entitled *As Easy As Lying*, and an anthology, *Wild and Whirling Words*.