

Hanging on Like Death · *Michael Van Walleghen*

The Octopus? The Tilt-a-Whirl?
Whatever it is, it begins

in the twinkling of an eye
to look like so much junk—

but it's too late by then.
By then, the jumpy alcoholic

who collects our tickets
has also strapped us in.

You'd have to be a little kid
to trust this thing. Tools,

sinister, odd scraps of metal
scattered in the oily grass . . .

this ride looks absolutely
murderous. "Hang on now."

I tell my daughter. "Hang on."
What else is there to say

when the Octopus has got you?
Or suddenly, some cold, grey morning

a lavender, Chevrolet Impala
with different colored doors

jumps the twisted guardrail
and then comes sliding toward you

sideways, down the interstate.
You'd have to be four years old

and afraid so far of nothing
in this life but monsters

big dogs and snakes to trust
this hanging on, this tilting world

about to vanish, this carnival
we almost missed—and *would* have

except for sheer dumb luck
and the kid who pumped our gas

and answered all our questions
by pointing here and there

along the flickering horizon
with a lit cigarette.