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A Vocation

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A Vocation

Siobhan Phillips

A human can be so afraid
the liver fails, a guest researcher
tells me. I'm impressed. His accent
tests a laugh-line: You are yellow,
truly. Yes. . . . We don't know why
it happens yet, but give us time.
Or war. That's neuroscience data.

His was decades past. He left
his violin behind; he came
to grad school. Never picked it up again.
But still lights up at dinner, hailing
Oistrakh: his technique, his tone.
His thirst! So many shots—he mimes—
before a show. So drunk he sits

on stage—more gesture—sways. Then plays
Prokofiev. Without a flaw.
I do not breathe, he adds. Years after,
though, I take the tape and listen
slow. He misses lots, his fingers
slip. He just recovers fast,
so fast your ears would never guess.

He sighs above his coffee. Practice
cannot give you this. And I
had none. I thought a student visa
safer. I came here. I stopped,
however, not for that. I lacked—
a pause. It's years ago. And you?
What brought you to this topic, fear?

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Siobhan Phillips is an assistant professor at Dickinson College and the author of *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in Modern American Verse* (Columbia UP). Her poems and essays have appeared in *Southwest Review*, *Yale Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Literary Imagination*, and other journals.