Epicenter

Chaney, Joseph R

Epicenter

He was walking to work when the buildings began to break, their bones cracking, popping, cement dust firing onto the street. A snapped wire lashed like a feline’s tail.

The growling pavement tilted, throwing him down. The dizzy earth thundered, coughing sand. When he stood up again, he wondered where he could have been going. Did it matter?

We’ve heard the stories from Hiroshima. One survivor found a friend with scorched soles and had to push him home like a barrow because he could walk only on his heels.

Another dug through rubble looking for her missing child, only to discover a different girl, almost dead, moaning, her daughter having vanished with her doll.

The facades still hissed, crumbling. A girl cried from a storefront, under a collapsed floor, and he went searching. The June day dawned. Only her thin voice indicated life.

He crouched to enter, then crawled over glass and concrete chips, calling out. Though frequent, her cries weren’t any kind of answer, more like wheezing, like gasps that the dying make.

An image of his mother bound in sheets on her deathbed gave him strength to push through to the farthest recess, forcing broken furniture aside, inhaling the dust.

With his hand he found the girl’s warm hand. She lay trapped under a fallen cabinet. He used his feet to pry it up, and pulled her out. He didn’t know her leg was torn
Joseph Chaney

until he saw the bloodtrail in the street.
With his undershirt he stopped the bleeding.
Her bruised eyelids shut, she breathed quietly.
Stunned people stepped from the buildings like ghosts.

Although he grew aware of their voices,
he couldn’t move. He was a refugee.
His own family had died in the war
that overran his ancestral country,

driving him out. He swam a long way
down the river, harassed by storm water,
and landed in a camp at the river’s mouth,
where other broken men and boys gathered.

The rescued child was his first human care
in this city, where not even the dogs
respected him. So when her mother wailed
and ran toward him, her raised arms waving,

he didn’t feel brave or happy or proud.
The girl, who’d given him his life again,
took it back, and he found himself alone
in the street, adrift among the living.