Betsy Sholl, the former poet laureate of our state, writes that this week’s poem “came out of an actual experience at the main post office in Portland,” where she heard a little voice that grew larger as she thought about it.

Alms
by Betsy Sholl

Small as a fly bump, the little voice behind me calling Miss, Miss, wanted a dollar, maybe for food as she said

in that voice of mist, so plaintive
and soft it could have come from inside my own head, a notch below whisper,
voice of pocket lint, frayed button hole,

voice of God going gnat small. I shivered and stopped. I looked for the source, and there it was again, Miss, so slight

it wobbled moth-like on air,
up from a bare trash-filled recess beside the post office steps. Yes, I gave the dollar. But I had seven

in my wallet, so clearly that voice wasn’t small enough, still someone else’s sorrow, easy to brush off,

till later that night, in bed, I heard it again, smaller—miss, miss, little fly strafe troubling sleep—not a name at all, but a failure, a lack, a lost chance.

Take Heart: Poems from Maine, an anthology collecting the first two years of this column, is now available from Down East Books.