



*Diverse Voices Quarterly*  
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### Editor's Note

A little later than I wanted, but it's here and it's still autumn (at least in the U.S.). My reward for finishing this issue? I've got pumpkin pie cheesecake waiting for me. Yum! These pieces need no introduction, and are you reading this anyway? No, you want to read the poetry and stories. So, go forth...

Enjoy!

Krisma

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Cover art: *Utah Mountain Birch* by Keith Moul

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**Mary Koral** is happy to be published in a journal devoted to diversity! She lives a multicultural, multinational life, and her work depicts that reality. “Baby Stealer?” is part of a larger work, *Thicker Than Water*, that she hopes to have picked up. She has stories and essays published or forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly*, *Cream City Review*, *Tusculum Review*, *Pisgah Review*, *Interim*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and others.

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A young author, **John Morrison** has been writing for almost a decade. He is student of human nature and the human condition and derives much inspiration from simply watching people in their everyday lives.

**Keith Moul**'s photos began appearing widely in 2010, while his poems have been published for more than forty years. Blue & Yellow Dog Press released his chapbook, *The Grammar of Mind*, in November 2010. *Beautiful Agitation*, which won Red Ochre Press 2011 chapbook contest is now available for purchase. He has trouble deciding which is more satisfying: writing poems or taking pictures.

**Nyk Robertson** was born in Wichita, Kansas, and is currently residing in Brighton, Massachusetts. She received her bachelor's in English and minor in creative writing from Emporia State University. She is currently working on her master's in gender studies from Simmons College in Boston. Robertson has been published in the *Flint Hills Review*. She has performed at the Cantab Lounge and Lizard Lounge in Cambridge. She has hosted and performed annually in the Live Homosexual Acts at Emporia State University for five consecutive years.

**Felicia Schneiderhan** grew up on the Mississippi River, the daughter of a nun caught by a fisherman. Her essays have appeared in various literary journals, including *Literary Mama*, *PoemMemoirStory*, and *Sport Literate*. She lives in Northern Minnesota with her family.

**Layla Schubert** is a native of Springfield, Illinois, from whence she fled long ago. She completed a BA in creative writing at SIUC, working with Lucia Perillo, Rodney Jones, and Allison Joseph. From there she traveled to the wilds of Oregon with two hippies and five cats, where she earned a Ph.D. in medieval literature and an MLS just in time for the economy to crash. Schubert currently resides in Portland with her husband and herds her two children while her hundred-year old house crumbles around her ears.

**Vincen Gregory Yu** is currently in his fourth year of medical training at the University of the Philippines College of Medicine under the prestigious 7-year INTARMED program (and if all goes well, will be a full-fledged physician by 2016). He grew up in Iloilo City, studies in Manila, and can't be any prouder of being Filipino-Chinese. He loves the theater, film, books, zoos, and airplanes and airports, though not necessarily in that order. He is overjoyed to finally appear in an international publication.

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## **AFTERSHAVE**

by

Prudence Fenton

Willard rolled over and slammed the snooze button. He opened one eye, pulled up the covers with his fat, hairy arm, and buried his head from the dawn light. He didn't want to be wearing his human suit anymore. He was tired of being Willard. He was forty-two years old and had never left the summer construction job he'd taken more than two decades ago when he got out of college. Yeah, it made him laugh to think of his pursuits during those college days. Beer, women, and hard-hat dollars. The first two never wasted his time. The construction he dreaded—especially this week.

He'd agreed to take over the jackhammer job from his sick buddy, Luke. The shaking, the noise, the dust, and then the shaking all over again. Could he ever, would he ever, might he ever stop? Just stop, think, and find another goddam job. He saw those ads for ITT tech and had even gone online to check them out. The alarm clock wailed and his arm came out again and slammed it off. The clock crashed to the floor, joining his shoes, socks, and pants that lay in a heap next to a wastebasket filled with beer bottles. He stared over at the bureau he'd had since college, piled high with underwear, socks, and aftershave. He kept meaning to shave his beard and wanted to be prepared with the aftershave.

His feet felt the cold floor. Today Willard was going to do it. Shave his beard. He looked down at his bare stomach decorated with fur. Many women had told him he was a hairy guy. One even suggested he shave his back. The thought made him shiver. That could happen if he found the right woman. He would do the beard today. That jackhammer kicked up too much dust, and he feared his beard would be cemented on his face.

Maud, his calico cat, jumped on the bed beside him. She kneaded the down comforter with her claws. White feathers floated out. He petted Maud, then pulled up the blinds. The sun hit the far hillside. Today promised to be hot. His bedroom faced north so the air was still cool. He looked up at the wooden rafters, paint chips flaking from them. The bubbled walls beckoned. His bedroom could use some of his construction talents. He entered the blue-tiled bathroom, which suffered like the bedroom, with cracks and chips and pockets of hair and dust in the corners. Maud followed.

“Criminy, kitty cat, how can you stand me? I'm such a slob,” he said.

He waited for the maid that would never come, or perhaps his mother, who hadn't cleaned up after him since he was eighteen.

He stood at the sink and stared into the mirror, and a big guy with brown, wavy locks and a bushy beard stared back at him. He picked up the scissors and began to cut.

He cut chunks from his chin, his cheek, his neck. The chunks fell to the floor and multiplied into a hair mountain. Maud watched, tail swishing from side to side. He pulled out his new hair trimmer and plugged it in.

The whirr pleased him, more than the *chukka-chukka-chuk* of the jackhammer that hit his belly and gave him indigestion. More hair scattered into the air. He chopped and shaved in concentration. Brown hair everywhere—soft, coarse, short, long, and then...his face, chin, neck. And then he looked into the mirror, and a different human stared back. Who was this guy with the pointy chin, the big Adam's apple, the gray eyes, the narrow head? Would anyone recognize him? He had lived the past twelve years hidden under a sheaf of hair.

He felt the cool breeze on his head. Shivering and shaking, he put his hands up to feel his rugged face, his thatched head from uneven trimming. Where had this guy been? He went to get the aftershave.

\* \* \*

It was 11:00 a.m. when Willard climbed the wooden stairs to the office trailer. Plastic desks and a makeshift counter with the giant time clock on the right filled the trailer. Two twin secretaries Flo and Evey in tight pink cashmere sweaters manned the desks. Fake wood plastered the walls with two small windows providing a view into the site. Willard took his place at the end of the line to punch his time card. The air-conditioning hit the back of his neck. He kept reaching his hand up to feel his chin and cheek.

Conway, the foreman, came in. He scratched his thick blond beard and pulled shoulder-length blond hair back off his sweating neck.

"Hey, has anyone seen Willard? I need to move him from jackhammer to drywall on the eighth floor," Conway said.

"Hey, man, I'm here," said Willard as he punched his time card.

All eyes turned toward him. No one spoke. The secretaries frowned at him, the workers in line crowded around him.

"You ain't Willard, no way," said Flo.

Conway pulled off his black rim glasses and peered into Willard's face.

"What the eff...? Man, that is you," said Conway. He punched Willard in

the arm. “You even trimmed your eyebrows like a damn woman. You’re an ugly cuss without the hair.”

Willard winced. His eyes smarted with that remark. That thought had crossed his mind too.

Willard then stood up straight and flashed a big, white-toothed smile at the secretaries. No one had ever seen his lips before.

“Time for a change, you know. It’s what’s inside that counts, Conway. You might want to lose your blond locks someday,” he said.

“Yeah, right,” said Conway, looking far away from the new Willard. “Get up to the eighth floor with the drywall crew. I want it finished today.”

“Sure thing,” said Willard. He walked out, picked up his tool belt, and took the metal stairs two at a time. On the seventh floor, he stopped to look at the view of the Cleveland skyline. He loved Lake Erie. And hell, he had built most of the skyscrapers in town. The day was heating up, humid with a light breeze. Once again he ran his hand over his new head and face. The open grids phase was his favorite time in a new building. He felt affinity with the steel. Naked grid-iron, pure, undressed, waiting to contain and define something new.

## ACEDIA AND THE RUSSIAN BLUE

by

Michele A. Hromada

I am a professor of economics at the University of Washington. After my last class, I park my bike and gather up discarded papers and food containers from my apartment to take to the complex's refuse and recycling area. The alcove is pristine except for a piece of paper on the tiled floor. I notice the handwriting first. It is bold and black and written in a style that reminds me of calligraphy. The unfolded sheet of paper is torn from a spiral notebook. The writing is so clear I can read the words while standing up. I see a date, September 10, at the top of the page. My heart beats faster when I recognize the exact configuration of letters spelling out my name: Dr. Clifford Osborne, Apt. 8B.

I bend down, scoop up the paper, and crush it into my pocket. Inside my apartment, I smooth it out on the kitchen table and see that the writing is set up like journal entries.

*Sept. 10*

*Looking from my window, I saw Dr. Clifford Osborne, Apt. 8B, park his bicycle this evening. He was carrying a brown paper bag, probably his dinner. I wonder what kind of food he likes? Hamburgers, tacos, noodle soup? Maybe he likes sushi.*

*Sept. 12*

*This morning I was standing next to Dr. O. in the elevator. I could see his left eye twitching beneath his wire-rimmed glasses. He seemed absorbed in his own thoughts and was unaware of me. I wanted to rub my head against his leg and*

The journal entry ends; there is nothing written on the other side. The writing was most likely continued on another page. My fingers play with the frilly pattern of torn circlets on the left side of the paper. For the past few years, I have taught and done research in economics at the University of Washington. Bike riding, chicory coffee, an organic diet, and running keep my body lean and wired. Living in Seattle, in a fashionably shabby apartment, my possessions include vintage furniture, vinyl record albums, hardcover books, and an assortment of framed black-and-white photos of alleys, taken around the world. I pride myself on being an independent thinker with an analytical mind and am in the thick of what should be a seminal article on macroeconomics and the global economy. It should be finished any day now. At forty, I suppose my students think of me as an irrelevant, aging hipster. My hours have been spent conducting classes, going to meetings, and writing this paper in the hopes of getting a tenure appointment. I do not waste time examining my

emotions, but right now, I am perspiring and agitated.

I wonder if one of my colleagues at the university has left these notes to distract me from my paper. Oliver Simon has a blog where he has been predicting economic ruin for the American economy as has happened in Portugal and Greece. He has been deriding my advocacy of vast government policy changes to stabilize the economy in the hopes of maintaining the middle class in this country. Oliver maintains that tax cuts for the rich, the so-called job creators, are needed as a continued policy to stabilize the economy. He has termed me a socialist and naive optimist in my advocacy of make-work projects to update infrastructure. Even in Seattle, I sense a trend of mean-spiritedness toward those who have less. I pour myself a glass of pinot noir and look out the window. A stocky woman is walking a sleek blue-gray cat on a leash. The contrast in their appearances and the fact that it is an elegant cat and not a dog out for an airing gets my attention. I watch the pair walking along the tree-lined path until they are out of my view.

\* \* \*

The next morning I am jogging and out of breath when the woman and her cat pass me by. I shout “good morning” and run in place while commenting on her cat’s beauty.

“Thank you. Isis is a Russian blue; I rescued her from a shelter. She reminded me of an Egyptian sculpture; that’s why I gave her the name Isis.”

Isis is stretching, as cats do, head down, tail in the air; she curls and uncurls her toes in the sand. She stares at me with malachite eyes. Isis’s owner introduces herself as Rebecca Jansen. We chat a bit; Rebecca is in the technology field. I feel the hairs on my leg come alive. Isis has begun to rub her head against my bare shin. Since the breakup with my wife, I have closed myself off from women, but I feel myself aroused and wish to swoop up Isis and take her along on my jog.

I continue my run and wave to James Hayes as he passes me from the other direction. James is a philosophy professor, a former Benedictine monk, and a colleague at the university. My first class is at noon, so I head home, shower, and sit at my desk. Pulling out a yellow legal pad, I jot down some notes on what I think are the determinants of long-term economic growth. My mind wanders to the torn journal pages from the day before; I ruminate and brood. I fall into a faint, unsatisfying sleep and awake with a throbbing pain in my neck. As if pulled down by invisible weights, I strain to get out of my chair. This is a mistake, I know; I will not be working on this paper again today. Perhaps I am suffering from adult ADHD and need medication. Maybe after years of scholarly pursuits, I am becoming undisciplined and lazy.

Leaving the apartment in hopes that the drizzle will revive me from my

torpor, I notice a piece of paper by the elevator door. Two simple declarative sentences curve at the top of the page.

*Sept. 13*

*He thinks I'm beautiful. I had quite the effect on him.*

Toward the middle of the page is a poem.

*A graveyard*

*A sockeye salmon*

*Sockeye salmon lives graveyard*

*It plays life*

*I play you*

*Will we play?*

*Will you live?*

*Me.*

*We.*

*You.*

Feeling a vague sense of nausea I retrace my steps back to my apartment. I text Suki Nakata, my graduate assistant, and tell her to cancel my classes for the day. Sprawled on my couch, I reread the journal page. I am not much for poetry but this Dadaist rant intrigues me. I listen to my voice mail. Sheila, my ex-wife, has left another message about selling our mountaintop cabin.

“Cliff, it’s me again. You never returned my last call. We never really use that cabin, and it needs repairs. I think we should sell it; I need cash to rent space for my nutrition counseling business. The agent says there is an interest in remote cabins in the woods for people who work from home. Call me, Cliff.”

Sheila and I had once loved hiking and camping. We had once loved one another. I remember with detachment the softness of her bare skin against mine inside our joined sleeping bags. Her eyelashes tickled my face as we wriggled together to get comfortable. I think of the Russian blue cat’s slanted, green eyes as she walks toward me. I fall asleep and dream about Isis. She has taken on human qualities and is standing upright on her furry legs at a lectern. Isis writes on a dry-erase board. Students are sitting in front of

laptops. I am by myself in the front row, naked, except for my white socks and high-top sneakers. Hoping no one notices, I slump down in my seat. I see the words: It plays life.

Isis looks at me and asks: “Tell us, Dr. Osborne, how are you playing at life? Are you living or pretending...are you living or pretending...are you living or pretending?”

Despite my nudity, no one in the lecture arena is looking at me; it is like I am invisible, but I feel ashamed and vulnerable. Isis’s words change into babble and I try to respond to her question, but no words come out. I awaken to bright light and panic; my body is at the very edge of my sofa. Swinging my legs downward, my feet reach the floor and I sit upright.

Unable to muster up the energy to work on my article, I transfer mental energy to physical energy and wander around my apartment. I feel as though I am in a trance. The familiar objects around me are losing their original purpose and transforming into an ugly arrangement of soulless junk. I have an urge to toss it all out. Instead I go into the bedroom, darken the room, and lay down on top of the covers. An internal monologue drones on in my head; the images shifting across different time periods in my life.

*I am a little boy playing with my Nana’s cat, Puff. She is a yellow-and-white-striped beauty. Every day after school, I walk down the street to Nana’s house to play with her. My mother is allergic and we can’t get a pet of our own. I remember a picture I took of Puff sitting on Nana’s front porch. I also recall a picture of me at my lectern giving a talk about macroeconomics to a group of undergraduates posted on Facebook. I was a popular adjunct then, passionate and younger. Social media, I think, is “collective narcissism.” I should have moved to the East Coast and taken the job at NYU, but relocating was too daunting, and Sheila wanted to stay in Washington. I see the diminutive Oliver Simon, at his tenure reception, holding court with a glass of wine in his hand. That Napoleonic toad, relentless self-promoter, and insufferable raconteur! How did I end up an economics professor anyway? I loved photography but was told I couldn’t make a living, and now I rarely photograph anything. I see the mountaintop view from our cabin window and think about the incomplete rock and herb gardens. Nobody really cares how the economy functions! Nobody cares about the relationships between national income, consumption, inflation, savings, international trade, and finance. People just want jobs to pay for things, without understanding the factors involved. I am stuck; I can’t figure out how I will complete the article or make it meaningful. Will we play? Will you live? Me. We. You.*

\* \* \*

Two weeks later I am still in bed. Before disabling my smart technology, the only person I communicated with was Suki Nakata. I told her I had the flu.

In a way, I am experiencing flu-like symptoms: headache, body aches, and not giving a damn. She is now pounding on my apartment door.

“Dr. Osborne, Dr. Osborne, it’s Suki! Are you all right? I brought you some miso soup. I forwarded you all the term papers from your classes. I even corrected them for you. You did not respond to my emails. Dr. Osborne, are you inside?”

I know I must answer the door. I comb my hair, splash water on my face, and hide the torn notebook pages, strewn around the apartment.

I open the front door. Suki looks concerned and frightened. She peeks behind me before coming inside. Suki updates me about my classes and tells me the student work was passable, but not terrible. In my kitchen she finds a bowl and heats up the soup in the microwave. She walks around the apartment, opening windows, plumping pillows, and organizing clutter. She makes a pot of green tea and starts to clean my bathroom.

“No, no, Suki, you have done enough. Any day now I should be back to work.”

I speak with little conviction. Suki is small, serious, and smart. Her long black hair held in a high ponytail matches the color of her narrow-framed glasses. She wears black leggings, a floral tunic, and hiking boots. I know very little about her life outside the university except that she shares a place with other graduate students on the third floor of my apartment complex.

“Dr. Osborne, I think you should know that Dr. Simon is posting, well, unflattering comments about your research on his blog. Since you are ill, and, uh, if you need assistance, I can help expedite your work. Of course, I would expect no credit for your ideas. Think of me as a sort of a secretary.”

I am surprised by the offer as well as relieved and a little embarrassed. *“Is my deterioration and incompetence so obvious? Pull yourself together, Cliff.”*

“No, no, Suki, you are too kind. The work will get done...soon, very soon.”

I grasp her hand and thank her. She looks uncomfortable and giggles in a girlish sort of way. Suki offers to go grocery shopping for me before her next class, Experimental Poetry.

“No, I’m fine and will probably go for a walk.”

Suki leaves. Without showering or brushing my teeth, I go outside. Dr. James Hayes, the former monk, now philosophy professor, is walking toward his car in the parking lot.

“Hi, Cliff, I’m surprised to see you; I heard you’ve been sick. Nothing serious, I hope.”

“No, just the flu, a virus, or maybe a breakdown. I think I’m depressed or in denial.”

James stops and scrutinizes my face.

“I have time to talk, Cliff; my first class is in the late afternoon.”

James gestures to a bench adjacent to the running trail. James is movie-star handsome and could play the lead of a conflicted priest in a drama about the Vatican. He is demonstrative without being intrusive, liked by many, but leading a solitary life. James is decidedly straight, but does not seem to date and is immersed in a world of teaching, study, and athletics. His most striking attribute is his aura of happiness and contentment. I feel I can confide in him and know he will not judge me.

I blurt it all out. My unfinished research project, my poor concentration, my divorce, the cabin, Oliver Simon, my lack of sleep, my fixation on a Russian blue cat, and the diary pages are unburdened before my expressionless colleague. Without hesitating, James offers his diagnosis.

“I don’t think you’re depressed; it sounds like acedia. Acedia is a state of listlessness where you are unable to work or concentrate. The term originated with the theologian, Thomas Aquinas, who observed and described the hazards of a monastic life. During the Middle Ages, monks often worked alone, studying in libraries or meditating in their cells. Acedia was called the “noonday demon” and considered similar to sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. At some point, most thinking people experience dissatisfaction with life, the tediousness of it all. Some monks were unable to pray; you’re unable to work. Despite all the connections we think we have today, whether electronic or human, they are distractions. We must reach inside ourselves for meaning, because in the end...we are alone. Be grateful for your life; the paper will get done. Things will get better, and you will achieve better understanding of yourself. And by the way, Cliff, I don’t think a Russian blue cat can write.”

We are silent for a moment. “Who says philosophy is dead?” I say.

“Don’t sell that cabin yet, Cliff. Take some time off.”

I wave to James as he pulls away and sit in wonder at his astute assessment of my mental state. A cool wind chills me, but I linger alone on the bench. When it starts to drizzle, I go inside. My suitcase is in the bedroom; I have decided to go to the cabin for an indefinite stay. Passing my desk I pause to look at the dusty laptop and piles of notes for my research paper. The university would probably grant me a leave of absence, I think, and start to

throw clothes into my bag. Sheila has taken the good luggage, and I must resort to this beat-up antique. In a pocket of the suitcase, I find the snapshot of Nana's cat, Puff, taken thirty or more years ago. The colors have faded, but Puff sits, timeless and pure. The tears come quick and messy. Vision blurred, I prop Puff's picture on my desk, open my laptop, and begin again.

## **DON'T TRUST A POET**

Don't trust a poet.  
Why? 'Cause he's a mindfucker.  
He'll tease your brains,  
blow your mind with his clever puns  
or his syntax, twisted.  
His lips are dangerous.  
With them, he'll steal the words  
right out of your mouth—  
suck them off the very tip  
of your tongue and spit them back out  
in a freestyle melody of vowel sounds,  
till you find yourself "Oooh-ing"  
and "Aaah-ing" at every verse.  
He'll smooth talk you—  
his advances will have you  
kneeling to his will,  
taking in whatever image he pulls out.  
He'll arouse you with his rising meter,  
an out-then-in rhythm  
that will cause you to sweat.  
And though he'll prolong your pleasure,  
he'll delay your gratification with an abrupt—  
End-stop.  
But his mind tricks aren't only for  
his amusement, they're for yours too.  
Don't trust a poet.  
But don't forget—  
in his game of poetic foreplay,  
you're playing along as well.

—Peace Madueme

## DIVORCE—CHICAGO STYLE

by

Felicia Schneiderhan

On the eve of my divorce, as I prepared to stand *pro se* before a judge, a friend told me, “I think I would hire a lawyer to do it, just so I could stay emotionally detached.”

Emotional detachment was not something I wanted, not for something as personal and intimate as ending a marriage. I have the strong Midwestern mindset that I got myself into this, I should be the one to get myself out. No children, no property, no disputes—why pay someone else to do what we could do ourselves? Which is the Chicago way, after all: do-it-yourself and self-sufficiency.

My soon-to-be ex and I started with a trip to Office Max, buying a do-it-yourself packet for thirty bucks. We sat at the dining room table in his new place and spread the papers out before us with a bottle of wine. The packet said, “Yes, you can do this yourself!” over and over again, gave bundles of generic forms, and then negated everything by saying each state had different laws and check to see what was required in your state. We searched online; we found endless solutions, all of them different, and many of them promising an easy divorce for only \$39.95!

The Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, at the majestic Richard J. Daley Center downtown, seemed the only sure route. My soon-to-be ex volunteered to go and retrieve the forms, and I volunteered to type them up.

The next time we met, my soon-to-be ex had a pile of every single form available at the Clerk of the Circuit Court, just to be safe, since the available brochure was outdated and listed forms that didn’t even exist anymore. The State Certificate of Dissolution and Invalidity of Marriage, the Domestic Relations Division cover sheet, the Certificate and Agreement by Counsel certifying that there are no contested issues, and the real *pièce de résistance*: the mysterious “dissolution of marriage petition” that we had to draft ourselves, but for which no instructions appeared anywhere in print or on the Web, and which no clerk at the court would explain to us, claiming they were not lawyers and therefore could not give legal advice. So I typed up our own petition, one sentence that stated: *We hereby petition for the dissolution of our marriage.* When we returned to the court and tried to file this document, the white-haired clerk said, “I never saw any petition like this. I’ll put it in, but I don’t think the judge will allow it. You should have gone to the library for a model.”

Like so many bureaucracies, the city of Chicago will give you the right

answer only after you've done the wrong thing. Five minutes later we stood in front of the law librarian, who looked at us with compassion and gave us a model and complete instructions. The real petition was at least several pages, detailing everything to be divided, accounting for all shared assets and debts and terms. I took it home and wrote a petition, and a week later we were back for our third visit, petition and notarized forms and checkbook in hand.

Our third attempt to file paperwork happened between Christmas and New Year's, and the clerk's office, which every time before had been filled with attorneys and messengers, now had a new group milling around—couples with the same weary but resigned expression: *If we're going to get through this, we're going to have to work together one last time.*

Our clerk, a tall man with olive-black skin, was a world traveler who asked about the origin of my briefcase—Tibet—and then proceeded to tell me and my soon-to-be ex that Tibetans were animals for their diet and practicing sky burials—never mind that the ground in Tibet is so hard it's impossible to grow much or bury the dead, and the fact that the Chinese have overtaken the land as a nuclear dumping ground. As he shoved one carefully prepared document after the next into the date stamp machine, he told us that his favorite countries in the world are Cuba and Egypt, and do you know why? Because they have the most beautiful women, and then he explained how Egyptian prostitutes show they're available by clucking their tongues behind burkas. And all the while we nodded and kept straight faces and did not argue with this man, did not tell him he was racist and sexist, because he was stamping our forms and giving us additional forms and answering our questions, and it really only came down to a matter of paying the \$417 fee and get out of my face for the next statistic.

After ten years living together, four years married, and two months maneuvering through the bureaucracy, we were to appear in court a week later to seal the deal.

\* \* \*

On the eve of the divorce, feeling sad and anxious and hopeful that the end of the tunnel was not far, praying there weren't going to be any last surprises, I arranged to see my friend for dinner. As I was going out to my car with vegetables in hand, what do I find?

The cold, mechanical, unbreakable, unmistakable yellow of a boot. A Denver boot.

Oh Lord, is the city against me? I had only just gotten the notice at the end of December, past the deadline, forwarded from our old apartment, and now there was a boot on my car for three tickets—*three tickets!*—two of which were from my soon-to-be ex!

Oh, the trap door before the end of the tunnel!

I called my friend to tell him I wasn't coming for dinner. "I'll be at city hall tomorrow anyway," I laughed. "I'll get the boot removed along with the Mrs."

"Do you think you can pick up my missing city stickers?" he joked. "I've been trying to get them from the city since last June."

\* \* \*

In the morning I braced for any roadblocks the city had in store. I left a half hour early for the inevitable CTA breakdown and arrived downtown at the Department of Revenue a good twenty minutes before they even opened. I waited in the lobby of city hall, watching the silent, everyday march of people coming to work. A guy came in and stood beside me, looking irritated, and I wondered if he got a boot too. It seemed this morning that everyone coming in with a scowl was either getting a boot removed or getting divorced or both. At 7:55 a.m., he jumped the gun and went inside, but I was determined not to bother any of the workers before 8 a.m., lest they tell me the city demanded I pay the fees in silver half dollars.

As the clock struck eight, I approached the counter. I handed over my credit card, prepared to pay the boot fee and the outstanding tickets and any other fees they chose to slap on, like a paper fee and an ink fee and a Mayor Daley tie clip fee. But she only charged me the boot and tickets, called in the boot release, signed my form, gave me all the paperwork, and promised they wouldn't tow it and it would be released by noon. She told me to have a good day. It was 8:05 a.m.

I had fifty-five minutes before my court appearance. I went down to the basement, where I found three women at very cramped desks, fast food breakfasts in front of them. I asked them about the missing city stickers, which had been returned. "Oh, I talked to him," the grandmotherly looking one said. "He said he was sending somebody to pick it up."

"Did you get the name?" a younger one asked, who was more of a stick-to-the-rules kinda person.

"No, I didn't get the name," the grandmother replied.

"Did you fill out the form?" the younger one asked.

"No," said the grandmother, who shrugged like she had worked for the city for ages and had learned that no form was so important that you couldn't just give somebody what they needed. They copied my license and made me fill

out new forms, and what it all came down to was that somebody put the wrong PO Box number on the mailing envelope, so it had come back to them. By 8:15 a.m., I walked out with the city stickers.

I thought about the mayor's next campaign slogan: "Chicago—where you can get a boot removed, missing vehicle stickers, a divorce, and still get back to the office by lunch." Followed by the tagline: *The City That Works*.

\* \* \*

For the last five years of our life together, we lived on the north side lake neighborhood called Andersonville. Our neighbor was an eighty-year-old Japanese painter; at four in the morning, you could look down into his studio and watch him working, eyes close to the canvas; in his front yard he kept, among other things, ferns to prevent mowing, brown ladders posed at specific angles, abandoned equipment, and a small plastic rocking horse, tucked into the tree, because, he said, it gave the impression that a child lived there. Down the street lived friends from high school, and more families—Asian, Latino, black, white, immigrant, gay, straight, musicians, Web designers, professors. After work I would walk home from the 'L,' and when I got to my street, I would say hello to everyone, and they would say hello to me, and we would stop and chitchat, and I would think how this was my young *Sesame Street* fantasy, where a city is not so impersonal that we can't know our neighbors, not so anonymous that we can't trust and befriend them.

\* \* \*

My soon-to-be ex and I met at 9 a.m. at the Picasso and rambled through security and then up to the 16th floor to the circus called Court Room A. Any nervousness I felt was more about the fear that we would have to come back rather than that this would be finally finished. The clerk was surprisingly congenial and helpful, asking if anyone was representing themselves, then checking over our paperwork for accuracy and giving us yet another form to fill out in triplicate (carbon provided). Attorneys filled the courtroom, talking about how it was Friday, and they only had five cases that day, and they only had to go to three floors, and thank God it's Friday.

After more than an hour, the judge finally came in, a woman wearing reading glasses and two Latina last names, with a healthy balance of formality and real-worldness.

The first plaintiff was called, a middle-aged black woman, with a black female attorney, and the judge asked her a lot of questions about cars and property and pension plans, and then, "When did you and your husband stop living together as man and wife?"

The plaintiff was apparently prepared for the real meaning of this

question, because she answered, “We stopped sleeping together four years ago, Your Honor.”

The courtroom erupted in soft laughter. The plaintiff turned to face us, embarrassed, but pleasantly so.

“That’s one way of putting it,” the judge said, smirking at us all.

Despite the little pockets of activity going on, everyone was listening to the main action. And despite the painful formality, this was a human place; here we were, talking about one of the most difficult and precarious contracts in our culture—that of husband and wife—and it all comes down to when did you stop having sex.

We watched a Polish woman whose husband had deserted her go next and a woman who had been in an abusive marriage after that. None of the defendants were present. We were the first to represent ourselves. The judge asked my soon-to-be ex questions, since I had listed him as plaintiff. Have you seen these documents, do you understand them, whose signatures are these? There were questions to both of us about being sure we knew we were waiving the right to alimony now and forevermore. There weren’t many details of our union thrown out there; the only one that gave us any sort of defining feature was that we were married in Las Vegas, which put us in a category of a Britney Spears mistake, which couldn’t be further from the truth. In the questions about, “Have you done everything you can...and the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage...and all future attempts to reconcile would not be in the best interests of the family...” the judge ended the line of questions by looking directly at us and saying, “So, basically, this marriage is dead.”

My soon-to-be ex laughed nervously with relief to have a non-scripted question—and said, “Yes.”

When we sense the death of love—we don’t even know it at first, probably—but something in us reacts, and we begin self-preservation methods, like anger and self-pity, which grow into resentment, and finally, into apathy. For months leading us to the end, I would lie on the bed with the man who was once my love—and I was able to look at him without compassion because I wanted to kill the love that once was there. I wanted to choke whatever life was left in it, suffocate it until it lay blue and limp. I saw him suffering and I didn’t care, because I didn’t want to feel his pain, because I didn’t want to feel my own.

I thought I was so strong for getting through this divorce, for not losing my shit, for gliding swiftly into single life, for being my own single, strong independent woman. But no matter how simple or funny I try to make the process of divorce—love died and I watched it die, and I contributed to its death—squeezed it until all the life was forced from it—and it makes me

wonder what kind of person I am to know love and to intentionally kill it.

\* \* \*

Sometimes a bureaucracy can surprise you with its long street of green lights. The questioning took less than seven minutes; the judge signed the paperwork with a circle. While the clerk did whatever official business remained, we stood to the side and waited. A young attorney approached the bench by himself, preparing the judge for a case coming up Monday, for which he had interviewed all four children in an angry custody battle; the four children were all under the age of ten, and he gave a detailed description of the temperament and state of mind of each one, ranging from anger and hostility in the oldest to a lack of awareness in the youngest. It was the first time the matter of children had been raised all morning.

In the hall outside the courtroom, I broke down, finally, from shock, grief, but mostly from relief. We fled to Maxim's, the beloved restaurant of so many traders and journalists, and ate omelets and drank Irish coffee and talked about the future—our individual futures—a conversation not altogether different from conversations we had been having for thirteen years. Then we parted outside on the street in a sea of lawyers, bankers, clerks, and bike messengers.

## **ILLITERATE HEART**

I once wrote a poem  
whose meaning diminished  
each day it went unread.  
I donned it as a dazed stare,  
but never designed to be  
deliberately  
in your field of vision.  
Dabbing couplets behind each ear  
with vague hope that the scent  
of their whimsicality  
might catch your attention,  
I sighed as the fragrance  
dissolved into a blasé affair.  
Deaf or indifferent,  
you moved about without  
so much as a curious look back.  
I have yet to understand  
why I spent such  
splendid words  
on an illiterate heart.

—Mary E. Delabruere

## **TEXT SPEAK**

I'm finding it very hard  
to put up with your text speak.  
Gone are the days when  
you'd cry "Oh. My. God."  
to express your surprise,  
with that excitement  
O-M-G can't arise.  
You've grown too lazy  
to throw your head  
back and laugh,  
so L-O-L and R-O-F-L  
have replaced that task .  
Take note that W-T-F  
doesn't hit as hard as "Fuck!"  
Or that G-2-G  
can't replace a "Good-bye."  
Wave. Blow a kiss.  
Aren't I worth more than  
the conveniences of your  
linguistic crunch?  
You've crammed speech  
into a one-by-one inch frame,  
capturing short bursts of time.  
Slow down.  
Don't T-T-Y-L. Talk to me now.  
Leave the text speak behind.  
And simply speak with me.

—Peace Madueme

## **BARGAIN**

I do not wish to be good.  
Because you indulge, I abstain.  
You take up your fork,  
I leave the table. You cry,  
I stay coldhearted.  
You are whole, I lie in pieces.  
You abide, I go alone.  
I drone on, you stand in silence,  
All elegant order, offering goodness  
Just because you can.

—C.W. Emerson

## **SHOPPING FOR ONE**

Neighbors see you in the grocery store.  
“We’re very sorry,” they whisper  
before moving quickly on. Some  
stop at a distance, stare. They’re curious  
as to how a woman who once bought  
for two now buys for one. They seem  
relieved when your cart fills up no  
less than before. You’re not about  
to starve yourself at least. But then  
again, some of these goods don’t come  
in widow’s portions. They’re packaged, sealed  
in tins, for couples. Everything you  
grab from shelves, you wonder how  
much will be waste. It’s enough to make  
you cry. You no longer just shop.  
You sympathize with the size things come in.

—John Grey

## **BRIEF ENCOUNTER**

when she walked into the room  
her feet barely touched the floor  
such grace such beauty  
I knew I could spend  
the rest of my life adoring her  
then she opened her mouth to sing  
that was it  
over before it ever began

—Bob Brill

## **FAIRY TALE**

Lost in the gender-queered world  
of my own fairy tales  
Sitting up in my tower  
Shining my sturdy armor  
Waiting for you to come save me

When you finally arrive  
You beg for me to let down my golden hair  
But it has been buzzed off long ago

I slowly lower my silver sword  
Excalibur reaching out for my hero  
Despite my desire to be rescued  
Whichever way I hold my sword  
One of us is always going to get cut

—Nyk Robertson

## **SAMPLING**

The bread ritual—*my* ritual—  
always includes: trying, but not waiting  
for the fresh bread to cool;  
slicing the crusty end off the loaf;  
sliding soft butter over the wide pores  
where bubbles lived and died;  
letting the butter melt until it is  
only a glisten on the pitted surface;  
taking that first bite of the crunchy end  
(that never lasts the night!  
Alas for plastic bags!) and  
staring into space as my tongue's wisdom  
interrogates the sweet, the hefty tang—  
enough barley? too much salt?  
Each loaf, each week, brings the question,  
the delight, as crusty bread meets  
the ardor of my mouth.

—Catherine McGuire

## CAFÉ COMFORTS

The swirling of steam as it spirals to the ceiling  
like a ballerina twirling in numberless pirouettes  
gives life to the cup growing cold  
in your bare rugged hands.

You whisper in the simmer,  
through alternating sips and silence,  
the stories pervading the cursory pathways  
crafted on your skin.

In this meager setup,  
you regale, I remember; you imply, I imagine;  
and our cities of sorrow, callow shores, sunsets,  
country sides, stars, communal settings—  
rise with the smoke to the overhead chandelier.

Over the prancing and brazen glancing  
of customers and cats on the sidewalk,  
you become the idea and I,  
your mural of childhood caricatures—  
bursting with color beneath layers of dust.

But once more, the door opens to welcome  
the newest buyer, and your eyes betray  
a hunger for hours of solitude, for song  
and symphonies and speech,  
and so you slither back to your cheap comforts  
and coffee.

—Vincen Gregory Yu

## EDMUND OF FEW WORDS IN LOVE

by

JWM Morgan

### Fall

On his first day of senior year English, Edmund knew to be quick and take the seat he wanted—second row, left of center. Behind him the seat supports creaked as two girls slid in from either side and collided hips. The two girls struggled briefly, then one girl gave up and left. Brown-eyed, full-figured Milly Derosiers announced her triumph with a husky “Hi” and passed Edmund a handful of hot, moist Cracker Jack.

“Hi,” he said. He pressed the Cracker Jack to his lips. He was pleased to have Milly sit behind him. She had sat behind him in English last year too, warmed his shoulders and neck with her breath—whispered to him, passed notes, spread her odors and her mad ideas. During tests she’d sometimes written answers on his back with her fingertip.

“So, how was your summer?” she asked. Her family was French-Canadian but she spoke English with no accent or hesitation. She moved her shoulder-length brown hair back with her thumb in an elbow-high gesture that presented her figure. He tried not to stare.

“Fine,” he said. Her perfume reminded him of the peonies his mother used to grow in the yard.

“I heard you got your driver’s license,” she said.

“Yeah.” His father had trained him to drive. The unpleasant lessons had not lasted long.

She pushed a rubber eraser around on the desktop with her fingertip. “Maybe you and me could go for a ride,” she said.

“Maybe,” he said.

That afternoon Edmund drove his father’s big, brown Chrysler by Milly’s small ranch house. His father, a petroleum engineer, away again for work in Saudi Arabia, had left him the car and the house and instructions to stay out of trouble. Edmund’s mother had passed away of a heart ailment six years earlier, when Edmund was twelve. His father had remained single, a disappointment Edmund preferred not to think about. Edmund was proud his father did vital work bringing in the oil everyone depended on, but he was sorry

to see him so rarely. A perfectionist, his father expected good grades and no trouble from Edmund. Their contact was limited, even when his father was in town.

Edmund felt mildly daring as he turned into the development, an enclosed neighborhood with only a few entrances, an area favored by those who had migrated down from Quebec to New Hampshire—due to economic necessity in many cases, family reasons in others. The houses in Milly’s neighborhood were small, the cars old. Edmund knew from his Yankee father that many of the French-speaking families were large—a result of the Pope’s chronic meddling in people’s private business. But beautiful Milly, like Edmund, was an only child.

Brown-leafed, blossomless rose bushes lined the Derosiers’ driveway. The hood was up on a small, older car, and Milly’s father was working on the engine. Edmund made a K-turn and passed by the house more slowly. The house, painted leaf green, was tidy and well kept up. Milly’s father’s was short and lopsided, his left shoulder pitched lower than his right. His pointed chin was dark with whiskers. According to Milly, he operated a machine at Blakely Screw, where he endured second class-citizen treatment. Edmund understood from his own father that Mr. Derosiers was lucky to be working at all. Limited education and French-Canadian background were double handicaps in Anglo-capitalist New Hampshire.

Saturday evening Edmund arrived on Milly’s front porch promptly at 6:30 p.m. They were going to a movie at seven-fifteen. Edmund didn’t have time to knock. Milly appeared and held the door open.

“Hi,” Milly said. She swept her hair back with her thumb. Her topaz dress was inset with white lace and had two lines of false buttons at the bodice. She smelled of perfumed talc. Edmund tamped down his emotion. He’d hate to do something goofy and embarrassing. Then he realized he wouldn’t care. While he was close to Milly, his existence was charmed. His mistakes would not matter.

“Milly?” a gravelly voiced man asked. “Is that your young gentleman?”

“Yes, Dad,” she said. She whispered to Edmund, “My father has to meet you before I can go in your car.” Her forehead brushed his chin. The heel of her hand pressed his chest. Static electricity lifted a few of her fine hairs. “If you just leave, I’d understand,” she said. But she was pinching the edge of his jacket.

Edmund stepped over the threshold into the narrow, overheated hallway. He felt crowded by the flowered wallpaper, a quilt, and many family photos that hung among the brass sconces on the wall. If he had known he would meet Milly’s parents tonight, he would have worn better pants and made sure his

hair was combed.

In the kitchen a miniature street vendor's cart, filled with wax fruit, took up the center of the table. There was no accounting for the terrible taste of the French Catholics, Edmund's father had told him. They insisted on cluttering up their houses with all sorts of "cute" junk. Edmund's family's house had large expanses of white wall, with only a rare and considered decoration, such as an old-fashioned mercury barometer or an eighteenth-century sea chart. Edmund stared at the miniature street vendor's cart until Milly tugged his elbow and led him down the stairs to the brightly lit, pine-paneled basement, where there was a console TV, a Ping-Pong table, and a green, velveteen, hide-a-bed sofa. Edmund could hear the word his father would say if he ever saw a sofa like that: "Ugh."

"We're supposed to wait here," Milly said.

"Wait for?" he asked. Milly sucked her lips inside her teeth. She picked up a Ping-Pong ball and one of the worn-out paddles. Edmund beckoned her toward the sofa. He would welcome her warm head against his shoulder and her fingers twining in his. She shook her head. "We have to play Ping-Pong," she said. "That's the rule. He has to hear the ball bouncing."

Edmund looked upward at the exposed boards of the basement ceiling. He reluctantly took up a paddle, and they began a lazy volley. He heard a crowd yelling and raised a brow.

"My mother," Milly said. "In bed, watching Roller Derby. She won't see you tonight. It's too much trouble for her to do her face."

Black-haired, lopsided Mr. Derosiers lumbered down the basement steps. He shook Edmund's hand with a nip like the pinch of a lobster claw. He spoke to Milly in French. She hurried up the stairs. "Milly's fond of you, Edmund," Mr. Derosiers said. He eyed Edmund intently. "I'm a member of the 'Future Fathers-in-Law of America,'" he said. "That gives me the right to ask some questions."

"Yes, sir."

"What church do you belong to?"

"Episcopalian. The Good Shepherd."

Mr. Derosiers winced. Edmund knew the Derosiers attended St. Paul's Catholic Church. Episcopalians were more acceptable to the Catholics than some other kinds of Protestants, like, for example, Congregationalists. Several of Edmund's school buddies were Congregationalists. "I understand you live with your dad," Mr. Derosiers said. Edmund nodded. "What does your dad do?"

Mr. Derosiers asked.

“Pipeline engineer,” Edmund said. “He’s in Saudi Arabia right now.”

Mr. Derosiers frowned, nodded. “Working yourself then?”

“Not right now,” Edmund said. “Last summer I worked at the tannery. I’m thinking of delivering pizzas, now that I got my license.” Edmund had disliked the hard, hot workdays at the tannery and would have preferred not to mention the job. But he had to suggest he could earn money. Would Milly’s father consider his work plan too unambitious? Or was he, as Edmund suspected and feared, seeing into the region of Edmund’s mind where Milly now frolicked joyfully with her pants off? Could he tell Edmund’s real “work” was cataloging his daughter’s smells and sounds and gestures for their erotic and evocative powers, an involuntary sorting and naming process that went on regardless of what else he was doing? Edmund was becoming fluent in Milly’s micro-chemical language and her system of secret messages—those she was sending deliberately and the ones she was trying not to send but could not stop.

“Going to college?” Mr. Derosiers asked.

“Yes. Yes, sir. Definitely. I’m going to major in biology at UNH.”

“Doctor, then?”

“Sure,” Edmund said, grinning. Milly’s father finally smiled. He was willing to go in on the doctor fairy tale. Edmund told the story often—adults loved it. He knew doctors worked too hard. Edmund aimed for an easy life.

Milly brought down a tray with three icy glasses of water. Mr. Derosiers drank his water in sharp gulps. He eyed Edmund head to toe, formed a pained smile with the right side of his lip, and said a few words to Milly as he climbed the stairs.

“Good job,” Milly whispered. “We can go.”

\* \* \*

## **Winter**

Habit carried Edmund and Milly to the lovers’ lane in Horace Greeley Park. A bronze Revolutionary War Minuteman guarded the park entrance, posed atop a granite pedestal, rifle in hand, his gaze fierce and hawk-like. “EVER VIGILANT!” the inscription read. Edmund and Milly had spent every weekend evening together through October, November, December, and, now, a snowy January. Many evenings, when they were supposedly bowling or roller

skating, they'd parked here and explored each other's lips and mouths. They would taste each other's back teeth, then, in their heightened state, cling to one another and sigh.

Edmund parked on crunchy snow beneath the sagging boughs of a huge pine. Outside the temperature was in the thirties, but inside the car was warm. Two other occupied cars were parked nearby, engines off, windows obscured by condensation and a light dusting of freshly fallen snow. He turned off the engine. The silence of the pine forest roared.

Milly and Edmund faced each other, opened their overcoats, paused for a magnificent second, then joined mouths. Milly's kissing was eager, sometimes rapturous. They kissed and ached and rested and kissed some more.

Edmund paused and fingered his upper lip, which had puffed up slightly. In some deep way he understood Milly's kisses brought much more than pleasure and beauty for him. Each kiss altered him. "You're it," her kisses said, in a life-size game of tag. "You're it. You're it. You're it."

He pushed back her hair and exposed her beautiful ear. With his fingertip he touched the single ovoid pearl that dangled at her neck on a gold choker—a gift from him. He fingered the top button of her white blouse. She bowed her head and watched his fingers work. He freed the button. He freed a second button and spread open the front of her blouse. He slipped a hand inside her blouse. She gripped his wrist. "Stop," she said. "I'm not ready for that."

"No?"

She shook her head. She pushed his hand away and refastened her blouse. "Are you mad?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"My dad said if you try to undress me, I should make you take me home." She laughed, laid her head against his shoulder, and turned her face upward. He snuggled her close. "He means well," she said.

"Of course he does," Edmund said. He reached for the door handle. "Let's get out," he said.

"What for? It's freezing." Snow was building up on the windshield wiper in a graduated arc.

"Just for a minute. Come on." She shook her head and pulled her jacket closer around herself. He swung his door open, stepped out, and looked upward. The invisible sky seemed about twelve feet high, like a black-painted

ceiling. The snowflakes were infrequent and widely spaced, white marvels falling from a black who-knew-where. "There's a theory you can see your future up there," he said.

"Can you see our future?" she asked.

He stared into the blackness. "Almost," he said.

Blue and red lights flashed. A police car had pulled in behind them and turned on his rooftop light. The officer remained in his car and waited until everyone had left the lovers' lane.

\* \* \*

## **Spring**

"Will your father come to the wedding at least?" Mrs. Derosiers asked Edmund at the dinner table. She wore a green knit dress, face and eye makeup, and fake pearls. She gripped Edmund's wrist and shook. She was a hugger, which he liked.

Edmund lived in the Derosiers' basement now, on the foldaway bed. Since Edmund's father had learned of Milly's pregnancy, he no longer allowed Edmund into the house. The Derosiers had taken the opposite tack, bringing Edmund into their home to ensure he would not run away. "Your dad'll be more than welcome, of course," Mrs. Derosiers said. Mr. Derosiers, at the far end of the table, nodded. Milly sat close to Edmund, their feet entwined.

They would marry at the Good Shepherd Church. The Catholic Church wouldn't have them. The reception would be in the Derosiers' backyard.

"No," Edmund said. "I'm sorry. My father won't even talk to me anymore."

Edmund and Milly would graduate from high school together two weeks from now, but they would not be going away to college in the fall. Mr. Derosiers had fixed Edmund up as an apprentice machinist where he worked at Blakely Screw. Milly was working after school at a burger place, but only until their child was born. Their new family would live in the Derosiers' basement at first. Within a few years, they should be able to move into a place of their own.

Milly pulled Edmund's hand to her belly underneath the table. "What are you frowning about?" she whispered.

"Nothing," Edmund said. He smiled. "I'm happy."

## **WEDDING IN THE RAIN**

After the sudden rain  
bolted down church gutters,  
spilled July heat wide,  
parents couldn't feel  
their own tears,  
an old man strewed confetti  
drenched in mid-air,  
a photographer wiped his lens  
with tux elbow,  
as a groom strode toward  
the limousine, hand covering head,  
and the bride rose up to toss  
the blazoning bliss of flowers  
whose blooms glowed  
both dim and clear  
against the breast and throat  
of her wet bridesmaid  
who fell back against  
a burst of wind,  
dropped the bouquet into  
a coming cooling darkness.

—John Grey

## **BARBIE DOLL**

I'm Barbie Malibu in Formal Ken's clothing  
Patten leather shoes reflecting my boyish smile  
Short brown plastic hair molded against my head  
You place me in the driver's seat of your pink convertible  
Pushing me toward your glamorous three-sided mansion  
Preparing for our night out on the town,  
Consisting of crossing four feet of shag carpet  
To a hot tub equipped with realistic bubble effects

Sleeveless T-shirt and swim trunks from the beach collection  
Synthetic fingers cannot wrap around yours  
Without some irreversible plying  
The hot tub, always half full dyed wine glasses  
And your wet hair sticking to my hardened arms  
Turns tonight into something less artificial

Plastic lips, malleable heads move closer to one another  
Clumsily bang into each other  
Searching for some feeling of closeness  
Some sensation of genuine intimacy

My anatomically barren plastic stature  
Leaves us both frustrated in every sense of the word

—Nyk Robertson

## **BABY STEALER?**

by

Mary Koral

Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, I ask myself the questions I don't want to think about. Those questions relate to my family and the choices that went into making that family. I ask myself if it's okay to move a child born in, say, Korea, to Germany, Australia, France, the United States?

I wonder if a child born to Buddhists should be raised to be Jewish, Mormon, Catholic, Baptist?

Should a Black/Vietnamese child be adopted by a Black family or a Vietnamese family? What about a White family? What about a Black family adopting a White child? Where should children be?

My kids did not come with physical labor on my part. I have three children. All three of them came to me by way of other women.

I have never let myself think about that much.

When I do think about the beginning of things and how we made our family, I think about what it was like the years before the children came: I was a woman waiting for my children's birth mothers to give birth those years. I might not have been able to articulate that. I doubt I thought about adoption in those terms. But the description is accurate. While those birth mothers went into labor, pushing, sweating, crying out in places I maybe hadn't given much thought to, I waited in Ann Arbor, in a house we had painted green, on the banks of the Huron River. I had my arms stretched out, my hands open and ready to receive the children those unknown women birthed. The faces of those women are there in my children's faces. I can *see* them.

But I have never known one of those women, and I never wanted to.

Now is different. I could meet those women now and tell them the stories I have about their children, every one of them grown. But back then, in the years the children first came, when everything was so new, I feared to take a step that would send us falling face forward. I wanted those birth mothers to give me their children and move into the background. I wanted those birth mothers to let *me* be the mother my children knew. They could be the unknown mothers, distant and nicely blurred, the mothers my children would not know.

Sometimes I am ashamed of that. Other times I think it's the nature of things. I know I was bear-like in my mothering, growling and rearing at

anything that would come between my children and me. I held onto those children with both hands, gripping, while I practiced saying *mother, adoptive family, interracial, international adoptive family*, a list of words it took me a while to master.

There were people who felt I had done the worst thing, people who felt that I used those women, allowed them to make babies for me, handed over some cash and walked away with their babies, like they were so many vending machines. I shut my ears when I heard that. Usually, I didn't *hear* that, it was something I might read, like in the paper or a magazine. And no one ever said that to me in front of the kids. People were mindful.

Except for one time.

I was out with our first child, Sõn, who had come from Vietnam and been with us for about four months. He was a scrawny eight-month-old when he came. But he'd gained weight, laughed almost all the time, and made his way across the room to take a toy if we held it out to him. We were in love with him.

The day I remember all these years later, I was pushing him in the stroller when a young guy, almost a kid really, wearing a Black-Sabbath T-shirt, riding a bike, passed us on the Broadway Bridge. He looked at me and my son, easy like, as if he planned to say, "Nice day." But he didn't say that. He stopped, straddled his bike, and said, leaning toward me, his face right close to mine, "You should be ashamed of yourself. You're nothing but a baby stealer!" Then he called me by name, "Baby Stealer."

His words hit me so hard that I held my hand against my chest as if I were stopping up a hole.

I'd been thinking only of the baby riding in his stroller. I had not been thinking about *how* or *why*. The baby smelled faintly of the Desitin I'd spread across his bottom when I changed his diaper. He was busy chewing on a honey wheat bagel, kicking his feet against the edge of the stroller.

I had been talking to him, pointing out trees, dogs, the water underneath the bridge and that bike. I had said, "That's a bike, honey," as the guy came toward us.

And then there was the face of that guy leaning in toward me, an angry face with a spread of acne, breath a little rank. *Baby Stealer!* And I could not think of a thing to say. I wanted to defend myself, our family, the baby in the stroller, and I wanted to knock that guy off his bike. I had not thought *stealing*. I had thought *my baby*. I leaned over Sõn hot with fierceness. I would not only die for him, I would kill anyone who tried to hurt him, not even a twinge of guilt.

The guy sat there on his bike and looked at us like he was readying for a mug shot, and the baby and I were the photographers, like he expected something, a click of a camera, or a solid retort. He waited, but I was a wimp. I didn't yell at him, didn't kick his bike tires. I did nothing but push the baby away from him as fast as I could. "You're my baby, honey. I didn't steal you." I said that, even though I knew the words meant nothing to the baby, knew I was talking to myself.

Ken was furious. He had none of my angst. He scoffed at *Baby Stealer*. "We didn't steal anybody's baby. What about all the trips to Immigration, the home studies, the forms, the months of not knowing? No one handed a child over to us for cash. We could never have paid for a baby. We don't have that kind of money. Plus, we had police check us out, for God's sake. Baby stealers don't have police check them out." He slapped the paper he was reading on the arm of the sofa, incredulous. *Baby Stealer*? He couldn't believe it. Who would say such a stupid thing? It was ridiculous for me to entertain the idea. We had, he thought, done the best we could through the whole process, and he wanted to stick with the facts. We did not steal a baby. Had we traveled to Vietnam and plucked a baby from its mother? No. Had we dealt with a shady agency and handed over a packet of cash? No. His voice rose with his anger. "Who is this guy," he yelled. "What does he even know?"

"Hush," I told him. "Hush. You'll scare the baby." He picked Sõn up and held him close. "Look, Baby, we didn't steal you from anybody. You have by-the-book parents." He checked Sõn over as though he were looking for damage, pulled me close, and gave me a hug. "Maybe the guy was strung out, Jackie." But it was half-comfort. I wished I had said something that shut the guy up, made him see that I was a parent, not a kidnapper. I wanted words that would keep us safe from accusation. I wanted acceptance. For a time, I wheeled Sõn the long way around. I would not cross over the bridge.

I returned to reading the brief adoptive parent guide sheet again and the little bit of information we had that came with Sõn, the thin description of his name and health and time spent in the orphanage. Those were such hard days. What if, somehow, I had been in Vietnam just before Vietnam blew up? What if I had been wandering through the orphanages with all those babies? Would I have picked a baby up and headed off, not knowing if there were parents in the background, somebody who might grieve a lifetime? Maybe I would have told myself it was the right thing to do, that the baby could die from the smallest thing, a cold, measles. Taking the baby out of the orphanage was a good choice.

And if someone had come to Ann Arbor and asked for him back, what would I have done? What if someone had said there was proof the baby had a living mother? Brothers, sisters, a father?

When I thought about those things, mostly in the middle of the night

with Ken and the baby asleep, I went into the baby's room and watched him, his mouth slack in sleep, his hands open and easy.

I would have to give him back if someone had proof there were living parents, but only if I were forced to. I would never willingly hand him over, living birth mother or not. So, I could have been a baby stealer; it might have been possible.

But how else do you love a child? People exclaimed to me in those early years, "Oh, you love him as if he were your own!" They had no idea.

Ken always saw us as parents. Just that. Parents. I don't think he gave much thought to the idea of *birth father*. He still doesn't. He cares. He's a good guy. But the birth father has never been part of Ken's adoption story.

It's the birth mothers people think about. Mothers with babies who float like unseen prizes in the dark of their bodies. Mothers who lost those prizes to women like me, women who were standing around waiting to grab them.

I could not be a birth mother. That is a simple truth. I don't have trouble saying that. The truth is: I did not get pregnant—just like that—when Ken parked our blue Impala and tossed his pants across the bottom of the bed, a blond sixties' thing his parents had lugged across town for us. We rolled around on that bed, in between the headboard and footboard. We fooled around in the flatlands of the Midwest, rich good-growing land, flat and arable. But I never grew a thing.

I was completely unlike my mother and her friends, champion baby makers. If there had been a local fair for growing babies, my mother and her friends would have taken all the prizes. As a kid, I watched their bellies round out, watched women jut their hips forward to position their newest baby. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen while they sat around the table and drank their coffee from pink Mel Mac cups. They always left a little dark at the bottom of the cup, and they looked deep into those tiny pools, like they were searching for something: a new baby, a ring, money, *something*. When they didn't find what they were looking for, they drank the last bit of their coffee and sighed. They said—to each other? To me standing in the doorway? They said it took nothing to get pregnant, just let a man hang his pants on the bedpost.

Babies came cheap in Union, the town where I grew up in the hills of northwestern Pennsylvania. A baby was the poor woman's prize. Women slung babies over their shoulders; lay them on the table, like leftovers. I'd come home from school and find something small on the bed I shared with my sisters. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I woke and found, not only my sisters, but something else, small and wet and crying.

I did not want their babies. I wanted to flirt with boys, wanted to wear

scoop-neck blouses that buttoned below my collarbone. I never got out of the house without a baby or two trailing me though. Babies crawled around my ankles while I flirted with boys on the corner. One eye on the babies, one on the boys. My hand fingered a small pearl button at the neck of my blouse.

“Can’t you get rid of them,” the boys asked. But they knew the town, knew when their turn came, soon enough, they’d take off their skinny jeans and hang them on a bedpost. Soon enough they’d be father to a baby crawling around their ankles, husband to a woman drinking coffee from pink Mel Mac. Ken never stood around on corners. He read books, lived in a house with his own bed; no strange babies cluttered that bed. He drove a car and knew things no one in Union talked about. I loved him on sight.

I could not hold onto his baby though. I’d begin just fine. I knew the ropes. Then around the third or fourth month, I’d lose my grip and the baby would come tumbling out, a clutter of blood and tissue. Were there arms and legs? Was it a boy or girl?

I ended up in an examining room while a doctor studied my organs as if I were a part in a factory back in Union being checked by quality control.

I didn’t pass. I went out to the waiting room where Ken sat. He looked at me standing there, a woman determined not to cry, a woman who shook her head and pulled him out of the office. It wasn’t hard, it really wasn’t, after that to move ahead with adoption. “So you lose your grip,” said my husband. “So let’s find a baby that’s already made.”

So we did. So were we baby stealers?

I don’t know. I don’t. Is it possible that our son had a mother alive somewhere the day he landed at Detroit Metro? That she is living right now? Surely that is possible. I know he has grieved his loss, and we have been more and less successful about helping that process. This is true for all three of our children. Sometimes it feels as if adoption is a process of learning to spackle empty places.

Once when the kids were young, we fished from the banks of the Huron River and came home walking uphill through scrub. There it was, partially obscured by scrub, a red Swiss Army knife, complete with screwdriver, scissors, and a small bottle opener. I leaned down to pick it up, holding it in my hand. I had always wanted a red Swiss Army knife. There it was, no way to find the owner. Three pairs of eyes watched me as I scribbled a note and poked it on a tree branch.

Item found: 6/10/87. Phone 987-6375

I carried it home in my hands, red knife in my bony cave. “What do you

want with it?" the kids asked. What did I want with it? I didn't know. I mostly kept it in my drawer, took it out from time to time. Sometimes put it in my pocket when we went hiking. My red Swiss Army knife that the owner never claimed. I still have it. Still like it.

Finders Keepers. It isn't like that with children though. It isn't as if I found the kids in scrub grass, poked a note on a tree branch and waited. It's not like I kept them in a drawer somewhere. I kept them. That is true. In the house on the banks of the Huron River. I loved them and watched them and held them at first tightly, then more loosely, until at last I had to open my hands and let go. My children who came out of the sky and landed in our Midwestern lives, who took our breath away, sometimes in fear, sometimes in love.

I do not believe adoption is a bad thing. I do not think that my children, and they've all had grief, are worse off for being adopted. Their lives are not the lives they might have had with their birth parents in their mother countries. So, there's loss and that loss is not a small thing. Their loss of country and past is a taste that can leave them desperate. They want the taste of something sweeter, something full of sugar. Something that will take away the bitterness.

The knowledge that their birth mothers will always be distant, will never move to the foreground, be able to explain why they have a tendency to moodiness or a need for glasses, that knowledge is pain for my kids. They can't ever know the things most of us just brush off as so much nothing, not even the day they were born. A person could say their past was stolen. On the other hand, a person could say they have a life.

I still review the bits of information that came with them, and I don't know the smallest bit of their past. But. If I were to search through blue-black dark in a room full of all the children who were ever placed for adoption, many of those children grown now with lives of their own, I would find my children. I would sniff them out, anxious, intent, determined. We have shaped ourselves, one to the other. Without flesh or blood, we lay claim.

"I would not mind seeing my birth mother," says Sōn. He's a big guy now. He's standing in the kitchen filching the croutons from the salad I'm making. "I would like to see her, but *you*," and he leans into me, like that kid on the bike did years ago, "*you* are my mother. You took on the job."

I am glad for that story, that version of how he sees our family. I take it, make it my story too. I will soothe myself with it when I am uneasy.

Every year, I light candles on my children's cakes, scoop ice cream, and count the years. We have the children. There they are, the three of them, no longer little. They grouch and complain and point out my faults, but they eat

the ice cream. They give me hugs. I have not stolen them. I don't believe that. I *have* taken them and held them to me, my sky kids, falling into my life like so many stars, pieces of light I could never return.

## QUEEN FOR A DAY

by

Katherine Hubbard

If Susie were a queen, she'd choose robes thick and heavy as the fabric in her hand, but the color of the sea, not purple or red or anything actually queen-ish. Susie holds the fabric to her chin. It is velvet and not the color of the sea, but green, kind of like spinach. Even so, it's a good color, and it makes her face glow like sun through a window. Miss Delaney at school said red-haired girls should always wear green.

Mother is at the counter. The fabric she holds is brown. Heavy too, Susie can tell just by looking at it, but not velvet. They can't afford velvet. Mother is here to buy fabric for a bear costume, which she didn't want to do, she said so this morning and that it was going to take a day's wage and maybe more to get it. But the ready-made costume that the school said Susie could use was moldy and smelly; it made Susie sneeze and sneeze and sneeze. Susie is Baby Bear, the star. She gets to open her mouth and cry, on purpose! On stage! Very loud! That's what Miss Delaney said when they practiced it: Louder, Susie! Be loud as you want! But do not sneeze. Sneezing wrecks it.

Mother's mouth opens and shuts like a puppet's; she is talking to the saleslady, and the saleslady is holding sheers long as knives. Susie doesn't have to turn; she can see her mother, the saleslady, the scissors, the counter—all in reverse in the mirror. Her mother leans toward the saleslady, her cheeks more red than they were this morning. Susie shifts her eyes away.

The velvet was difficult to move from the rack but she's done it. Using her feet, she rolls the bolt over one more time and is able to pull more of the cloth up around her. She twirls. The fabric slides down her arms, softer than still water. Susie looks back. Mother is leaning in toward the lady, jabbing a finger at the fabric between them. So Susie puts the velvet over her head. She clasps it under her chin with her finger. She sits down and now she is hidden by racks and bolts of fabric. If she shifts her eyes upward, she can still see Mother in the mirror. Mother's face is gray and long, like a wolf's face. Even from this distance, Susie can see her mother's eyes are rimmed with red.

Of course Mother had been crying all morning. Susie had been bad, had gotten up out of bed too early, had spilled milk on the counter, and Mother couldn't take it anymore, not after everything. Susie understood. It wasn't nice that she hadn't cleaned up; the rags were in the drawer. And she shouldn't have turned on the radio or moved the dial so that it was going to be harder to find their programs. After Mother was finished being angry, Susie moved the footstool to the icebox to get Mother a bottle of cola. Her mother lifted her head

from the kitchen table, said, "Thank you, baby," and drank the whole thing without stopping. Wiped the corners of her mouth with the handkerchief she kept in her sleeve. Buttoned the sweater up over the stain on her blouse. Mother made Susie wear a dress and her Sunday shoes with white socks, her Sunday coat and hat. Then, Mother pinned on her own hat, buttoned up their coats and gloves, walked to the store. And now, Mother is going to buy this brown fabric to make the Baby Bear costume, and Susie must be patient and just stay out of the way until Mother gets what she needs.

\* \* \*

The store is hot. There are high windows above the front door through which the sun shines very hard. Susie would like to remove her coat, gloves, and socks but she doesn't dare. Mother's voice is louder now. "You call this quality?" Susie hears her say. She cannot hear the saleslady's response. Next to the bolt of green fabric is a bolt of blue, blue like the sea in Susie's imagination. She decides to take this one down too. It is just as heavy. Heavier, actually, and bigger. Maybe people don't like blue velvet as much as they like green. Susie would like a queen's veil made out of the green, but she could have something, a skirt, in the blue. She didn't like the idea that the blue velvet might be left out. It is not nice not to be liked.

"What are you doing!" A voice, not her mother's, is behind her; Susie whirls around, but the lady of this voice is not looking at her. She is hurrying toward the other saleslady and Susie's mother. Susie's mother has the shears in her own hands now and is cutting the brown fabric straight up, violently, like she might cut the saleslady too. Susie had forgotten to keep an eye on Mother; she'd been so busy with the blue and the green. Now Susie stood up slowly, the green still around her shoulders and watched as another lady, a third lady, rushed toward her mother. One woman held Susie's mother around the waist, while the new lady took the scissors out of her hand. A chair was provided and they made Susie's mother sit in it. The woman with the scissors stood over Mother, her arms crossed. Outside, Susie heard the police siren go. It went on and on. Susie sat back down in the lovely sea of blue, the sea of green.

If it could ever be her choice, Susie would have all of her clothing, possibly her bed clothes and towels too, made from this green velvet. If she could sew, she'd make a dress for Mother so both of them could dress fancy.

The commotion in the store gets louder; there are more words from the saleslady. Mother talks back. "You have no right," she says. "I have the right to buy fabric for my child! I have credit; I have been a customer for years!"

"Susie!" Mother yells.

Susie unrolls more velvet and makes a little bed out of the two colors, covering herself up so the only things visible are her eyes. The policeman walks

through the store. His shoes are very shiny. Through the mirror, she watches Mother, the three ladies, and the policeman move and argue. Even though she is almost six, old enough to know better, Susie is still afraid that she becomes invisible when her eyes are closed. If she became invisible, Mother would never find her. So she does not close her eyes. But she does not leave the velvet sea.

## THE PRECOCITY OF SHOES

by

Maria A. Costantini

My passion for shoes began when I was four, the day my mother took me on a pilgrimage to Pompeii, where I stopped every few steps to bend over and wipe clean my immaculately white ankle-strap shoes. For those of us who rank sporting the right shoe a close second to hair as the feminine crowning glory, shoes are both a delight and a torment. They convey historic, aesthetic, political aspects of our persona. Their stylistic evolution reflects our own: from the bound feet of ancient Chinese women, the satin slippers of French courtesans, the moccasins of Native Americans, Holland's wooden clogs, Oprah Winfrey's "one-hour shoes," to Sarah Jessica Parker's collection of Manolo Blahniks. In the late '70s, comedian Steve Martin published *Cruel Shoes*—farcical anecdotes poking at the cultivated follies of men and women. And I, over the years, have grown to appreciate the nuances of shoe attire.

My husband shakes his head and playfully calls me "Imelda Marcos" whenever he eyes my stacks of shoes in a multitude of colors, styles, height, and fabrics to suit the season or occasion—a meticulous array resulting from hours of carefully planned bargain-hunting. There was a time I willingly spent my last dollar on a pair of stilettos by Jordan. Owning them, holding them with delight, and storing them in my closet brought me a sense of empowerment. I suppose I was making up for that fateful first day in eighth grade at St. Elizabeth's, when I wore my festive black patent shoes with pointy toes. They complemented the dress my seamstress-aunt had sewn for me. It was September 1956, and my family had just immigrated to Detroit from Italy, where pointy shoes were the vogue, but one glance at the other children's shoes made me reconsider mine with chagrin. Theirs were a flat conformity of rounded shapes. Painfully, my converging toes cramped and curled in my shoes.

My thoughts raced to my father, a shoemaker, from whom I had inherited a legacy of footwear. He had started his shoe venture in the late '30s upon returning to his native land, after having spent his youth working in his uncle's grocery store in Newark, New Jersey. He prided himself on his ability to leap into a grand, new business based on his early years of apprenticeship in a shoemaker's shop. Post-World War II, his handmade shoes were in high demand, proof of his genius for survival. Heavy-soled, unfashionably rustic sandals were just what the local *contadini*, the fieldworkers, needed to work the land all day beneath the sweltering Southern Italian sun.

As I continued to stare at my classmates' round-toed shoes positioned under their desks, the memory of my father's determined stance, critically

eyeing his workmanship before dispatching his goods to market, infused me with a sense of the warrior-princess, while pangs of looking different were as piercing as my awareness of being different. Was it just my shoes? Exactly what did those pointy toes say about me? Pleadingly, I asked my parents to buy me a pair of American shoes in brown. I explained about the slot for a coin on top of the shoes.

Thus, I thought my foreignness resolved since my shoes matched everyone else's—I even inserted a dime in the slots of my penny loafers because it had become the popular thing to do. Because we girls wore the mandatory uniforms of navy blue jumpers and white cotton jewel-neck blouses, we looked even more unified by wearing the same style of shoes. If nothing else, uniforms were convenient because our parents did not have to buy new clothes for us all the time, plus they prevented students from showing off through their clothes.

It wasn't until two years later, when I arrived to my tenth grade English class a few minutes early, gliding along in my third pair of American loafers, that I came face-to-face with my reality. The day before, I had won a speech competition for my recital of Marc Antony's address to the Roman crowd, from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. I had memorized the speech, word by incomprehensible word; practiced it for hours in front of the mirror. How my knees had wobbled as I stood facing the class, drawing no comfort from those sensible shoes. The bell hadn't rung, so the teacher was not in class yet. I was about to step inside when I saw two boys, one standing, the other kneeling with arms outstretched, mimicking my speech in a conspiratorial smile. It went like this: *Frrrends, Rroman, Conrriman, land me your eers*. I stepped forward and said nothing. They stopped and studied the floor as I made my way to my seat.

As I sat there, seemingly impassive, I realized that my attempts to look like the others, to fit in, didn't change the fact that I spoke with a foreign accent, that I would never be viewed as one of them. I still cringed at the memory of my ninth grade classmate Geraldine coming up to me after I had delivered my first English book report. As I presented it, I panicked at not being able to remember all of it, so great was my dread at having to stand in front of the class speaking in a language I barely knew. Thank God no one was aware of my omitting two crucial paragraphs. As I left the room, it wasn't the teacher's praise nor the students' applause that rang in my mind, but Geraldine's words, "Why, that was a good report; it's just that I couldn't understand anything you said. And, oh, is your hair naturally curly?" I stared at her not quite understanding her words, besides what did my curly hair have to do with my book report? I had been in the States one year, and my knowledge and pronunciation of English were still at the beginner level. Yet, I was proud of having read my first English book, *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, by myself. I had almost worn out my Italian-English dictionary to get through it, but I was able to glean enough information to synthesize the story on a page. As Geraldine gave me her "appraisal," I don't know why I couldn't come up with some sort of retort to make her feel like the picayune meddler she was.

Likewise, the moment I saw Alan and Cleofus deriding me with exaggerated gestures, overstressed consonants, and mispronounced vowels, I didn't know what to do or say. Perhaps their display didn't merit my response. Their actions may have been spurred by rivalry or envy: Why would a little Italian girl win a Shakespearean speech contest over the rest of the class? Over native speakers? Over them? What they didn't know was that I'd had quite a bit of acting experience in my Italian town. The nuns at the convent always gave me the leading role in their plays because they knew they could count on me to memorize all my lines. In fact, I also memorized the other characters' lines so I'd know when to come in. My ability to do that gave me a feeling of mastery. I was in my element. Villagers and out-of-towners came to see our amateur performances and applauded our efforts. Onstage, I inhabited my fictional character's shoes. Once, they were the low-heeled pumps of a 26-year-old mother looking for her lost child.

Maybe it was the memory of the leader I used to be in my village that kept me from giving the Geraldine-Alan-Cleofuses of this world satisfaction from seeing me hurt or diminished by their taunts. I finally understood that inside my blue school uniform, those loafers, I was still an outsider.

That first day in eighth grade, when those elegant pointy-toed shoes my mother had gone out of town to purchase for me just because we were leaving our country for America, just because we wanted to "put our best foot forward" so to speak, I got all dressed up in a new dress, white faux-fur jacket, and those shoes that perfectly completed the outfit. It's true that all of the students in class had their eyes on my shoes as the teacher led me to my seat. How different I must have looked. They might have thought I was putting on airs all dressed up like that. Yet those shoes were the part of my attire that made me feel most out of place. Why? Was it because they represented who I was, where I came from, more than my clothes did? How connected were they to my sense of belonging?

There are strong elements of magical belief in our regard for shoes. Consider Cinderella's glass slipper, Dorothy's red shoes in *The Wizard of Oz*, the seven-league boots that help Puss-in-Boots go up in the world, Billy Dane's magical football boots, the promise of athletic performance in Nike advertisements, and the representation of the "power" of designer heels in *Sex and the City*. Shoes are symbolic. They are attributed with the capacity to transform us. In my desire to fit in, I'd put aside my Italian shoes and replaced them with American ones, which I never identified with and never loved. They just served to insulate my feet from the ground.

Tears didn't come until the night of the Mark Antony speech ridicule, with only my bedroom walls to witness them. The following morning I resurrected my Italian shoes and, admiring their sleek design, decided to put them on. Not only had that style become the new craze in the States, they

suddenly conveyed a part of me I wanted to reclaim. I squeezed hard to cram my feet into those shoes, but they no longer fit. Then, I thought, how strange that it took two years for the fashion to reach Detroit. If only I'd known their worth when my feet could slide into them like silk.

## **MARATHON THOUGHTS**

Her mind runs in endless laps  
feet flying to flee the fear  
that she's become someone happenstance,  
effortlessly inconsequential—  
Someone circumstantial  
who knows too well  
what she does not like about herself.  
She hates the sight of a closing door  
And grieves the broken dreams, which hang limply  
but for the breeze of passing years  
blowing them one into the other  
a monotone clang of unrealized hope  
that grates like a cheap wind chime  
until she can no longer listen,  
though she thinks she hears it whisper "soon."  
She slips into her Nike thoughts  
to again begin the marathon  
she knows she'll never finish.

—Mary E. Delabruere

## **SUPERHEROES LOST**

by

John Morrison

Steven couldn't believe his eyes. He was floating off the ground. The morning started off like any other. He woke up; had his cup of coffee; took a shower; and as he was getting out of the shower, he slipped and fell. Well, should have fallen at least, but here he was floating.

The phone began to ring, and Steven made his way toward the phone. He was flying toward the phone. No way. Was he a superhero? He vaguely remembered his dream. He was a superhero saving the world from the evil monster. Phone now forgotten, he made a few laps around his house. Each time he picked up speed. Faster and faster, he would go. Until he had to stop, for fear of knocking things over. He was still a little numb about the situation.

Here he was flying around his house buck naked. He had to land and get dressed. Just thinking about landing made his feet plant onto the ground with ease. The phone began to ring again, and this time he walked over to it and picked it up.

“Hello.”

It was his boss. He was angry about Steven's being late for work once again. Steven listened and was about to come up with an excuse and grovel to his boss about how sorry he was, and he would be on his way as soon as possible. But those words never left his mouth. He just hung up the phone, with his boss's screams going to deaf ears.

He was like a superhero, and what superhero had an asshole boss when he could be flying; saving people from danger? This was awesome. He gently lifted off the ground and was about to fly out the window when he checked himself. He might be a superhero, but superheroes still had to wear clothes. He didn't want to upset people with his bare ass flying through the air. So he landed and began to dress.

Now how does a superhero dress? He went through his closet looking, and all he's got so far was his boxers and socks. They were Mickey Mouse boxers he got from his ex and a pair of black socks. But the other clothes seemed not to fit correctly for what he wanted. He was now a superhero, and regular pants and shirt just seemed wrong.

Last Halloween he and his friends decided to make their costumes, and Steven put together a haphazard costume with leather jacket, pair of shades,

and black leather pants. He was now looking at the clothes he wore, and it just seemed right. He dressed and checked out his look in the full mirror. It was perfect. He looked like a hero. And this was going to be his new costume.

Steven, now dressed, took a look at the alarm clock and saw it was noon. He took his sweet-ass time to find a costume, but figured there was still a lot of time in the day to rescue the innocent from the villains who stalked this wonderful town. He was excited at the ideas that racked his mind. Getting the key to the city for thwarting the bank robbers. Saving the damsel from the clutches of the crazed gunman. He was about to fly out his window, but decided against it. He needed a little discretion so, like the normal people of the world, he left through the front door.

\* \* \*

The day was turning out to be a hot day, and the leather jacket and pants were making Steven sweat. It was tough being a superhero. He had to get a summer costume 'cause he knew if the weather got any hotter, he might pass out from the heat. Today, though, he was going to tough it out. This was his first time, and a little heat wasn't going to stop him. He walked the streets trying to be discreet, but all the while looking out for anyone in need.

On a whim, he got on the bus. In the back there were two hoodlums snickering among themselves, and Steven kept a close eye on them. They looked like they were up to no good. Or, at least, were about to be up to no good. When they got off the bus, Steven decided to follow them.

He followed them into a bodega and saw with a smirk the two steal a forty-ounce beer. This was perfect. He was about to make his first bust, but decided to wait and see if they'd do anything worse. Now that they were going to have some alcohol in their system, things might get interesting. The heat of the day was now forgotten as the two walked through the heart of town, making jokes at the expense of others and drinking their beer right on the street. The nerve of some.

Then they stopped at an abandoned building and entered. This was pay dirt. Steven knew they were probably crack dealers, and he was now seeing the crack den where they gather their crack and whatever else crack dealers keep in their dens.

He made his way to the back of the building and was going to enter through the back, when another idea struck him.

Why the back door, when he could enter through the roof? So Steven lifted off the ground and flew to the roof. This was awesome. He was flying. Maybe he should, like, make some gesture right before he takes flight. All superheroes in comic books seemed to do that when they fly. Maybe even have

a catchphrase like: *Villains beware! Super Steven is on the loose.* Okay, that needed a little work.

He reached the roof and saw that the emergency exit door was open. Perfect. He walked over to the door and gazed into the darkness. It looked clear, and he swore his vision was better than normal. Another one of his superpowers? He was a little giddy now and a little disappointed that no one was guarding the door, so he could kick some butt. It was the roof door, though, and who in his right mind would guard the roof door anyhow? No one ever expects someone to enter through the roof. So he walked into the building, thinking this was going to be fun.

The building was ten stories, and the top three were empty. On the sixth floor he hit pay dirt. He could hear voices coming from one of the abandoned offices in the back. He snuck his way, still figuring on the element of surprise. He saw how it went down in his head. He would walk in on the evildoers as they got their crack ready for sale. He would say something witty, and then take flight and capture them. Then when they were all tied up and ready, he would call the police, and a new superhero would be born. He'd better think of a good name before he calls the police.

This was his first time, so he was a little nervous. He didn't want to screw it up. So he paused at the partially closed door, took a deep breath, and entered the room.

\* \* \*

The call came in a few hours later, and the police made their way toward the seedier part of town. What they found was not a pretty sight. They sealed off the perimeter, but didn't really expect to find anything. People were killed all the time in this part of town. The police didn't even make their rounds anymore. It was useless and dangerous for even the police. So they let those who live here kill themselves; hope they kill each other off. But this one was not from around here, they could tell right off the bat. He was hanging from a streetlight with a noose around his neck. Someone stapled a piece of paper on the young man's chest. It was a grisly sight, with all those bullet holes. Looked like someone used the body for target practice. When the police finally got the leather-clad man down from the streetlight, they were able to read what was written on the paper.

"Here hangs our first superhero killed by the Blood street gang." One of the cops had to suppress a laugh when he read the letter. "Superhero? There's no such thing as a superhero. Guess all the crack is warping these people's minds. Good. Maybe all these Blood street gang members will just keel over and die from all the drugs they take. Make it easier for the police."

## **DRY SOCKET**

When the walnut-sized absence  
in my jaw hatched  
a brood of razor blades,  
I knew my Cro-Magnon heritage  
had clashed with my need for fire,  
teaching me to hate chills  
and to embrace the taste  
of clove oil and gauze,  
to spit blood and shrug,  
swallow more Vicodin and  
Smile! Smile! Smile!  
my clotted smile.  
This is akin to love.  
Freud was right about a few things:  
our cravings for sex and death and fire.  
I came to see. I came to die.  
I came to that place  
where all the people stand around  
up to their lips in ennui,  
lusting, in pain.

—Layla Schubert

## THE JOB

by

Joel R. Burcat

I had chosen Bach's Goldberg Variations to drown out the roar of the train and my thoughts. Glenn Gould's savage piano playing and humming overcame the rumbling and occasional whistling of the train.

As I gazed out the window, the brush closest to the track rushed by, almost imperceptibly. A sprinkling of snow covered the Lancaster County farms as the train rolled by. In the distance, I watched the frozen winter scenery as it came into view, presented itself for a brief moment and then fled from my field of vision.

A poem came to my mind, Grey skeleton tree against a coffin sky...

A train station. Lovers kissing good-bye, students with ear buds and light jackets defying the cold air, businessmen in their blue, wool overcoats carrying briefcases. All going somewhere, going home, going away.

I dreaded my task, my role, my job. Yet I had been a willing participant in the proclamation and the chore had been assigned. Now it was my duty.

I watched as we passed Butz's Sign Shop, oil tanks, an old brick building with steam billowing from its chimney, a squirrel running up the embankment from the train, a stream and woods. I thought about the comfort and safety of the frozen woods.

They called me a wuss. No, a pussy; no, a virgin; no, a girl. That's why the task had been assigned to me—to toughen me up. For who? For what?

As Gould reached the penultimate variation, Bach resolved the musical questions he had asked in the preceding thirty movements. The train whistle blew and an Amish farmer sat stone-faced in a buggy at a crossing, his black horse's nostrils emitting clouds of steam into the early morning mist as we sped by.

The landscape changed. Fewer, then no farms. Big new houses gave way to big old houses, then row houses and, finally, crumbling houses. The station. The taxi. Jamaican music.

Drop me off here.

That'll be seven-fifty.

Keep the change.

I meet my partner, Antonio. I have met him only once before and we only know first names. No personal information. The bosses trust neither of us. I'm given the order that if Antonio fails to do this, I am to kill him too. No doubt, he has the same order for me.

His round face is dour. We make small talk, like the orchestra warming up, always beginning with the violin.

Eagles sucked.

Donovan sucked.

Reid sucked.

Always next year.

We both laugh nervously.

Antonio is older than I am, and his wrinkled face is gloomy. He has done this before, and he looks at me and says, You look like shit. Want me to do this?

No, man, I can handle it.

He laughs.

Allegro. We get in his rental car, a plain white Ford; Antonio driving and me in the back. We drive to the neighborhood where we are to meet our man. He is a thin black man with a goatee, wearing a long gray coat.

At 9th and Catherine we see him standing on the corner smoking a cigarette.

Hey, you Sean?

Yeah.

Get in the back.

Sean climbs in next to me and shuts the door.

Where is the meeting?

We'll take you there.

How come I never met you guys before?

Does it matter?

I show him my gun, a cheap-as-shit Chinese knockoff of a Smith and Wesson. Sean quiets down.

Adagio. Antonio drives toward the meeting place, an abandoned industrial area on the southwestern side of the city.

We're meeting up here, Antonio says.

Up here is under a highway bridge. There are no other cars, no buildings, no nothing. I watch Sean's face; it's expressionless. He knows.

Antonio pulls the car around an abutment under the highway. Cars overhead are zooming by. A truck downshifts above us. The noise is constant and loud, like percussion. Perfect.

Let's go, this is where we are meeting.

Sean looks around and then says to me, So this is it? Like this? Here?

It has to be. We have no choice.

Antonio opens Sean's door and he gets out. I'm out of the car hating every moment of this, but I have no alternative. This is what I signed up for.

Let's go over here and talk.

Over here?

I look up at the highway and look all around. Is anyone watching? My hand is shaking.

Sure, Sean, I say. Stand right here. This is where the meeting is going to take place. Just wait right here. The meeting will begin soon.

Sean looks into my eyes the whole time; his eyes do not flicker. I cannot meet his steady gaze.

Antonio looks at me, raises his eyebrows and makes a forward motion with his head.

A gun fires. Then again. And again. It is me; I have fired three times hitting Sean in the chest each time. He crumples to the ground, blood spurting from an artery.

Antonio fires four rounds into him too.

We walk over to Sean, and Antonio puts his foot into his side. No movement. Snowflakes are already starting to cover Sean's gray coat. Some of the snow is pink from blood.

Let's go, says Antonio.

My wife calls my cell as we drive back to town.

Are you straying in the city after you've finished your business?

You don't hang around in the city after you do what I do.

What is it you do? She asks.

Don't ask, don't tell, I say laughing, and hang up.

Antonio drops me at a different corner in Center City, and I head straight for a bar.

Allegro ma non troppo. Four bourbons later, I am on the 1:45 train back home. The snow is driving now. I manage to pick the same seat I came in on and sit mesmerized by the white-and-gray landscape that is speeding by. The city becomes suburbs; the suburbs become country.

I relax listening to Liszt on the way home, volume up as loud as I can take it. His ferocious Transcendental Etudes reverberate in my head. I glance around, wondering if any of my fellow riders would find it ironic that a murderer chills to Franz Liszt.

I relax. The snow is blowing horizontally. More Andrew Wyeth landscapes fly by, complete with steaming cows and a man in black holding a stick, walking across a barren field in the driving snow.

I relax. A row of boxcars on a siding provides colorful relief from the snowy landscape. Norfolk Southern, CSX, CN flash by. For an instant I see brightly painted graffiti on the cars by Chico and Big One and Ram Rod.

I relax. Cars crawl by on a nearby highway. I imagine the engineer smirking as he pushes the throttle past 90 in the white-out.

I relax. My adrenaline returns to normal.

The body of yet another bullet-ridden black man likely won't be found for days. The gun—wiped clean, no magazine, no bullets, no prints—is safely rusting in the mud of the Delaware River. I resolve never to check the papers to see if the murder is discovered.

I breathe and think about the brown envelope that will arrive at the post office box I have rented in the distant city just for this occasion. It will be thicker than the last one, since I was the main man, not the assistant, this time.

The next day, I return to my day job, healed from the 24-hour bug that caused my absence on Monday. Yes, I feel much better. Thank you.

Coda. I wait for another call, one that I know I will receive someday for another job.

Also, I wait for the car with two or maybe three men—it is always men—to pick me up for an unexpected meeting from which I will never return.