



**ERIN BELIEU**

**SLANT SIX**

## SOMEONE ASKS, WHAT MAKES THIS POEM AMERICAN?

And I answer by driving around, which seems to me the most American of activities, up there with waving the incendiary dandelion of sparklers or eating potato salad with green specks of relish, the German kind, salad of immigrants, of all the strange, pickled things we carry over from other places, like we did on Easter mornings in Nebraska, stuffing our Sunday shoes full of straw so that either Jesus or the Easter Bunny could leave us small, bullet-shaped candies in honor of what, I was never quite sure. Where do such customs come from? Everywhere!

Americanness is everywhere, wedged into everything, is best when driving around a frowsy Gulf Coast city with its terrific mini-marts like Bill's, the very best of all marts! UN of toasted boat rats and boys from the projects revving their hoopties; of biscuit-shaped ladies who penny their scratch cards and hold up the line; where Panama (from Panama) commands the counter, and Mr. Bud, the camel-faced man, offers every kid a sweetie, producing a jar of petrified lollies from a shelf also

displaying an array of swirly glassed pipes and Arthurian bongos, where Raul the Enforcer idles at the back, packing since the incident in the parking lot last summer.

Of course, people here have their discontents: the artists save what tips they don't snort and always mean to leave for New York or Seattle, though I tell them both drizzle like November half the time. So I say, No! That's un-American. We need our artists everywhere, not scrunched up in one or two rarefied spots, which makes their parties anxious. And Miłosz says artists come from everywhere, from everyplace, the capital *and* the provinces, to keep the body healthy or else end up like 17th-century Hapsburgs or German shepherds listing with hip dysplasia. So I'm circling the swampy taint of this Southern city, choosing art, choosing to be American, actively pursuing that fabled happiness when the alternatives present themselves, which is my obligation, both legislator and witness to Bill's Mini-Mart and Mike's Chinese Grocery, and the hungry citizens queuing up in front of Jenny's Lunchbox, waiting on line for a pile of cheese grits to start this day, placing them firmly for the moment

in the happiness column. Because what's more American than a full stomach on a sunny morning? What more than this fat-assed acceleration, driving with the windows cranked down?

## WHEN AT A CERTAIN PARTY IN NYC

Wherever you're from sucks,  
and wherever you grew up sucks,  
and everyone here lives in a converted  
chocolate factory or deconsecrated church,  
without an ugly lamp or souvenir coffee cup  
in sight, but only carefully edited *objets* like  
the Lacanian soap dispenser in the kitchen  
that looks like an industrial-age dildo, and  
when you rifle through the bathroom  
looking for a spare tampon, you discover  
that even their toothpaste is somehow more  
desirable than yours. And later you go  
with a world-famous critic to eat a plate  
of sushi prepared by a world-famous chef from  
Sweden and the roll is conceived to look like  
"a strand of pearls around a white throat," and is  
so confusingly beautiful that it makes itself  
impossible to eat. And your friend back home—  
who says the pioneers who first settled  
the great asphalt parking lot of our  
Middle, were not in fact heroic but, really,  
the chubby ones who lacked the imagination  
to go all the way to California—it could be that  
she's onto something. Because, admit it,

when you look at the people on these streets,  
the razor-blade women with their strategic bones  
and the men wearing Amish pants with  
interesting zippers, it's pretty clear that you  
will never cut it anywhere that constitutes  
a *where*, that even ordering a pint of tuna salad in  
a deli is an illustrative exercise in self-doubt.  
So when you see the dogs on the high-rise elevators  
practically tweaking, panting all the way down  
from the 19th floor to the 1st, dying to get on  
with their long-planned business of snuffling  
trash or peeing on something to which all day  
they've been looking forward, what you want is  
to be on the fastest Conestoga home, where the other  
losers live and where the tasteless azaleas are,  
as we speak, halfheartedly exploding.

## H. RES. 21-1: PROPOSING THE BAN OF PUSH-UP BRAS, ETC.

So it goes:

the foundation drops

and the ladies are busted,

those old carpetbaggers

slouching south.

O America,

we don't mean to disappoint,

but every lover comes

with a fulsome jiggle,

some pudding

packed in the U-Haul,

a mole we want to believe

could be viewed as a beauty mark.

But honestly,

isn't the honeymoon

the boring part?

All that lying about!

And what is beauty but

the absence of symmetry?

Better to forget

perfection, to remember

we were born a nation of

blemishes, a posse of strays

with cellulite.

If Benjamin Franklin

were alive today, you know

he'd be working a thong and

Rollerblades on Venice Beach,

flying his freak flag

just beneath Old Glory!

America, it's time

to unsuck those bellies

and show our ugly asses.

We must learn

to want each other

in direct sunlight,

no more or less than

what we really are.



# BONESHEPHERDS



POEMS

PATRICK ROSAL

## PRIDE FIGHT

The 600-lb. man and the 150-lb. man square off.  
 And people have paid to see these two  
 nudge each other, blow by bloody blow  
 (or by submission), as close as possible to death's  
 front porch, without sending the other man  
 through that last gray door.

We're yelling *Fuck him up! Oh Shit! Get out  
 the way! Smash him!* though I don't know  
 who I'm rooting for. I'm an American.

I could want the pale runt  
 to wreck the dark hulk to his knees  
 or cheer the giant as the pipsqueak  
 darts around the ring to dodge his lumbering foe.  
 The big man is casual,  
 swipes a paw at the air and misses  
 when the little man scuttles by,  
 and this goes on for some time,  
 the crowd jeering no one in particular.

We know, deep in our bodies, just about anything  
 is grotesque if you make it large enough. Science says,  
 in nature, all forms fail when you multiply them by scale.

And in this near-death match, I wonder  
 if what we're yelling at isn't a behemoth's  
 bullrush toward this sack of taut  
 scrawn, the farthest margins  
 of all the gruesome multitudes each of us contains—  
 on one end, all that is puny, a fragile  
 and fleeting thrash of flesh,  
 on the other, everything humongous and terrible  
 (as if we could measure every catastrophe and rapture  
 according to this exponential order).

Dear reader, perhaps, if you're like me,  
 you're asking, *Yes, yes,*  
*but who wins,* and I'll tell you: it is the big man  
 who catches the little man charging in.

The big man falls, full-weight,  
 and smothers his rival, whose face is smooshed  
 against a massive calf. Though the little man flaps  
 and squirms, turns red, he manages  
 from the bottom, with both *his* legs,  
 to take hold of the big man's leg. The smaller man,  
 struggling, tucks the one enormous foot in his armpit,  
 and, with the might of every buck and a half of muscle  
 in his body, arches his back and, vice-like, squeezes.

If we thought the big man had but one  
 stoic face for the world,  
 he shows us at least one other,  
 and it is pain.

The big man, sweaty and exhausted,  
 his ankle about to snap,  
 taps out.  
 No one in or out of the ring  
 exults. We are the ones  
 who can't move.  
 We fall into a moment of precise silence,  
 as if we can't believe our eyes,  
 as if we've just witnessed two men become  
 exactly the size of ourselves.