

# Becoming Shades of Motley et al o o o

By

*Edward Robson*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Holy doodle, we have a third Doctor this issue along with Ehrlich and Singer. It just might read more like a journaling periodical. A former clinical psychologist with a fresh MFA. Edward Robson is riveting, what the dickens am I doing analyzing him? In 'Becoming Shades of Motley' he aptly contrasts opposing commonplaces; and as hastily makes waste of them without hesitating or having lost. Adages, aphorisms, axioms and apothegms, some of them anathemas and others antithetically, absolutely contrasting. Edward's got more reflective pearls of wisdom than any book of proverbs, or collected maxims for that matter, you know the ones, birds in hands and unhatched chicks. "As a connoisseur of ill-assorted ironies" "Even Pollyanna lost it, finally went postal / after twenty years of writing Hallmark cards./ She was giggling as they dragged her off, / reciting all the words that rhyme with happy:" From his collide-o-scopic couplets, sighting "Zoetropes and doorknobs" to 'THE MAN LIKES BIKES,' "Jake's a friendly-whiskered archetype..." Waxing without waning in a most urbane nature, "unfailingly amusing." . . . Once again, I've gone too long and leave you halfway through. Sounding-off and moving on, there's nothing stopping you. (Spacing is poet's own.) . .*

## BECOMING SHADES OF MOTLEY

Everybody knows,  
those things that everybody knows may not be so.  
Birds that flock together  
break the rule of opposites attracting,  
and your beloved's heart just might be growing  
fonder when you're absent from her sight,  
but not her mind, cause now you're out of it.

So what about that moment of decision?  
Does the universe conspire to help,  
or does God laugh to hear what you've got planned?  
No, seriously? Make a living as a writer?  
Good luck with that. Let me know how it goes.

Murphy's not as widely recognized in these parts  
as he is in neighborhoods that lend themselves  
more readily to optimism's pitfalls.  
Looking on the bright side blinds you  
to the fifty shades of black and blue  
on spirits brutalized by honesty.  
Even Pollyanna lost it, finally went postal  
after twenty years of writing Hallmark cards.  
She was giggling as they dragged her off,  
reciting all the words that rhyme with happy:  
snappy, crappy, sappy, and fuck it.  
Fuck it rhymes with everything.

An artist's suffering is so cliché it's almost oxymoron.  
Our lifelike masks fool no one but ourselves—we are the fools.  
Though we rarely trot the motley out,  
everybody knows we live poetic lives.  
They applaud our public pratfalls,  
with incisive wit critique our hunger,  
and discuss the symbolism of the diverse ways we bleed.

It helps to see it all from their perspective.  
As a connoisseur of ill-assorted ironies  
and commentator on life's scenes of choice hyperbole,  
any time my own takes yet another wrenching turn,  
I can just whip out the microphone  
and interview the mirror:  
"Tell me, poet, how it feels."

DISORDERLY, AND MARVELOUS, AND OURS\*

Mecca's nowhere in the zodiac,  
a place not designated, secret open  
as the penitent's proud bleeding stripes.  
Fibrillating light draws only moths,

metal rod the massive static blast,  
a swallowed storm that tastes of bruises, fists  
and fences, coins and buttons pressing  
tin-roofed cardboard shacks beneath a cliff.

Zoetropes and doorknobs, carousels  
carousing for a coin tossed in a saucer,  
landing glancing blows. The heron bows,  
then straw hat waving, does the old soft shoe.

\* Title taken from a line in *Seam* by Tarfia Faizullah

## THE MAN LIKES BIKES

Jake's a friendly-whiskered archetype,  
tidy shop behind his house not crowded  
even with the cycles hung  
like fishing trophies from the rafters,

wood stove for cozy winter tinkering,  
dorm fridge half full of IPA dwarfed by  
tool chest stocked with curiosities. He hoists  
my underused and undercared-for Diamondback

onto the rack, spins wheels, listens, reaches  
for an Allen wrench. Two hours pass  
or maybe more as other gentle pedalers  
turn tales and sip and laugh. Strange lubricants

annoint our hands and gleam on hardware  
gliding through its stations. Jake explains  
the hows and whys of limit screws, the trick  
to setting front brake tension on the first try,

and the incremental politics of funding  
bike lanes, racks on buses, wearing down  
resistance of a rust-corroded system  
to a newer old idea. This one looks

no different for our efforts, but it is  
in my mind absolutely different, carrying  
my caring now, the skills and promises  
I'm going to keep. Jake does this every day,

his living, but one night a month for love  
of bikes and riders. He hands me a beer.

## HOMING: NC TO LOUISIANA

Vacating our three places we depart  
in rain-washed little hours, eschewing haste  
to go back for forgotten matters. None  
has slept—one managing the brew pub late,  
one busking bar crowd for that last sweet tip,  
all dreaming, packing. Stopping—that's what's hard.  
To leave we must become dispensable.

Slow progress over bleary highways, I'm  
content, my destination safely reached:  
deep peace of family rejoined. This trip  
knits fabric raveled long; we'll feel those threads  
stretch out behind us in another week,  
securing us, three generations' might  
of being, of becoming that which we  
could not imagine or create alone.

Four nights we sleep on breast of parents' love  
whose hospitality is feast enough,  
whose broad wings cover us. We need no more  
than this—they ask of us no more than this—  
to be where we are not dispensable,  
and know that our departure will renew  
a vacancy within, until our next  
returning.

Mutual indulgences:  
they let me play paternal fantasy  
and feed them, share my once upon a home,  
then two nights more downriver, where they taste  
of seasonings more piquant than Tabasco,  
hear voices whose authority derives  
from age beyond conceiving. They are both  
instinctually awed yet all the same  
immediately partisan and proud.  
My son notes dots on grid of Vieux Carré,  
a tablature of plans for his return.  
His sister, more the connoisseur, rides riffs  
of jazz and art and showmanship, knows she'll  
be back but will not ask yet when or how.

## NEW DIGS

My son gets paid tomorrow. He and I  
will shop for beans, hot peppers, onions, beef  
to make a chili fit to fortify  
the soul assailed by chills. By such relief  
is home defined—a friendly coffeepot,  
a loaf still warm for slicing, and a chair  
or two to spare for visitors. What brought  
us to this place were simple hopes: to share  
a quiet space where thoughts could coalesce  
at their own pace into the poetry  
of life in all its pulses; to express  
that which expresses us, the symmetry  
of arts and artists; and in depth to know  
its humble love, this earth in which we grow.

## URBAN NATURE

Nature subjugated, trapped on tiny reservations.  
32 square feet of dirt, one tree,  
low wrought-iron railing, purpose indeterminate.  
Smaller, unfenced squares support lone boxwoods  
by the intersection, by the coffee shop.  
Smaller, shallow-rooted shrubs make do  
with terra cotta planters.  
Sparrows hop, flit, peck around the picnic tables.  
Is it tragic, all the asphalt, concrete,  
brick and limestone, steel and glass?

Or is the habitat of H. Sap Sap  
as valid and respectable as those of other species?  
Some are less invasive, true,  
but what about pine beetles, goats, and kudzu?  
Is the architecture of a termite mound  
less natural than that of coral reefs?  
All nature is not beautiful  
unless we so define it,  
and if we do, then why deny  
the charm of human structures?  
Our manners aren't the best in Gaia's purview,  
but we have our moments.

On the sidewalk, underneath the lonely trees,  
and indoors by the potted scheffleras,  
ancient mating rituals may be observed,  
and beings not so far evolved  
as they believe themselves compete  
for dominance, attention, partners, food,  
their social norms complex and subtle,  
with occasional forays into aggression under stress,  
but mostly gentle, friendly, clever creatures,  
to the open-minded naturalist  
unfailingly amusing.

**THE POET SPEAKS:** *Why do I write (and read) poetry? Because I love the power of language and the sultry sensuality of words. Even when I'm writing essays, plays, or fiction, I am striving for a certain resonance both in the ears and in the mind. Writing verse, whether free or formal, forces me to pay attention to the way each word fits into the tapestry of sound and meaning, a discipline that strengthens my writing regardless of genre. I grew up loving Robert Frost, then Carl Sandburg, but the poet who probably did most to shape my sensibilities was the anthropologist Loren Eiseley, whose collections Notes of an Alchemist and The Innocent*

*Assassins still give me goosebumps.*

*I write poems to be read aloud, hoping readers will appreciate the cadence of the lines, the soundplay in the way I put my words together. And the stories. Not all of my poems are narrative, but most of those that aren't still have a story embedded or implied. "Homing: NC to Louisiana" relates the last time I took two of my children to see their grandparents in Baton Rouge and introduce them to New Orleans, one of the important places in my life. "Becoming Shades of Motley" came from my first attempt to support myself by writing, as did the sonnet, "New Digs." "The Man Likes Bikes" came from a visit to Jake Easter, a bicycle mechanic and cycle tour leader I used to know in Winston-Salem. "Urban Nature" I would classify as lyric; there's no story, just an observation of my favorite species in and about one of my favorite coffee shops downtown.*

*Most of my poetry is pretty straightforward—a deliberate effort to appeal to readers who have been put off by the more academic and experimental journals. "Disorderly, and Marvelous, and Ours" is one whimsical exception. It began as an in-class writing exercise in a poetry workshop at UCA. The professor, Sandy Longhorn, picked out some words that caught her eye from Kaveh Akbar's collection, *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, passed around some photographs including one of a cluster of shacks at the base of a cliff, and gave us a choice of three lines from Tarfia Faizullah's collection, *Seam*, as possible titles. I wasn't looking for meaning so much as pleasing sound and evocative imagery, hoping to let my intuition steer me someplace interesting before my rational side could hijack the creative process. I'm pretty sure I'm saying something with it, but I don't know what. All I know for sure is that I really like the part about the heron.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Ed Robson is a former (don't call him retired) clinical psychologist with a PhD from Chapel Hill and a brand-new MFA from Central Arkansas. He spends his days now writing (mainly essays to publish on Medium.com), polishing his short story, play, and poetry collections, searching for an agent for his novels, reading, cycling, gardening, cooking, and avoiding boredom AND the plague. His poems have appeared in many journals, including *Right Hand Pointing*, *Failed Haiku*, *The Hungry Chimera*, and *Perfume River*. He lives in Winston-Salem, NC but is willing to relocate for a teaching position in Creative Writing.

Ed Robson, PhD, MFA

Poet, Writer, Seeker after truth