

Three Poems

by Gregory Roper

These three poems were written over a long span of time, with completely different purposes, backgrounds, and modes of thought: a kind of surreal world in "The Man Who Forgot Things," religious meditation in "Christophoros", and playful self-deprecation in "Victoria's Secret."

The Man Who Forgot Things

It started with his contacts. He drove to work squinting, unsure why
He hadn't inserted them after showering, since
His morning routine was regular,
But after that small things began to slip by him:
He'd forget his lunch and have to buy a hotdog at the stand,
Walk off without his briefcase, so his wife, kindly, patient,
Would have to drive it in to him. After his morning workout
He realized there were no dress socks in the Nike bag,
So he'd hidden behind his desk all day, embarrassed by the white nerdy strip
That showed above his wingtips when he walked or sat. Then larger things:
Entering the office, he was surprised to find he had no shoes on,
For it was January, and he parked six blocks from his building. He was
Conservative, and yet the next week, in the restroom, he discovered
He'd not worn underwear, been dangling uncomfortably all morning.
Another time he simply left six fingers, for no reason, on the kitchen counter
And had to type with four all day; his left leg, next
He draped over the bathroom hamper
And neglected to pick it up again before walking out the door. His co-workers
Tried not to notice him hopping, except for that smart-ass in personnel,
Who made unfunny jokes. His secretary covered for him.
Soon he forgot his privacy, telling colleagues over coffee

About his father's alcoholism, his uncle's fight with HIV,
His fourteen-year-old son's bedwetting, his wife's occasional infidelities,
His daughter's soft whimpering
After the family was in bed.

Each night he would stay awake, trembling, trying to discern
What he would forget the next day. But on his commute,
He'd find he hadn't forgotten the thing he'd tried to remind himself
To forget the night before. Each night he'd struggle,
Until one day he began remembering things, but never the right ones:
His daughter's lunch instead of his, a file that belonged at home, not work,
A present for the VP who'd never given him the time of day.
One day he swung by the park to pick up his son from soccer practice
With the team he'd never joined. People began to gather by the cooler
To see what new treasure he'd bring to work: four umbrellas, six pairs of shoes,
A garden spade. They covered their mouths when he strode in confidently
Trailed by the janitor with an avocado toilet on a dolly.

Years later, on break, they'd pull files he had worked on,
Their margins crowded with colored-pencil illuminations:
A three-headed toad in jester's garb, bishops farting at the Pope,
Spurious monkeys poking the king's arse with a pike.

Christophoros

--for my nephew and godson

He's all across the continent, a fresco here, mosaic there.
I saw him near Thomastown. Some Cistercian chiseled
Into solid stone the liquid lines across which he lifted
A babe, suddenly straining his sinews:

The weight of the world, the mightiest master.

They used to say
One who spied his visage would suffer
No harm that day. So let me look.
What can I fear, when today
You wade in the Jordan,
Carrying Him calmly?

Victoria's Secret

*"That is no country for old men."
--Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"*

--Or for young men, either, to tell the truth.
Women wander in and out, fingering a silken robe,
Pulling at chemises, holding up slips
As we might inspect tires or compare wrenches,
Completely at home, chatting with one another
Of the traffic, the weather, or politics,
Holding this up and touching that, reading
The complex calculus of color, fabric, and shape,
Absorbed in their own beauties, unthinking of males.

But beyond that mahogany façade, a man enters
A world as foreign as Byzantium itself, as
Bejeweled with luxury as the basilica mosaics
Which greeted the hairy, unkempt crusaders. And caught
In the sensual music of silk, lace, and fantasy,
They stand hushed as in a church, uneasy,
Blessing Marco Polo's adventurous heart,

One fellow a careful four feet from the rack
Of lace teddies with little behind them
But a cool breeze, another casting sidelong glances
At a whole rack of panties in colors to shame
Gaugin and fabrics Alexander never saw,
The third, trying to look as if he were waiting for a bus,
In queue with dozens of people, sequined brassieres.

We walk three counted paces behind our wives
--close enough not to lose our guides
And seem thereby loners, strangers, perverts
--but far enough to fill the clothes
With the breasts, thighs, behinds we have known
Or dreamed of

like the time she wore this all day
--a honeymoon, say—and you found her
leaning against the windowsill, pink tap pants
and matching chemise blowing, just lifting
in the salt air, and she turned to you, saying
Isn't the sea wonderful tonight?

--The saleswoman wants to help us.
"No thank you, just looking,"
And as our wives disappear into dressing rooms
The size of Montana with disappointing opaque robes
We catch one another's eyes as we pass
Sharing mutual looks of pain and wonder.