Hideous

Miraculous

Philip Schaefer
“Is there anything stranger than being a real-life human being, one with actual emotions, one who performs actual actions in the service of a beating heart? Philip Schaefer’s [Hideous] Miraculous quietly paces and parses out a barage of human moments / monuments / momentousness in a way that reminds us of our sturdy spine and the ground beneath our feet. It is embraceable, and bracing.”

—Nate Pritts
[Hideous] Miraculous

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*NightBlock*—“After You Left”

*RHINO*—“Longest Division”

*Sonora Review*—“Translating Poorly”
Spork—“Elegiac” / “[In this one I’m wearing a paper bag]”

Tinderbox—“Autobiographies”
for Natalie
[Yesterday I found myself awake]

in the shower with my shirt on,
searching for my breast bone
like a doorknob in a hallway
that doesn’t exist. In this one
I am learning how to say sponge
without moving a muscle.
I contemplate what it means
to twitch. Contemplate which
Dakota I’d rather live in, having
never been. You told me
the Midwest was like two dogs
greeting each other. I don’t understand
anything without distance. In this way
I am like you: greedy, not sorry.
You say things
like a plum

is breaking. Pipes
are dormant

fountains, so
let’s move

to Kansas
City in a taxi.

You want me
to call out

the sky for
not responding
to your letter.
So what if

airplanes only
speak cursive.

What message
isn’t better

left in a bottle.
Put it down.

You’ve been
relocking the car

doors for over
an hour.

You say things
like bougainvillea
are dreadful creatures.

You curse Christ in broken German.

_I am not your liar._
I am not your liar.
but we are falling through water.
Quieter than we expect. Churning
is how we’ll later describe it.
Our arms dig out two wet $C$s,
a heart if you want to look at it
that way. Though the body is always
in between—that unoriginal arrow.
[In this one I’m wearing a paper bag]

over my head with cutout eyes
and a slit for the horse of my tongue.
I walk around town letting children
and transients draw their names
on my face. Each signature stitched
like a scar. Each as foreign
as the day I was born. I’m trying to
become the animal you made of me.
and the lilacs aren’t devastating.
Fact: I’m being dramatic. A knife
undresses butter in my good hand
and I have that. I nibble on a biscuit,
tell myself I’m attractive, biting
the corners of my mouth
with the crumbs. Taste blood.

[In this one you haven’t left]
around the corner over a boy
on a bicycle. His legs electrical
fans, all cylinder and gear. I strike
and throw matches into a bucket
on the porch, the smell of science
going warm and black on my fingers.
I’m not mentioning you in this one.
I’ve written a declaration of independence
on the bathroom mirror. Your dark
crimson lipstick worn like graffiti
on my pants, my socks, which
I’m pulling up over my shins
like excess skin. Sometimes
it’s necessary for one people
to dissolve. Sometimes
we shed our names.
After You Left

I’ve been dipping my finger in this happy hour martini for half a week now. My mouth is a ballroom. My tongue a wedding dress floating up from the basement of a pond. Like romance I don’t shut up. I eat olive after olive. After all this there’s nothing but The King and number one-thirty-three on this neon lit machine. Wise men don’t say what wise men don’t say. But mostly it’s true: I miss your clouds, your bubblegum yawn. Barkeep keeps calling me Joe and I can’t help but look over my shoulder. Outside the moon drools out astronauts. What we used to call stars falling. What we used to call anything floating with rootbeer. On the train today a man sang into his necktie. Tapped it twice for reverb. He wore a human face the shape of Indiana. When you’re old, imagine us in violet: I grease back my genius hair and step on stage. I dip the mic and make a
spark through its metal, buzzing lips. Listen, my voice is drumming. Cup your ear.
and we drive to the basin, peel off
our clothes like exorcised ghosts.
We get biblical under the hot choke
of sun. Our bodies amplify—waves
lapping waves. We towel off with nothing.
to your mouth, through your hair.
You want to rinse yourself
of last night’s fire and I should
have known this would become
a foreshadowing moment.
We spent the night with the night
as if the stars were still neon
stickers glued to the bedroom
ceiling. The wind did something
through the sleeping bag and I felt
the smooth jazz of your left thigh
and by god I wanted you to smile,
to sigh out a small yes
between your legs.

[In this one you are taking the creek]
because the parking lot was full
of mothers and small dogs
popping out of grocery bags.
In this one we held hands
without speaking all the way
around the store until one of us
mentioned making love
in front of the security camera.
We talked like we wanted kids,
but one of us saw something that day.
I can’t remember who, or just what.
Instead of burying the shoebox, 
we take off our shirts and kiss
the ground. Again, the moths fly
out, the gross wonder. We’re still young.
Shaped by summer and its lesions.
We toe the line between field
and sun until it’s light
in our mouths.

∞

I’ve picked up carving linnets in the attic
of an abandoned house to hold onto
something flightless. To be uncrushing.
Outside, the wind curls talons
from the ice near what used to be
a kitchen window. If you close your eyes
you can smell the river from here.
I remember us buying peppermints from the gas station outside Florence. Your tongue a radioactive stripe until we drove to the ocean where there was nothing left.

Imagine this is still the late nineties. The man scratched in rags on the bench behind the church drinking the ship right out of the bottle. On his back he finally hears the angels’ light breathing. They say nothing, which is: I’ve been waiting for you my whole life.
[I am dreaming in this one. You wax]

your nails mauve with streaks of teal.
I make a joke about salt water taffy,
anything to keep the polish in the air.
Your toes bend all macaroni like
over the coffee table. You flip
the channel. It’s the most normal
day in existence. Wake up. I can’t.
in this one. Give me a shotgun to point at my foot. I am trying to not say remember anymore. But remember when we drank warm wine in the hotel and I taught you how to move the knight? This is like that. Two spaces north, one space over the apartment we used to have a name for.
Off Grid

We’re burning coffee and writing our names in knife on the walls of this small cabin. The creek that led us here is frozen, all the moose a little farther south. I toss a log into the stove, another. You want me to tell you I need you in a way I never have before, so my hands talk around your hips and I watch from my body’s satellite what we look like in a foreign language. Each finger performing in French and cursive and treble clef. I move my speech through your hair, curl a soft letter over the lobe of your ear. Outside, wind makes phantoms of the snow. White asters flaring in a pond.
I am a traveling mirage. A dream circus unraveling. Because I am losing face I see your face tattooed on every neck of sky. I tell myself things like I am mayor of this garden in Idaho. Tuesdays are my Sabbath. Two juncos are playing piccolo on the shoulder of a sycamore and I am working the trunk with my silver shovel. Some jewels are edible, others bow low. I am your hickey-suck and charm necklace. Tell me I’m agreeable. Remind me why I wear a cape around the yard, a crown of light bulbs to sleep. Together we renamed ourselves Oleander. I am of York. My blanket becomes a kilt at Christmas. These are sentences within sentences within porcelain dolls. I hug them each, uncupping language with a black tongue. Sorrow and sweetness giving birth back and forth. I am growing permanent. I call out things in the long hallway of your ear as if it were still a doorway
I’m allowed to enter. I’ve given up wearing shoes. I discuss your old underwear with myself. One of us is missing out. Here is my talismanic mania. Here is my yarn corpse. The first words ever spoken were in dinosaur. The last. I am gnawing on branches. I am not your idiot. I am. Amen.
I wear your pendant
around my neck
like cattle rope.

Though you’re gone
still I take
for the barn.
along the back of my hand for half
an hour, wondering which of me
will talk first. I want you to say
there are dreams worthy
of this growth of being
alone. This gondola for one
and I’m obsessed over what I do
and do not know. The night as hard
as drugs, the animal breathing snow,
breaking down slowly in the blackening
cold. In this one I actually want to feel
a shiver of lightning run up the sky,
my legs. What possesses the wind
to still swim through town? The church
to break out its bell and sound something
similar but not equal to absolution?
Remind me what I’ve become—
a pair of boots left in the garage,
taking on the old and dying
smell of everything around them.
A bird under a tire, the song
spilt from its throat with blood.
the Ouija board, you lit votives
on my chest as if it were a river,
as if the sound of wax hardening
could reinterpret my flesh.
At night I often sit in the corner
of our old bedroom, legs in my arms,
imAGIning a colony of ants
streaming down my face.
I tell myself I am a dormant hive
waiting to be shaken. I let them
crawl. The smart wasp waits and waits
and watches. This one tends to repeat
itself: first I address the darkness
by speaking with my hands. Then
I ask it to rise (I rise), not knowing
how visible we can be without eyes.
last week. He said my hands
were kaleidoscopic butterflies
and if I broke them apart
someone in India might shiver.
Said the moon’s horoscope
was a deflated basketball
so I laughed. I don’t love
men the way I might or ought
to these days, but you’re dying
in my mind and nowhere near me
do monarchs mimic viceroy.
Or vice versa. Butterflies come
in quick stitches and knives
and public speeches. If only
each version could strip itself
of paint. If only your face were
a lottery ticket I could scratch off
with a penny. I’ve been dreaming
of you since February and here
it is always February. No one
believes in calendars or advent
birds. Months are actually
just the paper legs of insects,
the small wings we used to rub
into disintegration so that everything
we touched would also forget
what it feels like to fly. To know
nothing but air, lung, and song
until the song is a line of static.
Elegiac

A cancerous goat walking around in fencepost circles is one way to describe this. You are dead. Everyone you loved is dead to you and a field of charred wheat flaking off the low Montana plains isn’t enough to say we all beg for winter water. We contain multitudes. Miracles still fit into our pockets like watches, waltzes we’ve not yet stepped to. This is hardly the earth. This is my breath unraveling. My teeth. A way to feel dread as if you could teach me how to reinterpret new situations again. Tell me the sky is a blue demon filled with elevator music. I call thunder down the corridor of a microphone.
I want you to know in some dreams
I completely stop dreaming but I don’t
wake up. Call it vacuum suck. An emotion.
[I’ve stopped believing in death]

and traffic lights. Some nights
I place an animal, stuffed,
on the passenger seat and drive
through town with the windows
down. I turn up the radio
and ask the weather to cry
us out. In this one all the crows
caked to the pavement still beat.
In this one every dead deer
remembers what it was like
to feed off the sweet low vines
of cherry trees. I make a bed
with wine in the laid-out trunk
and tell the invisible driver
to push into fifth and scream
the tires out of transmission.
In this one I’m the animal,
the passenger seat, the bottle
of liquid gods drinking itself
dry. The moon sticks to the sky
like a firefly. The stars shred
into goose down. I swear everything
twitches if you tell it long enough
it doesn’t exist and can’t ever.
the other ones like a goddamn match
being licked out by cupped darkness.
It’s all I can do to not be wild. Turns out
our friends were mostly your friends.
I pinch the useless skin between
my eyes, waiting for the pressure
to say something. It never does.
I talk out loud to the mirror. Press
my cheek to it. I am hideous,
miraculous. I misquote Oscar Wilde.
Experience is merely the name men give
to their mistakes. I won’t name you.
Another Language

Someone once told me
if I could dream it I should
drink it. So I let the word boil
like black, unlit oil in my throat,
waiting for anyone to strike
a match. Tell me you could
hate me. Tell me and I will turn
into a bouquet of white and blue
flames. Last week in Montana
a woman took a cattle brand
to her stomach. The small,
not-quite-body inside her body
pinched out by the red fingers
of hot metal. I have an addiction
to stories like this. I cannot sleep
anymore. My eyes light up
like aquarium fish in the night.
Give me the farmer who slow-bleeds
his pigs, the old professor who cuts harmonica slits into his wrists. Let me feed off. Let me hate and be hated. There are immeasurable qualities in the dark. A face without a hand to trace it. The voice taken from the mouth, saying *come with me and don’t look back.*
Longest Division

Say apple, blood red, and I hear
the arrow flay the opaque air.

Hear things split
in two, hairlined, molecules
flaking into atoms.

But I cannot fathom the distance
between here and her and he.

I cannot actually touch my heart.

If we walked to the grocery store
for six years, if we palmed
produce for minutes,
if we bit.

The moment the sparrow lifts
and I am still
watching the branch.
PHILIP SCHAEFER co-authored the chapbooks *Radio Silence* (forthcoming 2016 from Black Lawrence Press) and *Smokes Tones* (available from Phantom Books) with poet Jeff Whitney. Individual work is out or due out in *Vinyl, The Cincinnati Review, Prelude, Forklift Ohio, DIAGRAM, Sonora Review, H_NGM_N, cream city, Columbia Poetry Review, and Hayden’s Ferry* among others. He tends bar at a craft distillery in Missoula, where he received his MFA from the University of Montana.