

## THREE POEMS BY SHAUN ROBINSON

### *Year of the Monkey*

A man on a ladder attacks a building  
with a machine that emits a wedge  
of sparks and a smell like driving around  
with the parking brake on. And you  
want to know if I can be more  
casual? Ask me when the sky's not  
as low as a waiting-room ceiling,  
when the clouds aren't a flotilla  
of empty milk jugs bobbing across  
a shallow sky. The truth is the man  
I said was attacking a building  
was sanding a length of awning tube—  
a certain amount of roughness  
is needed to make it adhere.  
If I told you that, you'd roll  
your eyes and put your hand  
in my pocket. You want to let  
what happens happen. I want to be  
more transparent in my desires,  
to hand you a ring pop and ask you  
to love me as long as it lasts.  
Keep an open mind is what I'm saying,  
pencil in a line of a poem in which  
we drive from Marfa, Texas, to Baton Rouge.  
In the meantime, I'll settle for Chinatown  
buck-a-shuck. It's wonderful and awful,  
don't you think, to slurp down an entire  
existence without chewing? The truth,  
after all, is only what happens when no one  
objects, when I say, for example,  
*The clouds look like they're trying to empty  
their emptiness down on our existence,  
and you answer, I wish they would.*

# *If I Wrote a Poem About My Father*

I'd tell you how he taught me to know whitetail  
from mule deer by prodding at roadkill with his rifle,  
to know north by the moss on trees  
and spruce by the pain it caused,  
to draw the thin, green capsules of nectar  
from Indian paintbrush and to draw a knife  
from a trout's gills to its anus, to scoop out  
and toss back the sloppy coil of intestines,  
the soggy raisin of its heart, and you would know him  
by simple facts. I wouldn't have to explain  
the complex resonance with which  
the intimate, animal smell of his work clothes  
occupied the laundry room, or how his greasy  
orange-shelled chainsaw ruled the basement  
perched on its tarped pile of board ends  
and firewood. I wouldn't say  
that once he went behind our  
house and began to attack  
the hillside with a mattock and shovel,  
that a week later the hillside  
had become a series of steps  
made of soil where my mother  
planted carrots and sunflowers,  
that another time he tied  
my brother's dog, Joey, to a post  
and shot him with the .22 because he wouldn't  
stop chewing on Pepper's skull.

I'd tell you that he taught me to layer  
kindling over balled paper, light it in  
several places and let the flame  
build before adding firewood, but not that he had scars  
all over his arms from lighting himself on fire,  
or that the rain and the years washed  
out the terraces he made behind the house.  
And even if I said I still build fires the way  
he taught me, I wouldn't say  
that he still has his scars.  
I wouldn't say that I'm still on fire.

# *Pilgrims*

As we drove it down the stairwell  
Curtis's couch bucked and fought  
like a rodeo bull in its chute, shedding dust  
and dribbling a trail of coins and cushions.  
Downstairs, we tried to wedge it into  
a U-haul packed with everything  
we'd carried that day: his grandfather's chairs,  
his mother's linens, his Craigslist bookshelves.  
The five of us who'd come to help  
Curtis ferry his life across the city  
were silent. Bryce lit a cigarette,  
sat down on a kitchen chair among  
the boxes and suitcases scattered around  
the parking lot. "It's not going to happen,"  
he said, and I knew he was right—the single  
trip we'd planned would turn into two, and none  
of the things I'd meant to do with the rest  
of the day would get done. What those things  
were, I wasn't sure, but I knew  
that whatever was wrong in my life I would  
have fixed that afternoon. Instead, I traveled  
with Curtis from Kitsilano to East Van,  
balancing a wooden boat on my lap, trying  
not to snap its delicate rigging as I turned  
the dial looking for hockey-draft updates.  
Half of what Curtis had gathered in twenty-four  
years rode behind us, slightly unsettled,  
shifting on corners. I spent the day  
shouldering duffels of laundry and angling  
tables into elevators, wiping sweat, downing  
water, cradling the bottoms of overloaded

boxes of books and kitchen utensils. The more  
I carried the less I saw the use of any of it.  
And because I forgot the ship in the cab  
of the truck I had to carry it back across  
the city twice more. I resolved one day  
to trim my life back until it fit in the matchbox  
hold of that vessel. It was only hours  
later, finally carrying the ship up  
to the new apartment, setting it  
on the bookshelf, among the boxes  
already being unfolded into towels  
and houseplants and coffee pots that I saw it was  
the *Mayflower*. We were pilgrims, I thought,  
and it didn't matter what we'd carried—  
we'd crossed the ocean of another day  
and found a new shore.