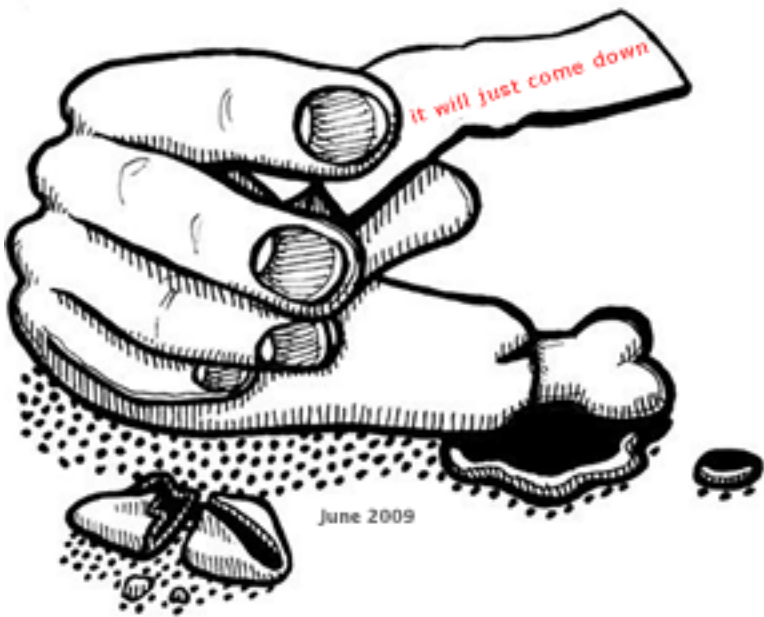


Fortune Cookies

poems by Andrew Cox



number 19 in the 2River Chapbook Series

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the editors of the following publications in which some of the poems in this volume have appeared:

2River View: “Halloween,” “Underpinnings”

Brooklyn Review: “Around These Parts”

Natural Bridge: “Chain of Events,” “Childhood,” “Look”

New Mexico Humanities Review: “I Think I Am Making a Mistake”

Pebble Lake Review: “Side Effects May Include,” “Villanelle”

Sentence: “Basement”

About the Author

Andrew Cox holds a BA from the University of Arkansas and an MFA from Washington University in St. Louis. *The Equation That Explains Everything* has been a finalist or semi-finalist in Four Way Books Intro Prize, the Intro Prize from Elixir Press, Waywiser Press’s Anthony Hecht Prize and the Verse Prize, among others. Cox’s poems have appeared in journals such as *The Laurel Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *River Styx*, *Sou’wester*, and *Witness*. His hypertext chapbook, *Company X*, was published by www.wordvirtual.org. He lives in University City, Missouri.

About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series.

Richard Long, Editor

www.2River.org

July 2009

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Basement

The siren on top of the pole in our neighborhood goes off and we are told to go to the basement and if we don't have a basement, to go to a small central room and if we don't have a small central room, to abandon mobile homes and if we don't have a mobile home to abandon, to flatten ourselves in a ditch and cover our heads and if we have lost our heads, we are probably safe though the instructions don't cover this because instructions don't cover everything.

*

She says try this salad dressing and I say I don't like that salad dressing I like this salad dressing and she says I should be more willing to try different things and I say, yes, I should, even though she is not a queen delivering a monologue about having lost her salad days and I go downstairs to the basement to build things no one uses.

*

I am tired of hanging out with people my own age: I want to retire and rock on a porch in a small town in the middle of the prairie. I want to take my shoes off and play in the sandbox with the others. I want to lay rubber in the parking lot at the local hangout. I want to look up into my mother's eyes as she changes my diapers. I want to be the grandmother you love, the one who lives in the basement because that's where your parents want her to live.

*

The de-clawed cat that lives in the basement paws the door to get out. He wants out. He paws. He does not escape. But sometimes we open the door and he glides out to perch on top of the couch and stares out the window at the birds and he purrs.

Chain of Events

He liked how she left her shoes on. Later they talked. Later she went home. Later they never saw each other again. Later each of their lives took an unexpected turn. This left each with a certain attitude towards daily events. Later they got old and did not recognize themselves in the mirror.

Random Thoughts on the Way to the Chinese Restaurant

The wedding cake crumbled long ago and we have lost touch with the plastic bride and groom.

*

If the future is in the cards then why aren't we all dealing from the bottom of the deck?

*

I went and sat in the most expensive room in the house. It did not make me feel any better.

*

What we lack in our play is the guy in motley pointing the way with a bony little finger.

*

The places we come back to are blessed for letting us arrive.

*

We think we look out the window but the outside looks in at us and the window says yes to both.

Villanelle: Fortune Cookies

Happiness is next to you. Stop searching forever. At least a horse knows its way back to the barn. You're an angel. Beware those who collect feathers. Keep your feet on the ground though some flatter. Ideas are like children: yours always wear the crown. Happiness is next to you. Stop searching forever. Your life will change when you receive a certain letter. Today it will rain. It will just come down. You're an angel. Beware those who collect feathers. You are welcome always and seven is your lucky number. Friends long absent will come around. Happiness is next to you. Stop searching forever. Use your charm to make things better. Tomorrow you will encounter a sad-faced clown. You're an angel. Beware those who collect feathers. Avoid all those clad in leather. Let the horses go back to the barn. Happiness is next to you. Stop searching forever. You're an angel. Beware those who collect feathers.

Halloween

Premise: *All elephants are self-aware.*
Elephants at the Bronx zoo recognize themselves in an 8 x 8 foot mirror. A female named Babe uses her trunk to touch a red dot that the keepers painted on her forehead.

Premise: *All dead people are not self-aware.*
Ghosts do not exist but little sweet goblins inhabit our hearts and homes.

Conclusion: *All elephants are not dead people.*
Therefore the leaves are yellow and orange and the wind elaborates October 31 while the elephants at the Bronx zoo join "the cognitive elite." Therefore the little goblins skip through the wind-swept streets not knowing why these houses are haunted, houses haunted not by ghosts, no, not by ghosts.

Childhood

It involved horses and a house we thought haunted but only an old woman lived there who could not speak English. It involved a favorite bicycle and certain tree-lined streets and lost chances and the rustle of the leaves on a hot dry day. It involved building a fort in the woods behind the cemetery and wind chimes tinkling on a distant porch. Other than that we're not sure anything else is worth mentioning. Other than that we're not sure what else to say. Other than that we are going to keep our mouths shut. Other than that we are going to let the cat from next door walk leisurely through the brown yard with the mouse tail dangling from its mouth.

Look

You and the horse gallop through the woods on the narrow trail and it does not matter, the risk and the spill that is about to happen but now there is only the velocity and the blurring trees and the sound hooves make. Pain, the pain comes to this: it's worth it, this you and the horse and the trail that leads you, this wild turkey about to scurry across and spook the horse; it is worth it, this ache. Pain, the pain comes to this: scream all you want to, cry because it is worth it, you and the horse galloping and not looking back.

Pain in the Neck

Pain stumbles and falls backwards down the stairs in front of the patrons at the movie theater. Pain denies she fell. Pain denies she was drunk on herself. Pain says it's *my way or the highway*. Pain was born old and is getting younger. Pain is an addict with a bag full of tricks: great legs emerging from a tennis outfit, a German sedan, a house in the suburbs. No one can throw a temper tantrum like Pain. No one understands how Pain's prescriptions are her best friends. No one understands how lame it is when an older gentleman comes to her aid and she says *my knight in shining armor. I must have fainted*. Pain stumbles and falls backwards down the stairs in front of the patrons at the movie theater and almost breaks her neck.

I Think I Am Making a Mistake

A man offers a man cash to do a job, a job that seems easy at first but becomes more difficult because it requires commitment. Usually the pay is not good enough for what needs to be done, yet someone always points a gun at someone else: a gun that always goes off and never brings anything like an epic to conclusion. This is a small, petty-minded story, one in which someone wants someone who's married to someone else, where a woman stares off through a rain-splattered windshield and says – loud enough for the driver (a man with money in his pocket) to know she has said something important without knowing what – *I think I am making a mistake.*

Underpinnings

1. Down the long hallway are muffled voices of grownups. So long now since I wanted to go to such murmurs and eavesdrop, to overhear what I am not supposed to hear: the unimpressed women the overeager men. The grownups will not go home. The grownups do not know I am listening. The grownups do not know anything

2. That dog was nothing to me...Cats are just charged particles... I'm making this up as I go along...I tried to mimic any number of people none of whom I admired...Most pandered to the present tense at the wedding...Good cheer earned the right to its underpinnings...We lived in the weather it did not live in us...Someone died...An 11 year-old girl cannot contain her happiness...

3. A man's tag says blank: a blank sign informs no one, who drives by with a blank face, who turns the wheel onto the blank street no one knows his mind being blank. Half of half of half and so on until you arrive at the smallest half: half for you and half for me. Cut ten in half. Five is a magic number because someone told me so. This man is half a man his blank name tag says so.

Late One Summer

Her husband died and left her standing on the edge of a field and the people on the other side are having a picnic and watch her as she starts across while heat hovers over the field and she walks as they keep watching and she doesn't know if she will make it across but she keeps walking and they keep watching and she continues and they continue and this spell will not be broken and they never stop watching and she never arrives.

My Response

I want to slam the door but I do not. The crowd downstairs is comprised of kids I like. It is possible that no one is sure how to proceed. The ceiling fan whirs. The timing of certain laughter does not help. The barking dog does not help. The weather outside does not help. The climate inside does not help. Making a contraction doesn't help. I want to shout but I don't. I want to laugh out loud but I don't. Someone might ask me a question but I won't answer. The silence helps. The silence fixes everything. I want to do something I regret but I don't, to do something stupid but can't figure out what it is. Someone close to me stops talking. This is my response. Someone I don't know begins preaching. This is my response. Whenever anyone wonders, this is my response.

Side Effects May Include

a runny nose; hair loss; nausea; itchy skin; redness around the ears; an inclination to shout; forgetfulness; an urge to twirl; a tendency to wake up a different person; to drool; to walk backwards; to play cowboy and Indians; to play chess with yourself and lose; to stand up and mock the crowd and help the meek inherit the earth; to kiss a bully on the cheek; to go forth naked convinced you are the most beautiful person in the world.

The Baby in the Back Seat

I am the baby in the back seat. That's my parents in the front and this is our rickety car. My mom is white and plump. My dad is black and thin. I am somewhere in between and though I have traveled with these two for only a short while, I am losing all respect for them and wish them gone. I can only hope someday I'll learn to drive and leave these two behind.

Objects such as funky felt hats come to rest on the heads of 15 year-old girls who pull them down over their eyes as they smoke at bus stops waiting for a ride to school. To look at them is to look at a deeply beautiful bruise.

I am old. Now I am part of the background noise through which the young move. But I do not lament. Every so often those who are not old hear a whisper of indescribable attraction and are drawn off the sidewalk just as the light turns green and the traffic jerks into the intersection.

Around These Parts

Because a car dealer thought giving away a twelve-gauge shotgun with every truck was the perfect sales pitch, a man went home and blasted all the birds on his block. He was the kind of man whose neighbors said *he was always so quiet, thoughtful, considerate, once he climbed my tree and saved my half-blind cat*. Next door another boy grew up without a dad and a woman tried to be ironic about it all, but felt it was hard sometimes to care. So she married a butcher who left her nonplussed, but she liked her mother-in-law who took the boy under her wing, so to speak. And the boy, the boy went around with a certain look on his face, the look of someone who wanted a pick-up truck but had no money to buy one with, the look that launched a thousand failed attempts. The boy thinks about sticking up the corner gas station but can't even get up from what his mother calls the divan, can't even call the girl who let it be known she was interested, the girl whose father owns the biggest car and truck dealership around these parts.

I Know a Man

Apologies to Creeley

I said to my friend who is a thrill seeker, let's stuff ourselves into the cockpit of a jet airplane, a car is not fast enough, Jesus, he said, because he likes to swear, that's a f__ing brilliant idea and I said John, as I like to address people, John, I said, Damn, he said, watch where you are going, you almost hit that thunderhead, for which I drank a glass of water rapidly to stop myself from burping and say much of this wrongly and cannot stop the darkness from surrounding us.

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