

Rollerskates

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Perhaps you could tell from the color of my eyelashes
Or the depth of the valley behind my clavicles
Or the angles of my chin.

The ridges in my fingernails
Whorl of my ears

Or any of dozens of little signals
of phrenology
or physiognomy

But
most likely
it was my walk that gave it away:

His parents are not from here

How exotic to grow up like that
In our nation
Among us
But still as if in that other place

And what can you expect
--I anticipate them saying
His parents never really assimilated
So of course
Like them
Like everyone in the country where they came from
My first mode of locomotion was rollerskates

And it's true.
My first step
was really a first roll

And that's the way I learned to get around
The way my parents did
Fluidly, gracefully, efficiently
Naturally
The momentum of countless generations
of grandparents all wheeled and proud

Propelling me forward
Strong arms behind me if I leaned back too far

Rollerskating really was no problem
In my house
In my neighborhood
Or visiting relatives

I didn't think so.

I knew that some people
have skates without wheels
that's the way they get around
my mother said.
It seemed so awkward, ungraceful, inefficient, unnatural

There were things she didn't say then
that I learned later:

for most of the good jobs, they don't want your wheels
you have to walk

when you get to public school
you have to walk

when you don't want to draw attention sometimes
you have to walk

when you are used to rolling
walking is not easy

and I did go to the public school
where many of us wept to take off our skates
and clumsily attach those wooden shoes

up and down the hallways
leaning against the walls
many of us falling over
often
anyway
muttering profanity out of the teachers' earshot

most of the teachers
were more comfortable on skates as well
So I didn't understand why
When they caught me trying to tie my skates on sometimes

They would say
Shoes. Shoes. Shoes.

I knew
most of the teachers
were more comfortable on skates as well
and they knew our lives
and how much harder our parents had to work
and how sometimes we didn't have enough to eat
only because we come from the place where they rollerskate

most of the teachers
would go easy on us
make us walk
but slower than you might have
in your public school

most of the teachers
would accept the bare minimum
when it came to walking
we were in it together
in a way

and even though I kept skating almost everywhere
when I wasn't in school
when
in my house
in my neighborhood
with my relatives

I got pretty good at walking anyway

I was one of the best in my school
I got good grades
Awards
advanced classes

When my family needed someone to walk for them
I would be the walker
proud

But
When the politicians talked of moats
And how we should all skate back

Where our skates belonged
I knew I needed to walk right up to them
And tell them who I was

But usually
to do that
They make you go to college first

And that's why I'm here
On these shoes
that are pretty comfortable now
Almost as comfortable
as skates
But still not as natural
Nor as beautiful
Nor as me

There were things my high school teacher never said
that I'm learning now:

here
There are hills and stairs
everywhere
You can trip even if
you're a pretty good walker

All of the teachers can
RUN

And they expect you to run with them
And with those students who
It seems
never had to learn to walk
it seems
were born into the best
running shoes

most of the teachers can't even skate
and don't understand how different it is
So who do you think is the faster runner?

I'm a fast learner
But I'm afraid
That by the time I catch up

The race will be over

And I will still
be behind.

David Longstreth is an English as an Additional Language instructor in Humboldt State University's International English Language Institute. His areas of academic and pedagogical interest include the promotion of equitable education for language minority students in English-medium universities, the use of corpora to inform language teaching and learning, and the development of a lexis-focused approach to teaching language learners to write in the disciplines.