

# Rollerskates

David Longstreth, *Humboldt State University*

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.*