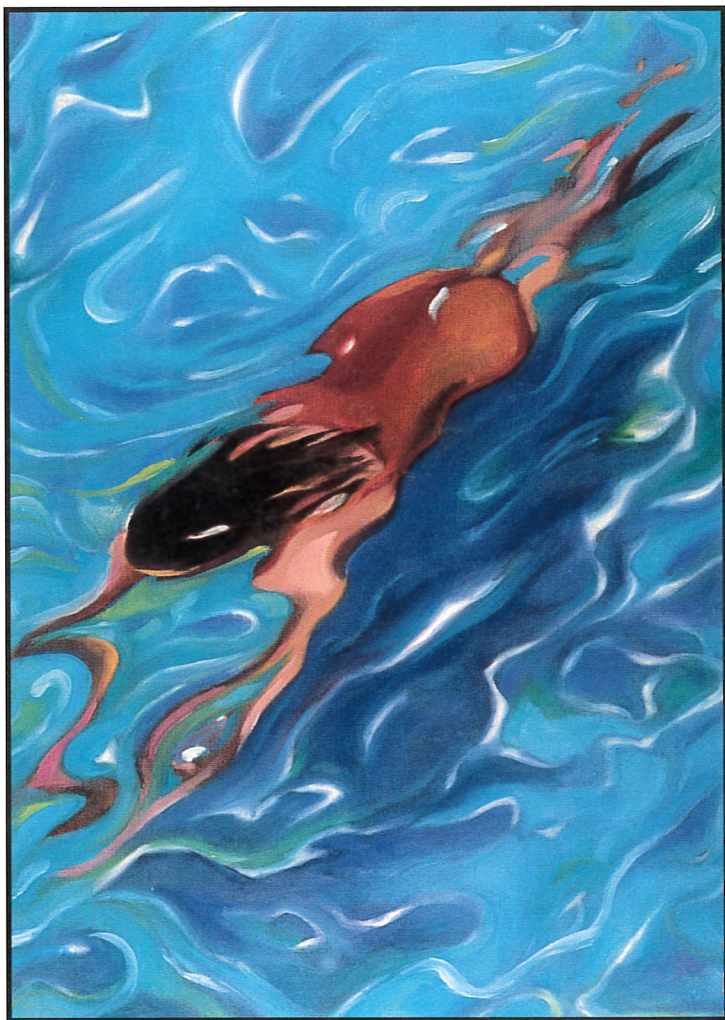


# SHENANDOAH

THE WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY REVIEW



Volume 50    Number 2  
SUMMER 2000

Erika Krouse

## MERCY

I found the apartment the day I arrived in the city. I lived above a Chinese restaurant that served peanut-butter-and-cucumber sandwiches as a lunch special. There was a “Room For Rent” sign by the cash register. I read the lease over a bowl of rice speckled with anise and crushed coriander. While my pen quivered over the space left for references, Kim, the young landlord asked, “Quiet, right?”

I nodded. A leaf fell from my hair onto the table.

“If I find a cat, it’ll be liquidated. Deep sixed. I’ll make it into gumbo,” he said.

“No cats.” I signed the lease. “No noise.” Asshole, I thought.

Every time I came home, Kim followed me as I wandered among the tables, walked back through the gritty kitchen and started up the stairs to my apartment. “Here, try this,” he’d say and I’d pause with my hand on the banister, opening my mouth. He usually popped something in with a toothpick, or if he had no time for a toothpick, with his oil-stained fingers. Sometimes a fresh dumpling but more often an experiment — French chicken in white wine sauce, or a scoop of shepherd pie. A stuffed jalapeño.

I said, “The sign says ‘Chinese Restaurant,’ Kim. Why do you serve shrimp *fra diavolo*?”

“Sold four today,” he said.

I walked in this city five days a week, too scared to point to a “Help Wanted” sign and ask, “Really? Really?” I was out of money, and I had never had a job. Leaving my husband had cost \$1,000 and I had felt a kind of pleasure in watching his money slip through my hands until it was gone.

But I did like coming home every day, walking under the neon “Lotus Eaters” sign and up the long steps to my studio apartment, my hot plate, my dishes stacked in the bathroom sink. Sometimes I sat at the one window and watched customers walk into the restaurant. From above, their bodies shortened as they approached

until they were just blonde, brown or red dots. And then the restaurant door swung open. When I pressed my cheek against the window, I could feel the building shift to make room for one more life, one more hunger.

I never brought a man home. I couldn’t imagine it — trailing through the restaurant and kitchen, Kim following us with two toothpicks. Watching the man leave in the morning from the window as he grew from a dot to an elongated figure.

So I waited. Waited for the lease to end, waited for a good reason. I was thirty years old then. I told myself, I will wait another thirty before I give up.

A FEW WEEKS after I moved in, I came home from another day of wandering the streets, looking for a job. Kim glanced up from a torn copy of *Jane Eyre* and straightened on his stool. He called, “Moki! Moki!” He hunched his thin shoulders around his ears.

A little boy tottered down the stairs from my apartment wearing a pair of my underwear on his head. They were purple, out of my dirty laundry pile.

Kim leaped over to the stairwell. He reached out to snatch the underwear from the little boy’s head, and then his hand faltered. I grabbed them myself, immediately stuffing them into my coat pocket.

“Where did you get the kid?”

“My son,” Kim said. “I just got custody. Long story. I’ll spank him.”

“Spank yourself,” I said. “Why did you let him go into my apartment in the first place?”

“It’s not an apartment. It’s a room,” he said.

I stared. “My room.”

Furious, I grabbed the little boy’s balled fist and pried it open. There was nothing inside. Feeling even more foolish, I carried him up the stairs to my apartment. He leaned sideways in my arms and pointed at the cracks in the wall and ceiling. His black hair fanned out like a fish’s fin.

Once in my apartment, I wondered what to do with him. So I showed him the window. Then I showed him a bowl. Then I showed him what I was wearing. He sat in the middle of the room, as stoic as a blackjack dealer.

"Talk," I said.

He stared at me with his bluish-black eyes.

"Come on, say something."

"No."

"Where's your mommy?" I asked, cruelly.

Moki pulled at my hand until I sat next to him on the lint-specked floor. Then he grabbed my head and bit my cheek, hard.

I pulled away quickly and touched the wet milk-tooth indentations with my fingertips.

"That hurts," I told him. "When you do that, you have to do it . . . in your imagination."

"What dat?"

"In your brain."

"What dat?"

Eventually we gravitated into a game of Laundry. The game was this, I guess: I picked him up by his chubby legs until he hung upside-down and his bangs separated from his forehead in staticky lines. Then I said, "Time to do the laundry!" and he laughed and laughed. I set him down carefully on the bed, head-first. Moki said, "Again, mommy."

"I'm not your mommy," I said. I pulled up my shirt halfway and showed him my belly.

"See?" I said. "No stretch marks."

He laughed and showed me *his* bellybutton, still an outie. He poked it with a small, perfectly-groomed finger, then became lost in its complexities. I looked at the part on the top of his head as he studied.

After awhile Moki said, "Again."

"Again what?"

"Again laundry."

"Laundry's dirty."

"Dirty birdy purty laundry."

I picked him up. He said, "Mommy."

And there we were again.

IT HAD BEEN a month since I had wobbled into the first seat on a train headed here. The last words I said to my husband had shot out through a dribble of blood: "Yeah, well, and I hate *Texas*."

I called a taxicab from a pay phone outside a convenience store. People stared at me, at my stumbling walk, my bloody face, my thin dress. When the cab came, the driver said, "I don't do hospitals, lady."

I said, "Train." When I lay down in the back seat, I turned my head and wiped my face against the upholstery.

I don't know how I got up the steps of the train station. At the ticket window, the stationmaster thought I was drunk or on drugs, so he sent me here.

I FOUND A job advertised in a flyer and they hired me over the telephone. The job involved telemarketing opera libretti and other junk. On the first day I showed up in my one skirt and my supervisor complimented it. After the third day in the same skirt, he frowned at the stain on my right thigh. He kept glancing at it until I nested a phone book in my lap.

I worked off a typed list of names and phone numbers. The telephone was a dial phone, orange and weighing about fifteen pounds. I started using a pencil to dial, and the fossilized eraser on the tip left green, waxy streaks over the numbers.

It was hard to make a sale, especially when the lists were wrong. "Hello, is Mrs. Morganschleffer available?"

"It's Morganstern. And you have the wrong number."

"Morganstern." But she had already hung up.

Most of them didn't know what a libretto was, which is what I told my supervisor when he complained that my numbers were down. Actually, my numbers were nonexistent. "These phone lists are from carefully-selected sources," he scolded. "The opera-listening public."

"Well, they don't seem to know any opera."

"Maybe you should study up on opera so you can tap into the specific opera selections that they do know."

"When I said 'opera' to one of them, she said, 'I don't watch Oprah. I watch Jerry Springer.'"

"You're not enunciating."

"Can't you give me something that makes better use of my skills?"

"What skills?"

He was right. It was as if I was just born.

My supervisor fired me after he overheard me trying to sell my hot plate and wool coat. He got angry when I said that I was just trying to sell people something they might actually want. "And I'm broke," I explained.

"Survival of the fittest, my dear," he said and slid off his penny loafers to rub his feet in their black-ribbed socks. But I didn't know who the fittest would be. He didn't have any other employees. He barely had an office. My desk was a bunch of plastic milk crates lashed together with duct tape. Wood paneling on the walls. Carpet with ridges running down the middle like snake spines.

He paid me in cash for half the week, which was more than I deserved, he said.

After the money was in my hand, I said, "I'm going to think hard of something bad to do to you." He reached to take the money back. I snatched my hand away and then left.

All that evening I sat in the restaurant, watching people, figuring things out. Kim emerged from the kitchen with a hissing *coq au flambe* for the table by the door. On the way back, he winked and said, "Kiss me, I'm an Aquarius."

I held Moki in my lap and whispered into his hair, "No money."

He murmured, "No nunny." He patted the stuffed dog I gave him. I had found it in a dumpster and washed it carefully in the bathroom sink with dish soap.

Over his head, I turned a page in the want ads. I circled an ad that said, "Creative energetic person needed for exciting career possibility. Must enjoy dementia population."

Kim hummed as he slapped spatulas and waved towels in the air. Through the open doors, the kitchen swam with char and grease. His hands whirred around a plate until it was dressed with food the way a child is dressed for New Year's. The dangling peels of paint shifted as he walked by, then they settled again.

I watched Kim's reflection through a metal pie case filled with homemade baklava, raspberry torte, and as a concession to Americanized Chinese culture, fortune cookies. Kim made them himself and called them Misfortune Cookies. He stuffed them

with handwritten messages saying things like, "Even your Hawaiian shirts can't save you from global warming." I pulled a cookie out of the case and crumpled it open. It said, "You will meet a tall, dark felon."

When Kim pressed his concoctions on me, I always protested. Then I opened my mouth. And after the restaurant closed, I sneaked downstairs and stole hamburger and dry bunches of noodles. I heated stained pots of water on his stove. I lay flat on the counter with my cheek pressed against the cold, scrubbed metal. I slipped eggs into the boiling water and watched to see if they would crack at the shock.

I HAD TO do something. Using Moki's fingerpaints, I painted a sign that said, "Fortune Telling, Ten Bucks." I sneaked down the stairs, sign faced inward. Kim smiled at me, hands full of plates.

I walked to the park and propped the sign against a park bench, then sat slightly apart from it, as if it belonged to someone else. After five minutes I scooted closer. After another five minutes I moved it and myself out of the park and onto the street. I leaned against a brick wall and waited there until I felt less stupid.

The first person handed me some money and held out his hand. I clasped it by the fingers and looked at the lines. They were deep, almost as if he had a cartoon hand. I can't read palms.

"You are . . . a very passionate lover?" I said.

He nodded. His forehead turned pink so I continued, a little louder over the sounds of the cars.

"Watch out for airlines with the letter S in them. Less red meat, more fish. Your boss will make a fatal mistake and blame it on you. You will have an affair, but return to your wife."

He smiled and tipped me.

All day, people asked me about the things that were lost to them. Family heirlooms, past lovers, dead children. When they did, I saw my words under my own feet like the slats of train tracks sliding beneath me as I moved forward. I saw the words like something held tight to my chest and then released as my grip broke and I let it break.

So it was easy when someone grabbed my hand and asked, "Will I ever see my little Bobby again?"

I said, "Yes, of course."  
Or, "No."

KIM ENLISTED MY help in the kitchen when a busload of tourists pulled up. I hadn't really cooked in months, so it felt good, the crash of the raw vegetables in oil, the crackling skin of poultry, the moist flakes of fish. Kim said, "Moki, help me. Sing me the song." Moki danced in the hot kitchen with a handful of cabbage. The song had no words, just high noises and the windy sound of his breath.

As I brought hot food to the tables, the tourists said, "Thank you. How lovely." Or, "I never saw cheese in Chinese food before." Then they were silent in their ferocious eating, every now and then glancing at each other with painted eyebrows piled high with meaning.

After everyone had left besides the odd dumpling-eater, Kim said, "And now for us." He pulled a steaming duck from the oven. He showed me how to peel back the fat and baste the surface so it formed a soft second skin.

"So what do you do all day long?" Kim asked.

"I'm kind of a fortune teller."

"What's my fortune?" He held out his hands, stained with grease and black bean sauce.

"Fame." I smiled.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"I don't even have a friend."

"What about Moki?" Kim asked. Moki was chewing on the wrong end of a carrot, so I pulled it out of his mouth and turned it around for him.

Kim turned back to the stove. "You're from Oklahoma," he said.

"Texas."

"You talk like a Texan. Can you ride a horse?"

"No."

"What can you do?"

"I don't know."

"I can't do much myself. Besides cooking."

After a few minutes, Kim asked, "Why do you stare like that?"

"I can stare if I want to."

Kim took off his apron, then his shirt. "Look at me," he said, but I was already looking.

He was slightly skinny, with muscles that looked excessive, placed there for decoration only. A little rivulet of sweat shone on his sternum. He was a man, clearly. He was a man at a loss.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, arms stretched out.

Embarrassed, I looked out the window and then at his son who was staring at me with a big wooden spoon stuck in his mouth.

THAT NIGHT, KIM knocked on my door, looked at what I was wearing and asked, "Are you ready?"

I looked down. My clothes weren't fantastic, but I was clean. He wore a white shirt and a tie with dice all over it.

We went to a French restaurant. At least, all the names of the dishes were in French. Kim was very interested in what I was going to order, vetoing my first choices with, "Aw, I can make that."

We chatted over dinner. I watched myself just talking like there was nothing else to it.

"I have a question for you," Kim said over dessert. "But you won't like it."

"I'll trade questions, then. Me first."

"That's fair."

"What happened with Moki's mother?"

"Okay." He leaned in. "When you came here and signed the lease. Was that a bruise on your eye?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's okay," I said, idiotically.

Kim said, "Moki's mother is in Mexico. She stole some money from her job. She also got very fat. Fatter than you can imagine. She said it was my fault. She was convinced that Moki was a stomach tumor. She called me ugly. She ate hot dogs. She moved out. She cut her hair and then moved out."

"So. You two didn't work out in general. It was a mistake."

"From retrospect, every mistake just looks like denial." Kim folded up his napkin and then just threw it down on the table anyway.

After dinner, we took a walk. It began to sleet. The slush formed a shell over Kim's black hair. He smiled at me. "Look at

you. You're encrusted." We grinned at each other and I thought, Spring.

"Am I trying too hard here?" Kim asked.

I wanted to find the place in me that would let all the words come out the way I wanted, in that natural way I had seen in the movies or TV. I wanted to stop measuring my words out in teaspoons and half-cups. I wanted to talk the way Kim cooked — just the right handful at the right time.

Instead, I just said, "You can try harder."

Kim put his arm around my shoulders. We walked like that for a while until I felt like something inside me was breaking into tiny pieces and falling in our footsteps.

WHILE I WAS reading fortunes on the street, a bald man slapped his pregnant wife and drove off in his car. The woman steadied herself on the rail of someone else's stoop, then walked slowly down the street, her face still.

She stopped in front of my sign, then sat carefully in the woven folding chair next to it. She started crying into her hands.

"Should I call somebody?" I asked, reaching across the card table but not touching her, not sure where to lay my hands.

"I need something," she said. Her lips receded from her teeth. She held her breath while she cried quietly.

"A doctor?"

She took a long, shaking breath and then several more. Then she asked, "What just happened?"

So I told her that she fell in love with the wrong man. I told her she would have to leave, soon, as soon as she could. I told her about the escape, the ride on the train, the blood and the bruises.

I started to tell her that she would lose this baby in a dirty train bathroom while the tracks blinked fast under her feet. She would think she was dying when she felt the first contraction. She'd feel the bloody mass slip from between her legs and disappear immediately, the baby she didn't even know she had inside her. Then she'd stare at the tracks constantly renewing themselves in their horrible uniformity, and she'd think that there is no such thing as mercy.

I HAD AN interview at a travel agency. Kim styled my hair for me, and Moki planted a slobbery kiss on my cheek. "Good luck, good

luck," they chanted, waving from the window while something smoked on the grill. "Goodbye!"

The agency was eight blocks from home. When I walked in, the women smiled from their desks and batted away cigarette smoke. They were all fat. Scattered on every flat surface were jars of candy, cookies and packages of snack cakes. A Labrador retriever greeted me, tail flipping around, ears folded like wontons.

"Have a donut," Marjorie, the boss, said. I took one and, without thinking, held it in my lap.

The first question she asked was, "What exactly are your feelings about travel?"

The other women in the office joined in. "Do you know Windows? Oh, it's easy. Hey, how did you get your skin to look so soft?"

"What's that accent, honey? Where are you from?" Marjorie asked.

"Oh, here and there," I said.

They made the dog do tricks. "Maurice — jump! Jump! Well, he usually jumps."

Maurice ran under my outstretched hand, back and forth. "He's a self-petter," Marjorie explained. "Well, you're hired. We can only pay you starvation wages, but there's always food around, so you'll live. OK by you?"

I nodded. Maurice kept moving, trying to milk every last bit of kindness out of what was only a hand, only mine.

After I left, I turned down the first alley I could find. I jumped up and down, hands clenched into fists, grinning. I hopped right by a man lying down along a wall. He rolled over and asked, "Change? Bunny?"

I stopped jumping and reached into my pockets. They were completely empty. I turned them inside out. "I'm sorry," I said breathlessly. "I have absolutely no no no money." I started hopping again.

"Wait." He reached inside his shoe and then held out something in his grimy fist. I wouldn't come closer until he opened his hand to show me what was inside. "Here," he said. It was a quarter.

"Now can I please fucking sleep?" He rolled over.

MOKI RAN IN circles around my room, then picked up my toothbrush, which was lying on the floor for some reason. He

started to comb his hair with it, then stopped when I made an Aaa-Aaa-Aaa noise. Then he pretended, lightly brushing a few inches above his head, before then pretending that it was a horse and galloping around the room.

I read a magazine article explaining how to keep a lover interested. This particular article suggested that I call out another man's name in the heat of passion. To keep him guessing.

"Guess what?" Moki asked.

"What?"

"Elephants."

Downstairs, there was the sound of Kim shutting the cash register at the counter after the restaurant had closed. I heard his step on the stair. He walked into my room, pulled the two of us off the floor. He led us down into the dim kitchen, where we sat on the counter with the soggy tomatoes and the cucumbers in their buckets.

Kim pulled Moki into his lap and said, "It's time for you to tell me everything."

So I told him about Texas.

One night my husband hit me until I couldn't close my mouth. It was stuck open, like I was yawning. Every time I tried to bring my jaws together, something in my temple snapped and I couldn't see very well. I cried like an animal.

He left and the door slammed in a slice of cold air. I waited at the window, in the dark. Soon a windstorm pulled up the dirt and dust and spun it around. The dog across the street barked and pulled against his chain. The glass thudded like a heart, and my pulse shuddered against it. I waited there for an hour until the wind died down.

In front of the Our Chance gas station across the street, a faint figure moved under the street lamp. It was an elderly woman, walking, shuttered by passing cars. Her orthopedic shoes had high heels, and something glittered around her neck. Glass beads, probably. Ladies' night out. Her head was doddering back and forth, back and forth.

The cars passed so quickly that it was almost a freeze frame when I first saw the man running behind her, then closer, then indeed raising a fist to strike as the woman peered slowly around her shoulder.

The old woman opened the claw of her fist. I held my breath and grabbed at the surface of the windowpane, but I couldn't see very well. Each passing car obscured her.

She lunged at the man's neck with a karate chop. Her handbag swung from her elbow. She whirled around and jumped. She was up in the air; it was impossible. As she landed, her foot lodged into the man's kidneys. He dropped. That was it.

There were no more cars. The man's figure writhed on the ground. The old woman bent over him, saying something. Her silk dress had a crease in the shoulder where the man had grabbed her briefly, and a rip in the skirt from her — what? It can only be called a flying side-kick. One of her feet lay across the man's throat, as neatly as a table setting.

Then it looked like she'd had enough, because she backed up and then turned around. She adjusted the shoulder strap of her bag and walked away, leaving the man twisted on the ground. Her bun shone behind her, a silver moon.

This is hard for me to say.

Waiting in the dark for my husband to come home, I held my sore ribs, remembering the woman leaping high and kicking, her old body making new shapes. It was all I thought about until I left the next morning, taking nothing with me. How the old woman looked; how I would look. Flying, like a fish in air.