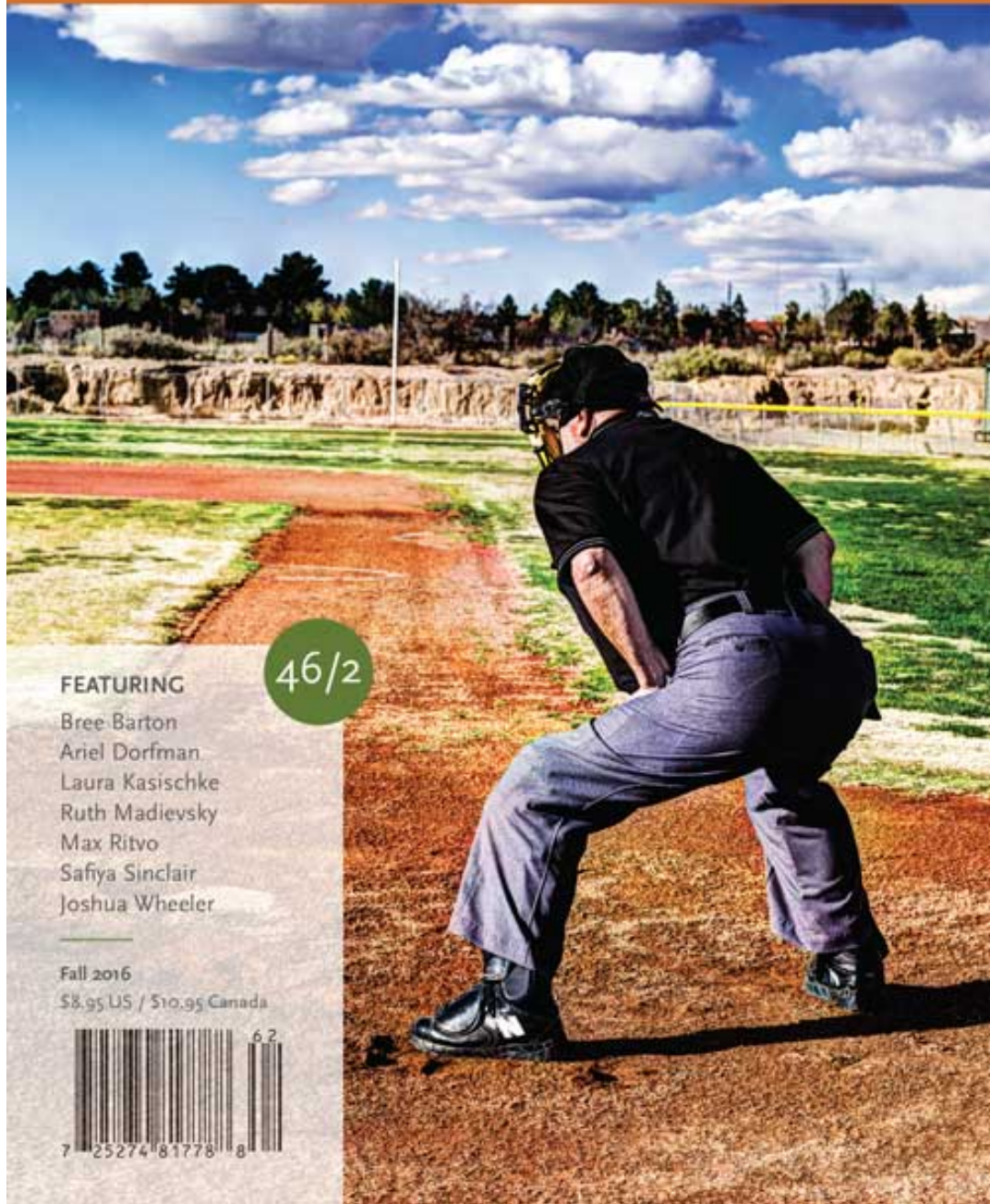


the
IOWA REVIEW



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CHEN LI

I Catch Sight of Many Chaplins on the Street

Translated from the Chinese by Ting Wang

I catch sight of many Chaplins on the street: each wearing a bowler hat, clutching a cane, dressed in ill-fitted, mismatched clothing, and walking awkwardly like a duck. Some of them live by the swimming pool, others in the air-raid shelter; some are often wakeful and engage in soliloquy, others have frequent dates with the stars in the sky. They haven't seen movies by Chaplin, for they cannot find theaters that play his films. They walk, fall in love, talk, dream, and feel guilty like Chaplin, without knowing they are Chaplinesque.

They cross the underground passage and pass the municipal hospital while dithering over whether to give their pocket money away to the busking foreign vagabond. They walk past the newly opened stock exchange and pick up a crushed flower amidst the noisy crowd. They wear the flower above their hearts, smiling to the girl who sells chewing gum, smiling to the streets, smiling to the buses—their smiles optimize the city's order.

They sit solitarily at one corner of the park while the seesaws of the entire world lean toward computer terminals. They are a merry-go-round, hopping and twirling with the children who come by. They are code numbers, which they stick onto children's exercise books, which then become toys, fairy tales, and monthly calendars of sentiments and emotions.

They hide away love in garbage bins and lock up dreams in fire hydrants. They dance on the dining table, with small dinner rolls as dancing shoes. They use forks and knives as aerial ladders, elevating troubled hearts beyond cloud nine. They sing songs with only vocals but no meaningful lyrics.

They prowl around with their toolbox. Yet they are not patriots who spray-paint graffiti on the walls of memorials. Rather, they are amateur landscapers and biographical researchers. They apply rubber tapes on both eyes of each and every statue in the city to treat insomnia for those vexed and sleepless colossi.

Just like you, they are afraid of their wives, afraid of alarm clocks, afraid of dogs, afraid of aging, even though some of them are not yet married, with only one newly popped-up wisdom tooth. Just like you,

they ride off into the sunset, ride white horses, ride their own shadows to work; they eat lunch, take naps, read evening newspapers, watch entertainment news, and read translated novels. They are like windup fish swimming between urban aquariums.

They are desiccated fish.

Yet they are soppy at the same time. They resist photocopiers, staplers, and automatic fish feeders. They get into fistfights with thugs that are featured in the society pages. They admire clowns, psychiatrists, and trapeze artists. They walk past the shadows resembling swooping eagles thrown on the ground by the soaring scaffolding and think of themselves as eagles. They remember the orphanage, the pawnshop, and the powdered milk at the church. They remember poverty.

They, too, experience the pain of unrequited love. They try hard to learn to appreciate operas, and spare no tears for the latest arias.

They, too, go on strike, for the sake of tiny hemorrhoids on their bottoms. They, too, demonstrate, protest, and encircle—with clubs—the cockroaches that had come the night before to gnaw on their youth.

And encircle the power plant undergoing an outage.

They are the City Lights.