

BECOMING JOEY

by Paul C. Gorski

José's ten.
Looks six by size,
twenty in the eyes.

Down
the school-morning street
José ambles along
dotted lines of big cheese busses
that spit exhaust like expletives.
José chokes
on a few final moments of peace.

Hand-me-downs hang
from José's slenderness,
patched and stained.
Soles flop beneath battered shoes,
worn but hanging on,
if only by a lace.

José pauses in the schoolyard
where fairer kids laugh and
scamper
unaware of this, his battle;
of this, his burden;
of these, his borderlands.

Behind him: cracked sidewalks
and frosty nights sweetened
by the warmth of belonging.

Before him: manicured
playgrounds,
colorful classrooms,
lectures and quizzes about a world
that doesn't see him.

Still, José moves forward—
what feels in his stomach
a regressive sort of forward.
He straightens his shirt,
dusting off the stains of ancestry.
And he clears his throat,
spitting out his Mexican voice.

And, becoming Joey,
he crosses
into school.