

**Joint First Place:**

**Nervous Breakdowns**

**Tiffany Krupa (La Jolla, USA)**

They happen at the nail parlor

between your thumb and index finger

fire engine red with a quick-dry gloss coat

all of a sudden, you are laughing, or screaming

the thin, effeminate man holding the brush starts

speaking in Korean really fast, over his shoulder.

Or, in the cleaning supply aisle while

you're chewing over the unit price,

holding the wrong coupon. You look down,

there's a yellow puddle at your feet,

an empty bottle of Mr. Clean in your hand, some guy,

doing his mother's shopping, quickly backing away...

In the middle of a meeting, you're doodling

the person sitting next to you starts crying loudly

you look around and everyone is frozen, so

you put your pen down, rise slowly, take his hand

in yours, gesture toward the door. Smiling, you whisper

*I understand, dear. I know. Let's get out of here.*

You leave the building, your lone shadow striping the sun.

### **Judge's comments**

Nervous Breakdowns is written in a deceptively simple, colloquial style and set in a modern urban world of nail-bars, supermarkets and work meetings. Without labouring the point at all (and I can't stress too often how important it is not to labour the point in a poem!) the author sets up a tension between the everyday world of 'a quick-dry gloss coat' (it is surely not incidental that the colour chosen is 'fire-engine red') or doodling in a meeting and the frighteningly unpredictable world of the 'you' of the poem.

The disconnects of this world are tellingly brought out through the deliberate lack of explanation. One minute the protagonist is rationally 'chewing over the unit price', the next minute finding 'an empty bottle of Mr Clean' in her or his hand. Someone 'starts crying loudly' in a meeting and the protagonist calmly soothes him and leads him out - or not. The last line 'You leave the building your lone shadow striping the sun' speaks volumes without any obvious effort. This poem, which is absolutely without histrionics, is an object lesson in how to write with real force and insight about a truly distressing experience.