

SABRINA ITO

Jackson Square

I.

At night, it lights up like a poem.
Street lamps glow, green absinthe steaming
against the purple-black backdrop of evening
sky and buildings teeming
with cracks, cockroaches,
witchcraft.

Spanish moss drips
like long wisps of dry honey
dribbling from craggy branches
of ancient oaks.

They line the streets here,
where your hard heels slip
on peat-covered cobble stones
sweating from humidity,
gleaming from orange-lit shops
and booze-breathing taverns.

Your lover's teeth flash white in the shadows.
His face is strangely transformed—ghoulish, sexy.
For a minute, you think you've caught a glimpse
of his insides—the part you're never allowed to see,
that looks just like the doubt you have,
foreign and scary.

Time oozes like thick molasses,

sticking to the notes and the beat,
the lonely bleat
of a saxophone
sliding down your neck,
trilling in your ear, filling in
those small, shifting moments.

Your body moves to the music—
the slick swim of hip,
the click of fingers,
ticking heels,
keeping time—like sex, to song.
You are pulsating now,
and when a slippery blue Palmetto bug
chatters and flashes past your ear,
you shudder with pleasure
because to you, it sounds like jazz.

But soon, alleyways clang with locking doors
and feet, retreating into more sobering hours.
You look up to find the constellations
and see instead, twinkle lights lolling on strings
connecting buildings, dotting the sky.

So, you stumble along unsteady,
cheek pressed hard into your lover's shoulder.
Blink hard into the lusty haze of sunrise,
hush frost into whispers
of 'good morning.'

II.

In the morning, the city wakes with a hangover,
businesses don't open until eleven, or noon.
The haze of humidity, the hotness of the sun
ripple slow and shaky from the crackling concrete.

Slow-grinding wheels of ships and paddle-boats
are first to be timidly industrious.
Their heads hurt—
they push slowly down the Mississippi.

Churchgoers brunch, filling their bloated bellies
with crawfish, oysters—muffaletta sandwiches
drip sauce, as gumbo stew rolls
down white sleeves
tinged rust at the cuffs.
Bruised lips take quick sips
from thick, chicory coffee
filled to the brim,
quivering with cream.

Perspiration is eager on Sunday afternoons,
but as we walk to church,
no one agrees that it is offensive to God.
Streetcars ring as church bells ring,
so we wave to the puffy breasted women
who cool themselves in the shade,
lolling along the balustrade
of a deep, pale-violet veranda.

And so, we are bursting
as we climb
the ascending steps—
creaking under our bodies,
our new shoes, our backs.

We sink like groaning ships
into the back pews,
moist and slippery,

and when the priest nods and gives us his light caress—
his empty gaze brushing the tops of our heads—
we can't help but snicker at how he licks his red lips.

Smiles of remembrance
from the night before.