

FIRST INTENSITY

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Drew Gardner —————

will she turn around, so I can see
her face, finally?

red brown white and green
rooftops of mid-thought's excavating

as if the sincerity of the separations
could brake upon the friendship
permanent and pure

the colored shapes approaching
so close only light and presence are apparent

and the shallow distance of a sun
emerges, swallowed up
in inverse fire

change, draw out, move away, remain
the power of love has not
been fully applied as yet

FESTINA LENTE

CIAN CALLED SUGGS Clark Kent. He told Suggs about Superman and the TV. Suggs put on his big horn-rims and knotted his undersized tie up his big stretching chest. He combed his mild-mannered hair high behind his ears. Suggs said, No way, my friend, and Cian said, Oh yes my friend, if you look closely at the television set, right up to the screen, you can see the board Superman is lying on when he flies across the screen.

Suggs said, "Hey, fuck you, Corey, I *fly*," and Murphy laughed.

Suggs said, "Hey, anyway, fly or no fly," he had something better than that, about Brother Mackintosh, and, with one sneaker on and the other sneaker in his right hand and his one free hand hanging on the open door of his locker he said, "Four freshman caught Happy Mackie in an open stall with his prick in his hands, and the twerps were so scared by Mackie's wiener schnitzel that they went down to get a dean, and Brother Michel had to take the prickpuller out of the bathroom himself."

Cian said, "That's got fairy tale written all over it," and Murphy slammed his locker door shut and said, "*Fairy* is right, I believe every word."

Suggs threw his bag over his long shoulder and shrugged. "I don't care who believes me."

Murphy said, "Ladies, let's hightail it, it's time now anyway for the Happy Mackie Hour."

Cian trailed the winding parade past the cafeteria doors and down the wide hall where the white-blue Passion mosaic showed a sheen of gray grease ending at the gold trim of the trophy case. Above the trophy case was a red cardboard banner: INTRAMURAL GLORIES.

Outside the classroom Suggs made a fist at his fly and stopped and half-peeked over his shoulder at Cian. "You watch the way he squints, the good Brother's already going blind from it."

Cian went into the room behind Suggs and he heard Murphy say, "Blessed Mary Palm pray for us," and someone let out a sputtering laugh.

Brother Mackintosh sat with his big hands held still just above his open book and Cian felt his eyes on him. "You, Mister Cian Corey. The higher powers have asked that you speak with me before you run away to the weekend."

The Brother smoothed down the pages of his book. "It is about that scandalous drawing of yours." Cian heard *scandalous drawing* in his stomach and his arms went weak and his legs fell out as he took his seat behind Suggs.

Mackintosh started with a slow bobbing on his heels and slow, steady words about number thirteen, "Problematic, I know, watch here," and Cian followed the Brother's numbers on the blackboard and he thought with some fun of the poem quoted in the yellowed obituary handed round in Brother Nico's class. He thought *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Virgin* was a better title for the competition than *Twelve Images of the Virgin*, but title or no title he knew someone was unhappy with his drawing, or even unhappily excited by it, and he heard a voice of outrage, "What business, Mister Corey, does this sort of lewd drawing have in a contest that purports to be an art competition about the Virgin Mother?" Not Brother Mackintosh, though even Mackie might be none too happy with the fleeting glimpse of her legs that he drew with uncontrolled tingling ease to the mixing violins of *L'Après-Midi D'un Faune* bought just on Tuesday with the last two bucks of two weeks' pay from Stevie's Seventy-Eights near the Stadium and fifteen minutes before closing time. "Almost minute never mind midi," Stevie had said. He imagined Mackie might ask, with his hands behind his back, bobbing on his heels, "Why this basket of fish at the Virgin's feet?" and, "A pearl necklace? On the Blessed Virgin?" A long hour of after-class alone with Mackie. But none of the ruler. Not from Happy Mackie. Just enough time to put off Friday and, maybe, likely, probably, *maybe* inform his "folks," on their rich creamy white paper with its deep blue heading ST. JOHN THE DIVINE SCHOOL FOR BOYS, Jerome 6-2323: ". . . this letter is to notify you that your son has submitted a picture for the competition which we deem . . ." and he could already see his father's face of unholy rage, a strip-search of the room, collecting every pen and pencil and drawing pad, plucking books from under the bed. "The Egyptian Book of the Dead?"

Michel's right on there, you have turned into a sacrilegious bastard." And he half-heard close to sleep the ticking lull of tapping chalk and subdued songs of side voices, soft questions and the scribbling of pencils.

From the first row along the wall a suddenly loud question came through heavy laughter.

"Brother, you can't be serious?"

"Hush boys, simmer. I *am* serious. There is a sine-cosine to a woman's anatomy." The first row burst into hot laughter.

"You gentlemen are just titillated by what is simple mathematical application. The whole universe is only a matter of equations. Take Mister Suggs."

The Brother pointed at Suggs and came down the aisle in slow steps, custard-cheeks and pink-bald with his ring of white hair. He leaned to Suggs' face and raised his white eyebrows, as if looking into a fish bowl.

"Mister Suggs is on God's green earth only courtesy of an accident of calculus and biochemistry."

Mackintosh stood straight and bobbed on his heels and stared down at Suggs with a clinical look, like a doctor about to ask him to take a deep breath. "Right, Mister Suggs? One evening, one little sperm fished its way up through what was the most important mathematical equation of your life. Very particular mathematical odds at work in your mother's body that night. Dangerous milliseconds. Not to mention tissue resistance and the protoplasmic fluids, the microscopic bacteria of the vagina. And add to this the genetic odds of boyhood, the fact that that little spermfish of your father's might have carried an X-chromosome, in which case Mister Suggs, instead of wearing his awful plaid tie, would be *Miss* Suggs."

A wolf whistle sounded from the first row.

"And in which case he'd be earning his education in a pink skirt among the fair dames downtown at Cathedral." Hoot-hows broke into cackling hollers. Mackintosh put his finger over his lips and the class went quiet.

"So there you have it, Mister Suggs. A quick example of the application of high school math to your precious life. And here

you are fifteen long years later, in the year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and fifty-five, page three hundred and twenty-five and on of all questions number five. Correct? That's some fearful mathematical symmetry, no? Continue."

Suggs said *X is four if and only if* and over his low-toned voice and chalk scratches, the class settled into a slow drone.

Cian watched two boys in the courtyard under the pale branch of a sycamore fumble a pack of Luckies from the fat boy's pocket.

"Powerful, Mister Suggs, you always convert, always convert, and please, now, share with your compatriots the name of the composer of *Rigoletto*."

Suggs slouched. Cian saw Murphy mumbling across the aisle. A big brown freckle marked the rim of Murphy's small nose, and he sat half-off his chair with his hands in his pockets. "Here we go, opera in trig, my father says this fairyass should be turned in —"

Suggs raised his long arms in a careful back-stretch and scratched the back of his neck.

"He's waiting, Corey. 'Rigaletter.' Who wrote it?"

Across the aisle Conor Flood behind Murphy said, "Cian, tell Suggs Mozart composed it, I had this question last week, am I right?"

Brother Mackintosh leaned heavy on the podium and looked through the window into the courtyard. "Questa o quella, Mister Suggs, no? Questa o quella?"

Cian ducked and talked into the prickly hairs along Suggs' thick neck. "Say, 'Joe Green'." Suggs half-turned around with his lips pressed into his shoulder. "Joe Green? Who's Joe Green? Joe Green's a fucking relief pitcher. Corey, talk to me."

Cian ducked again and said, "If you don't answer 'Joe Green' you'll regret it."

Cian sat up. The row of heads had turned around looking at them and the long line of light eyes ended at Mackintosh. Mackintosh sneezed and the class said, "Bless you." The heads turned up to Mackintosh ragging his nose. The Brother finished wiping and looked over at Cian and the heads turned back to him. He stuffed his handkerchief into his shirt pocket and bobbed on his heels in the chalky haze. "I heard you. *We* heard you, Mister Corey."

Mackintosh stepped around his podium under the crucifix and past the yellow numbers along the board and turned down left towards them.

“You advised Mister Suggs to say Joe Green but naturally he lost it in your translation.”

He stopped over Suggs. He ran his fingers through Suggs’ hair and Suggs jerked and ducked and the class exploded.

He stepped away from Suggs and stood over Cian and Cian caught a deep apple scent of aftershave. “Mister Corey knows his Verdi. But I heard from someone in the cheap seats here say Mozart. But Mister Suggs knows, doesn’t he, that Mozart would never compose such a lewd opus. I know Mister Corey knows this.” Mackintosh bowed at Cian.

“But his answer had no business whatever with a question I put to Mister Suggs.”

Cian stared up at the soft flatness of Mackintosh’s nose. Dark brown sprouts of nostril hair under the red skin and his thin upper lip showed a dry film of white. “Gentlemen, most of our problems are put to us by people who make it their business to answer questions that life has put to each of us.”

Murphy let out a hot chuckle and the class turned to him. “Let me put a question on you. Why are we talking about opera in math class?”

Murphy rested his elbows on his open book.

Mackintosh stepped in front of Cian’s desk and passed, squeezing into the next aisle. He stood over Murphy. Murphy lowered his chin into his hands and stared up at the Brother with wide eyes.

“A fair question,” Mackintosh said. “Too rude to be called Socratic, but a good question from Mister Murphy. Point is exactly that Mister Murphy, rude question or not, we deserve space and respect to answer our questions for ourselves. Opera, Mister Murphy, is precisely the drama of facing essential questions. Without help. And you, Mister Murphy, are in the opening act of God’s dramatic opera. Call it ‘La Vita.’ Does this help you with *your* question?”

“Yeah, and I have an answer. Fuck you and your la veeda shit.”

Mackintosh stepped back and the back of his legs pressed into Cian’s desk.

"Come again?"

"What come again? I gave you my answer. I said 'Fuck you'."

"Mister Murphy, you're projecting your rage, you dear."

"No one calls a man 'dear' unless he's a buttfucker."

Cian kept still. Murphy wiggled in his chair without looking up at Mackintosh, and Suggs and the heads in the rows stared down at their desks. Cian stared at the green-brown tiles and saw Murphy's shoe on the low rung of his desk leg, blue and buffed, with an old strip of Scotch tape topping one of his laces.

Murphy slammed his book shut and the full slap snapped across the room. Someone in the front row let out a breathy gasp and Murphy banged one book on top of another. Cian watched him binding his book strap around the stack.

Mackintosh went up Murphy's row and stopped and turned at the front. He put his right hand on the podium and looked down at Murphy moving in his seat. "Yes, do that, take leave, Mister Murphy, good-bye. Ciao. We'll all visit you in Dante's thirteenth circle. You and Pier della Vigna."

Cian watched Murphy tuck the overlarge wrap of books underarm. No one in the rows looked up to watch him pass, and his shoes clacked on the floor tiles. His wet hair loosened and bobbed over his forehead as he pulled open the door. He let it go behind him with a loud bang. Murphy shouted in the hall and soft talking flowed over the desks. Suggs turned around and raised his eyebrows and fixed his glasses. He shrugged. "Corey, you heard what I just heard, right?"

Mackintosh rapped his knuckles on the podium until the class dropped quiet.

"At least — *quiet*. At least, at least Mister Murphy's obscene aria gives me a chance to make one final word apropos of living one's questions."

Mackintosh leaned with his elbows out on the podium and rubbed his temple carefully, as if trying to smudge out a thought.

"We, and I say *we* because I'm as alive as you boys. We need to think openly, widely. And we don't need Rilke, Rilke who tells us in many ways that life is one large question, just one question refined into an interminable number of finer questions. Don't drown out uncertainties with the kind of false answers that come

from the mouths of people like Murphy. There aren't essentially any answers. Life leaves us to our questions. Like the parables of Christ. That's what faith is, boys, belief and love of your own doubts and your own questions."

He fingered something on the podium and his forehead eased and he seemed now dancing in his thoughts.

"We know where Mister Murphy is going to end up. And I don't just mean a one-way ticket to Taft High School once Brother Michel phones his parents and deals with this mess. He's not willing to accept his own doubts, so he's going to end up a fat and lustless organism, waiting for his pitiful wife to cook for him, waiting for his pension. That's a common, ready-made, vulgar answer. You boys ought to give yourselves a life lived with some of its original edge. Some music." He spun on his heels and paced in front of the board. "Life is a matter of equations." He waved his hand at the scribbled equations on the board, "Questa o quella?"

The bell rang and voices unwound over the scraping of chairs and Suggs pointed at Cian. "Christ, Corey, I think Murphy's got you to thank for pushing him over the edge, you shoulda just whispered 'Verdi' instead of the Joe Green bullshit, would have saved us that sermon, I told you Mackie's going slaphappy in his head. Too much time with Mary Palm."

"Master Corey, you haven't forgotten our meeting, up here."

"And Master, don't forget my need for a nice long feather please." Suggs stepped around Cian's desk. "The feather, Master Corey."

Cian plucked his bag and stepped up and around the other boys and sat in front of the Brother's desk. Mackintosh shuffled papers and the class noise dissolved behind into a buzzing quiet.

Mackintosh opened his drawer and brought out a large paper held gently underneath with both hands like an expensive dinner plate. He placed the paper facing Cian on the wide desk and Cian recognized the picture in a full wave of fear like falling in a dream. His charcoal curving loop of her small breasts rounded by pearls, the bursts of tulips in her hair with the delicate leaves dangling from the short stems, the bend of her hand, her hand he'd copied from a saint by Raphael that was not the Virgin, with her hand's gentle sweep to offer the basket of shaded fish, her legs rising in

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thin lines on the bedrock, the perfect run of thigh-knee-calf-foot from under her folded robe, and seeing her curls and the shades of pencil-gray on the Brother's wide desk in this open place felt like falling through cold sky.

Cian said he never should have submitted it. "If my father has to know let me tell him, please."

"Why to the yearbook, of all places? Where these thugs scribble all that sentimental drivel to each other?"

"I draw this kind of picture for myself. I should keep it to myself."

Mackintosh smiled widely with his hands behind his head. "You know that Brother Michel is right, this drawing reflects on you. But what it reflects is not what Michel has in mind, it reflects what they call in our day 'refinement,' what they called in the Renaissance making haste slowly, *festina lente*. Ripeness is all. Does Brother Giacomo teach Renaissance in his art chopshop?"

Cian said they hadn't gotten to the Renaissance yet.

"You don't get to the Renaissance." Mackintosh put his hand under his belt. "The Renaissance is all around us. And in the Renaissance they believed in a principal of opposites, spiritual paradoxes that artists like yourself depicted. Gorgeous paradoxes depicted as physical unities. On study sheets, on those frescoes with all those faces embodying opposites. And you have that quality in your hand." Mackintosh took his hand out of his belt and put his palm on the desk. "So we have this Virgin here, a splendid promiscuous Virgin." He ran his red-pink forefinger on the waves of her hair following the flow of a loose strand drawn around her ear touching her pearls in a fading line. "There are so many points in your picture where the erotic is the virginal. It makes a sexual seduction of the ideal of mercy. Falling into the arms of the Virgin. That's exactly what our Brother Michel teaches his seniors in his class, what is it he calls the course? 'Faith and Morality'?"

Mackintosh told him to breathe and pull his hands out of his pockets. "You know by now whose side I'm on."

Cian apologized. He folded his hands on the desk and looked past the Brother's head at the long poster lined with Chinese letters in green and gold. Above the green and gold letters was a

small drawing of a sparrow perched on a bamboo tree.

"I know of your father. As I infer from your question about informing him, your father would very much approve of our good Brother's tanning your hide till you bleed on account of this picture. And you thought they'd publish this in our yearbook under, what is the name of their silly competition?"

"Twelve Images of the Virgin."

"Right. Images *sans voit loin*. So your father would fully approve of having Michel break your hand bones, which is precisely what our Christian Brother Michel wishes would be done."

"My father beats me and beats himself, and beats on anyone at anytime. I don't see my drawings as part of that."

Mackintosh shrugged. He asked was he considering a school for this.

"For the drawing?"

"For your *art*."

He said he was not thinking much past tonight or the next night really.

"Well, you be grateful Michel asked me to talk to you about this. You want to be a professional visionary you'd better learn the price of it. You live in a world where there isn't the faintest idea of the Virgin Mary anymore. Have you ever been out to Queens and seen their version of the Virgin Mary? The family poodle pisses on the Virgin Mary on the front lawns out there. But you won't hear Michel or Pope Pius taking any one of them to task for that."

Mackintosh held the picture up and said nothing. He held the drawing between his thumb and forefinger like a sheet of metal and the buzzing lights overhead broke the quiet.

He put the drawing down and leaned back and his chair creak echoed across the room.

"Do you know what Michelangelo's last words were?"

He said he didn't.

"Nothing profound. Not like our physicist friend Einstein who I read in the papers told his colleague that imagination is more important than knowledge. That's not quite right. Anyway, what *Michelangelo* said as he lay dying were simple words of advice to his gifted apprentice." Mackintosh's face tightened and lines of

wrinkles deepened in his forehead. "He said, 'Draw, dear Antonio, *draw*. Draw and do not waste time.' You understand his meaning?"

He said he did.

Mackintosh told him to take the drawing home. "Keep it to yourself for now and one day when you're two thousand miles from the Bronx, you'll have your reward. Just make haste slowly. All this petty moralizing and policing. Our great diocese has carved out a wonderful purgatory here in Highbridge."

Cian tucked the drawing into his bag and with the drawing away he felt with the Brother a shared secret and a rush in his stomach.

"Brother Giacomo says you're the best artist in the whole school system," Cian said.

"Brother Giacomo's unmasked me, has he?"

"He said you studied sculpting in Paris."

"I studied. But back then I studied in order to *do*. Which is a different state of affairs now. My buried life. Yes. And our teachers required, *required* us to read Baudelaire. That great Frenchman just made our current dean's list of Inappropriate Books. Did you know that? And we had to read Pico and Dante. All of Plotinus. That's where we found God. And then we were given our lessons in proportion and anatomy and then our tools to work from there."

Mackintosh nodded at Cian's bag. "You go out and do as Michelangelo said. Or you end up a weekend artist, Mister Corey, like me, a weekend poet."

Mackintosh stood and pushed his seat under his desk and went to the window. He drew up the dusty shade and the light brightened the pale green board and the Brother's shirt looked grayish in the sunlight.

Cian asked him did he really like math and the Brother said, "Come again?" and he asked him again and the Brother's face went still.

Cian said he was sorry. "It's not my business."

"It's not at all your business."

Mackintosh watched the fat boy in the courtyard stomping a cigarette and Cian watched with him. The Brother stared without

looking, stared past the brown brick face and wide windows across the yard. He asked in a flat voice did he know those boys out there smoking and Cian said they were seniors.

“I asked did you know them, not whether they were seniors.”

Cian said they were seniors and he did not know seniors.

Mackintosh rested his shoulder on the window and wound the shade string around his finger. The dark leaves turned on their light sides in the wind. The boys in the courtyard saw Mackintosh and waved at him. They turned and hurried through the doors on the other side of the building.

“Farewell Mister Corey. Go home.”

Cian took up the strap under the chair and lifted his bag onto his lap.

He passed the empty desks with a strange heaviness in his feet like walking in deep water. He stopped mid-row and looked back. Mackintosh's right hand was cupped over his brows.

He opened the door. He held the doorknob until the door catch clicked shut.

A broomstick slapped on the floor far down the hall. He stood by the door and heard a heavy breath and waited. He heard a heaving sound, a child panting into the echoey emptiness of the hall. Then he heard it again clearly cracking into muffled cries behind the door. He listened again, and then he knew he had no business at all just standing there.

