

LEEANN MCCOY

## *Graffiti*

This is not the nice side of town. This is a place to pass through, and each day I do, safe in my subway bubble. After we leave one manicured, sturdy brick world and before we enter the next, we speed through this wasteland: broken cinder blocks, rusted barbed wire fences sprung from their posts, a potpourri of dirty leaves and garbage—plastic bags, styrofoam cups, wadded up tissues, a crushed Dunkin' Donuts Munchkin box. But no matter how the light hits, all I see is gray gray gray. Then the T turns on its track and graffiti claims everything.

Over the backs of squat brick buildings, across cement pilings, up the arch of a little tunnel, graffiti swells and blooms with the same unwanted, bright beauty as dandelions. There are letters made puffy and soft, angled and edgy, 3-D and coming toward you. There are abstract designs outlined heavily in black: arcs and waves and shapes like clouds. The usual array of declarations are scribbled beneath and sometimes over: phone numbers, initials, “the bees Forever!,” “Nemo Sucks!” But these words ride a great plume of red crested by rust and crash into a blue and green swirl, a shower of yellow sparks.

All this chaos of color builds up to the tunnel and the T slows as we approach it. A heart the height of a man and three times as wide billows up—crooked, cartoonish, blatantly red. At its center, in black letters each as long as my arm, “I LOVE YOU, PK!” It is not new, this heart, and it shows no sign of fading. Oh, PK, where are you? Are you ashamed when you see this, are you regretful, does your heart buoy up and your stomach drop to the crotch of your jeans? This heart cannot blend in, PK, it reduces the declarations around it to nothing.

Maybe you're riding on the T, PK, baby on your hip. You hold the metal bar to keep from swaying. You're wondering when her next booster shot is and if your sister will be on time and then it hits—“I LOVE YOU, PK!”—and your baby is patting your mouth and the name of the graffiti artist is singing in your brain, rising to your lips, then the train whirs into blackness and you absentmindedly

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kiss the baby's fingers and your husband touches your shoulder and gestures to a seat made available and can he tell something's come over you? He doesn't even know you as PK, for you've taken his last name in place of your own, and this old identity hangs outside you, beyond the windows. You have made your life into a round thing, yet the past tags along or ambushes you in all its embarrassing, misplaced glory. How unformed life was then, how limitless in possibility.

True, one explanation does not erase the possibility of others: you never liked him, PK, or you loved him terribly but he was insincere, or he was a she and now she's married, like you, and you wonder, what did it mean? Or you're a man. Or you wish you'd loved him back. Or you wish you hadn't. You were a thirteen-year-old girl, a sixteen-year-old boy, the woman who took the tickets at the roller rink. You were enthralled, you were appalled, you were the laughingstock of your seventh grade class.

Yes, it's true: people seldom love us enough, or in the right way.

So let's say this: you are fifteen, PK, and awkward and wear your jeans too tight and your sweatshirts too big and spray your bangs into a perfect arc, like a wave. Desire is percolating up inside you—the smoothness of his hand on your thigh, the smell of his jean jacket—Brut aftershave and Juicy Fruit and smoke. And this moment of declaration—too tenuous to be re-enacted—is rushing by. And in this moment—oh if only you could see it, PK—that last nearly white shaft of light from a gray November sky, the way the trash is singing in the wind—if only you'd stop and pay attention—you have everything, the whole, perfect weight of love. And the cold of the tunnel is making your back damp and the wind is whipping through your hair and the passing train is shaking your bodies together and however far I've strayed, know this: in the midst of all these broken, used-up things, in this place which is a place to pass through, the graffiti artist loves you.