

*Karen Piconi*

## **Tokens: From the Caves at Sao Paolo**

We parade down the street like children,  
Three of us, holding hands, you  
me and Tomas, whom you have known  
even before the birth of his eight year old  
daughter, Clarissa. She gives us  
buttons, pretend tokens for the caves.  
Chickens follow us in the street  
and then drop off when we arrive.  
Tomas leaves Clarissa outside to  
guard them, these chickens who do  
not understand “guarding” but seem to  
tolerate Clarissa, a child.

Yellow hats, flashlights tied  
around our necks with white string,  
we feel our way down through the mouth  
of the cave. Bracing one hand on  
the rocks, holding the other  
over my face to keep out the odor,  
mildew, old water somewhere beneath us  
in the dark, I focus on the valley  
between Tomas’ narrow shoulders.  
Gravel crumbles behind me, and, for one  
betrayed instant I don’t want you  
close to me, not behind me where,  
if you slip, I must whip around  
to catch you or fall with you, I  
would have to face you and you would see  
my yellow face floating in the halo  
of this flashlight.

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Tomas continues, familiar, chameleon,  
his body takes on the shape of the rocks.  
The crevices wait to be filled  
by his fingers. "Look up,  
" he says.

The roof of the cave, like the ridged  
inside of my mouth, opens up to Tomas'  
light. We three floating faces look up.  
We are only heads inside here, not  
bodies. I have no body, Tomas' hand  
is not cupping the back of my neck,  
is not feeling its way down the crevice  
between my shoulders. You are not  
holding my free hand. We are just faces  
craning toward the light Tomas points,  
just standing, holding hands  
like children.