On Language

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Class of 2014

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Keywords
creative writing, poetry

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This poetry is available in The Mercury: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2014/iss1/23
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Emily Francisco

It’s the exhaustion of words
that kills the body,

every salt-tipped consonant
and bulleted vowel

a struggle to wield,
weapons given to an ignorant youth,

the gun of syntax more
likely to be turned inward

than outward to an opponent.
Lessons can only do so much—

walking to the immigration office,
my brain mixes translations

together like a stew of leftovers,
every Italian syllable a soft, mushy carrot

and every French article
a bone of frozen poulet,

the flavors slipping together
in a broth so murky

that the thought of conversing—
forming sentences, making dialogue—

is repulsive, nauseating to my weak senses,
fragile in their new environment.
One sip of the broth,
and it is already rising in my throat

like bile, the phrases coming out
in jumbled fragments, chunks

of knowledge I knew yesterday
in a classroom of seven,

now expelled from my esophagus
in frantic sprays of, “Est-ce que vous parli—

parli inglese?”
Drowning in the prose,

lost on the way to the questura,
my romantic Firenze disappears,

and I see only a city of acrid yellow
and sordidly brown buildings,

monotonous shapes taunting
my American eyes with the blunt honesty

of reality, that I am alone
in this place called Italia,

mute and stranded
as a migrant pigeon,

so eager to flock to a new metropolis,
lying abroad to seek fresh

pickings from the rabble,
to feel foreign rain

graze my wings as I bathe,
but instead, I find myself desperately

nipping at the shoes of strangers,
hoping, begging, pleading for a single
crumb of guidance
for my foreign tongue to swallow.