Tokens: From the Caves at Sao Paolo

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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 Tomás’ 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.
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.