

## Alive

\*Hollins University Literary Festival Poetry Prize 1996.

You are sick again, filling your prescription at the counter in a feverish daze, back turned to the fast walkers who cut through the crowd with shopping cart weapons, cursing yourself because you still want a cigarette. You finish muttering your condition, hand

the white slip to the coated, vague bodies, and turn around, looking for a place to linger, when you see him waiting for his name, sitting in the row of uniform chairs, one empty on either side of him. You sit down on his left, notice his soiled skin, the wide-lined

scars, the way his clothes hang on his frame as if one move would make them fall, piece by piece, until he is naked, another man with the same anatomy, labels on the parts that make him alive. You feel like patting yourself on the back. No one else would have

gotten so close. A suited, fat man struts up to your scarred partner in waiting, studies his appearance, asks him if he'd like a chance to better himself, to find a job, to clean up, leaves him a thick brochure, and drifts down the aisles with a holy grin. The scarred man

shakes his head, looks into you with blue eyes clear as an ache, strong as your hacking cough that just won't go away, and says, *You just never know about people*, before he grips your hand and tells you his name, tells you to take care. There is nothing polite

in the way his soft, tired voice works through his chest to his limbs, leaves the thick lips. Before he even spoke, you knew him. Before he even took your hand, you were already touching. A smile, some kind of tug in your chest, and the joy of strangeness makes you

want to collect everyone in a circle, close your eyes, listen to each mysterious song of skin and bones, cup your hand around the closest ear, and whisper, *Pass it on*.

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