

ADAM MERTEN [A CANDLE FOR GRAM]
FIRST PLACE, COLLINS LITERARY PRIZE FOR POETRY

Yesterday we trudged up the stone steps of Dante's spine
to San Miniato. At the top
we could see Cyprus trees, old feuding-family villas,
the Duomo and Campanile
like a half-submerged elephant's head and vertical trunk,
and the old stretched transept of Santa Croce
with the perhaps too new façade. We waltzed

into someone's wedding. This is apparently appropriate
if the church is old enough or if tourists light tons of candles.
I lit one.

Dropping gold coin into bronze slot, I hoped God
would help keep the jangle of other prayer change quiet.
He did.

I would later say I had lit the thing for Gram.

No. I signed the cross over my chest too fast
and probably backwards. Spilt wax on my right hand,

I began "God, just keep me from dying before I've done
something. I have to find some means of clawing
the split-written blocks of message out of my back
and eraser-clapping
them until I either make blunt music or choke
in dust and chalk.

Oh, and could you maybe help us keep Gram
from cleaning the gutters again? That forsythia
can't fake another Spring if she keeps
flying, orthopedic shoes over dentures,
into it. Thanks."

It felt silly and numb-tongued
to whisper "God" in the almost dark, but there must have been
meaning in that at least the grinning bride and groom
would be screwing that night and that outside were dead

people in every cast and effigy.
Back in the half-sun I could still hear
the priest missing his pitches. Marble busts
still stood staring. A little girl,
her hair in tiny ringlets, assaulted a pink
pigeon in gunfire Italian. I saw my soul,
clean but not stainless, being wrung by big
hands and pinned to cumulus clouds.
Florence loafed and yawned
at another ballpoint-penning jackass claiming a new voice
and walking up Italy to bargain with God.