

The Third
Claire Donato

There exist two brothers and one lover, but the lover is not shared between the brothers. Rather, she is the third—or, one of the brothers is, depending on who is taking her photograph. Often, the who taking the photograph is the second brother; that is, the brother who is not foremost in the lover's mind but whose desire to be is visible in every photograph he takes.

For example, in this photograph—5x7, high glossy paper, Kodak Portra 400 film, as taken on a Pentax K1000, a 35mm vintage film camera that costs more than the average 35mm vintage film camera due to its relative popularity—the lover is standing behind a tree. Through its branches, light is cast upon her face, which looks like jewelry. (Naturally, men as attractive as the brothers will only accept female accessories whose visages look like glass: the easier to shatter them with, to crack their skulls open with.) (There is no sequitur in the previous sentence, I realize. I got carried away by the sound of her head falling on the floor. Subsequently, I picked up the shards and rearranged them into a distorted portrait, through which I perceive a foreboding sense of self. To reorient your consciousness amidst these sentences' scattered pearls, I shall reiterate that this portrait is not a self-portrait, for a self-portrait is taken by a person who lives alone whereas this photograph was taken by one of the brothers, who live together in an apartment far away from the center of the world.)

It is, simply put, a portrait that conveys one brother's love for the lover, the lover who makes love to his brother. Is this portrait romantic? And whose love, in fact, is it? The shadow begs a question across her face, as does the quality of light: mid-day, bucolic, margarine, honeybee, the interior of a Christmas light—or an egg's yolk. Maybe this lover makes both brothers' hearts flutter. Or maybe she, too, is split in half.

I picture her sitting in the backseat of the brothers' car, holding her lover's—one of the brothers—hand. She does not yet know this brother is a bad listener, because she is young. I know this, however, because I kissed him, and I am old. Let me try to tell you the story without getting too bored. I can't make any promises.

We had had too much to drink while sitting on a blanket, and after we drank and ate olives, dried apricots, and cold clementines, I announced: I need to go home to disassemble my desk. I can help you with that, the lover's brother said. Which is how I consented to getting myself into a situation that resulted not only in the failure to disassemble the desk, but also in my pressing my face against the lover's brother's face, which did not listen to me at all, and instead consumed my mouth.

In Chinese medicine, the tongue is connected to the heart. When one kisses, one therefore licks the heart, not the thoughts. When I kissed the lover's brother, I could not hear him think. I could only speculate that his thoughts were dumb, that they merely grazed the surface of the ocean. Do you want to hear them? I didn't think so. For as I try to imagine myself listening to them, I too tune out, and recall instead holding the lover's brother's hand in the backseat of the brothers' car as if that moment wasn't happening now but, rather, had happened on a distant night at which I was already looking back from the future. Observe his thumb grazing the acupuncture point on my hand connected to the large intestine.

Now I am drinking a warm mug of peppermint tea while trying to trust the chain of thoughts that brought me here. Perhaps I was bored with thinking about the lover's brother's hand. Or perhaps I'm masochistic. For, against my better judgment, once I initially fantasized about him, my body immediately began germinating feelings for the lover's brother, as one might germinate seeds near a heat source following a period of dormancy. The lover's brother was the body that woke me up from a long spell. In this incantation he is a sexual creature, and I am not. But I

somehow grew feelings for him, and he deployed me as one might deploy a cup to drink a beverage. And though I did not pronounce my feelings, he could surely feel them at a distance—for all sentient beings are psychically connected to one another, not because of magic, but because all of our bodies are shared. So I wrote him a letter. I had a lovely time, I said. I had a lovely time too, he responded, feigning enthusiasm, as I am feigning distance from myself, and so too from him, by writing this. For if he did not pretend to be warm I would think him cold in his distance, and if I did not present my experience in this distant a fashion, you might think I get hot too soon. But it was a hot evening, I think as I finish—a lie I also whisper into the lover's brother's ear as I fall asleep next to his body hoping, for once, this night won't be the last.

