

Statistics (or: Walking to Work through Lexington Market)

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

At the metro, I don't take the escalator — too many pick-pockets. My feet crunch on the abandoned peanut shells, cigarette butts, and gnawed chicken bones littering the granite steps. A covey of young men loiter by the exit, voices excited, muscle tees framing black-inked tats. Absorbed in their furtive closed palm exchanges of rolled-up bills for baggies, they ignore me.

Outside, summer's swelter carries the usual market smells of over-ripe fruit, worn-out peanut oil, and stale urine. I walk quickly, breathing through my mouth. Around the corner I bypass a puddle of vomit and almost trip over the legs of a woman propped against the Market's brick wall. Sweat pours down her face; I fight the strong urge to yank off her puffy red parka. She stares at me, eyes filmy from glaucoma or some other affliction, but I walk past, averting my gaze to the crab grass pushing through broken concrete, the spent condoms, the empty vodka nips rolling at her stockinged feet.

Campus security patrols the intersection. We smile at each other, as we do every day, small reassuring grimaces. The ham and Swiss hangs heavy in my lunch bag like a bad conscience. The light changes. I hurry across to the air-conditioned safety of the hospital, to the day of running yesterday's numbers: admissions, discharges, dollars, death. But first, I stop for a latte, hoping to usher energy enough to feel the morning's sting.

