



Nikki Paley Cox

## City Invincible

“I dream’d in a dream, I saw a city invincible  
to the attacks of the whole of the rest  
of the earth” —Walt Whitman

You feel like that, even deliriously hot and tired,  
like a city sacked whose ruins still stand  
on *lungoteveri*, the Tiber, river that literally  
runs through it, or you, flooded with marble  
statues and fountains triumphant in power  
and control, like you, or the *Tritone*,  
direct and dramatic—an over-lifesize  
muscular merman straddle-squats his thick thighs  
over an opened scallop shell, throwing back  
his head to raise a conch to his lips from which  
a jet of water spurts, less now than before,  
but still magnificent marble contrapposto  
infused with hot breath, chest bent back  
under stone skin, a bodily reaction to ecstasy,  
*invincible to the attacks of the whole  
of the rest of the earth*—like you  
when you see Whitman’s notes penciled  
into *Endymion*, first edition under glass in the room  
where Joseph Severn listened for his friend to breathe,  
a gesture unseen but with Baroque-style quality,  
a broad and heroic tendency only he

could have dreamed but which was real, like you  
or a sea god controlling the waters, draining  
away the biblical flood, travertine city invincible  
you imagine, inhabit, busy with shepherds  
and gods and movements of the moon, and you.

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Nikki Paley Cox teaches in the First-Year Writing Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has been published in *Hanging Loose*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *World Jewish Digest*, and *Briar Cliff Review* (Pushcart Prize nomination), among others. A staged reading of her play, *Lift and Separate*, was part of the 2011 Chicago Writer's Bloc Festival.