

TERRITORY

(Excerpts)

by J.D. Scrimgeour

The spring after my mom threw me out
Gabe graduated and we moved in with his sister,

an apartment in South Boston. Gabe started
looking for work, and I wanted to do that, too,

but he said, “Jared, if you don’t get your diploma now,
you’ll be fucked for your whole life,”

so I spent a week going into South Boston High
and telling my story to different people.

There was this one guidance counselor—she
was wearing jeans, I remember, because

that seemed too casual—and after she heard me
she said, “You’ve got a year. Let’s get you through.”

I wanted to hug her then. Instead, I nodded.
I couldn’t speak. And when I walked out of the school

I ran into a McDonalds bathroom, locked myself
in a stall, and sobbed. I was sitting on the toilet lid

and the flimsy plastic felt like it might crack.
It was there that I really said goodbye

to my mother, that I just didn’t care anymore
what she had said, all the “faggots” she spit at me.

“Let’s get you through,” rinsed off the venom.
Someone opened the bathroom door.

I flushed the toilet to drown my sniffles
and stood. There, on the wall of the stall,

someone had scraped, “Fags Die.” Honestly,
I laughed—to see that message then.

I took out my apartment key and scratched
a “t” after “Die”—“Fags Diet.” I don’t know

what I meant by it, but it felt good
cutting through the paint and metal.

Homeless. I never thought of the word
that summer I would sleep in the park

near Harvard. Gabe had found someone else,
and one day I just loaded up a dufflebag,

grabbed a couple oranges and bagels
and left. I haven’t seen him since.

Homeless. I never thought of it in Buenos Aires,
Austin, L.A., Newark—all those cities

after Capilla where I hustled myself
for a bed, a room, food. Some stories

I won’t tell, even now. The shade
of the overpass, the raid on the shelter,

all the men with broken teeth, the blood
on the blade, drops crusting the dirt.

When the word came up in Sociology
this year, I mentioned that I’d been homeless,

and the professor treated me like I was
an expert. I told her I didn’t know

much, had never studied it. It turned out she just wanted to hear my stories.

I started to share one, and the other students looked at me like I was on a reality show.

Who needs that? “You don’t want to know,” I said. I couldn’t explain it then, but now I get it:

I’m in school to find out what happened to me.

J.D. Scrimgeour served as Salem State University’s coordinator of creative writing for several years, and created and directs the Salem Poetry Seminar, a free summer program for select student poets at Massachusetts public colleges and universities. He has published a collection of poetry, *The Last Miles* (2005) and two books of creative nonfiction, *Spin Moves* (2000) and *Themes for English B: A Professor’s Education In and Out of Class* (2006), which won the *Association of Writers and Writers Programs Award for Creative Nonfiction*. His poetry has appeared in magazines such as *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, and *Colorado Review*, and has won numerous awards.

