

The Tobacco Company
by Ryan Babcock

For F

Through the noise of downtown Shockoe Bottom, we stumbled down drunkard streets, drunk on each other's skin-rippling fingertips, hooking our hearts on jazzy renditions of forgotten pop songs that were whispered through alleyways. We followed the breathy wind to a buzzing bland-brick building. Inside, three floors of art-deco opulence shone brightly by shaking chandeliers. Chains and ropes suspended plants from the ceiling; people sipped from gold and neon drinks; lovers and strangers chatted in corners; strangers and lovers pulled each other onto the narrow walkway that guests turned into a dance floor. Black-tied servers tetrised their way through sweaty, shifting bodies. A band led by a raspy female vocalist, supported by men on instruments—saxophone, guitar, piano—rattled my bones, electrified my neurons. F reached for my hand to dance, but I couldn't take it. I shook my head. He pulled away, still beaming at me. I ran my palms along my jeans to remove evidence of perspiration. F, being F, didn't push; my lover is a man who blankets my neuroses. Alone, I watched him move his hips with an attitude that begged for an audience; it filled me with daylight and allowed me to bloom from my chair. He flashed a candlelight smile, reached his hand out for connection—*again*—and drew me closer, where I eased my pelvis against his, rooting there.