

# FLACO

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Returning to my bike with bags of food, Around that way, pointed a homeless man.  
When I returned the other tire was gone. The other way, he pointed now, and then  
I found my grocery shopping trip undone. Lugging the heavy frame I passed a man  
I'd seen since I moved in beside a dumpster selling vinyl, comics, art, and clothes, Playboys,  
movies, clothing and old furniture he found On streets outside the houses of the dead,  
students moving, those too cramped for space for an Alpine Ski Machine that fell from grace.  
"They get your rims?" he asked without a smile. I'd see him lying shirtless on the walk  
Outside the deli, mornings, as I passed Suited for work, day breaking over us  
And furiously arranging goods at night As I returned. "I'll get them back for you,"  
He said, "just tell me where you live." I thought A moment, gave him my address. Next day  
At 7:30 sharp Flaco appeared My rims in hand. He wouldn't let me pay,  
Though we both knew they cost a hundred each. The day before I'd found a shopping cart  
Full to the brim with books from Barthes to Yeats. "Would you like these?" I asked, not having room.  
"Yeah, sure," he said, "I lost those yesterday." A few nights later, cold and snowy out,  
I made burritos, put them on a plate, And took them to him. At his cardboard box  
He flipped the plastic door up; waved me in, Arranged two Coke crates where sat and ate.  
He said that for my thoughtfulness and care, He had a gift for me: I need not fear,  
walking alone at night through heroin alley, the dealers, thieves, and all were now my friends.  
On weekend nights for months I gladly shed my thousand dollar suits for shabby jeans  
with rolled up trouser legs, and between sales, we'd talk about his daughter, his divorce,  
His past as a skilled painter, and my own, our minds oddly completing the same tune.  
In shadows by the dumpster, eating wings I breathed in the carnival of lights,  
And freaks, crack whores and wild-eyed kids deplaned From Iowa or Kansas city, spikes  
Of purple hair, gray hipsters, homeless drunks Up-towners slumming, flashing blonde and ice  
And wielding Prada shields against the grit. The capos brought him uncut smack to rate,  
I'd squirm watching the plunger hit a vein, And their reaction to a "3" or "9".  
Celebrities dropped by in Limousines, To greet the night with speedballs for a dime.  
One day in my regular spot I found my name in chalk and learned he'd gone to jail.  
I took the bus to Rykers, a mere speck of white in swirling seas of brown and black.  
He wouldn't use the lawyer I'd retained, And said just send me art supplies instead,  
And bring me soap, a toothbrush and some clothes. In prison he'd go straight and maybe get  
His lovely long-lost daughter back he said. Two years later the Village Voice announced  
An exhibition at a West-Side gallery of new work by the painter Jose Rios.  
There, I hugged him, met his daughter, cried, Met his new bride, and scanned the walls, and scoured  
The more than forty paintings, mostly sold. Alone with a glass of Pinot Grigio  
I wandered to the back of an empty room And found a work marked clearly "NOT FOR SALE".  
Under incandescent haloed streetlights, A wisp of smoke curled from the top  
Of a snow-banked cardboard box, And up a motley-colored wall of bricks,  
and windows of a vacant restaurant. Next-door unchosen pines in night-caps gleamed  
in broken ranks outside the Graceful Deli.

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