Brian Age Seven

By Mark Doty

Grateful for their tour of the pharmacy, the first-grade class has drawn these pictures, each self-portrait taped to the window-glass, faces wide to the street, round and available, with parallel lines for hair.

I like this one best: Brian, whose attenuated name fills a quarter of the frame, stretched beside impossible legs descending from the ball of his torso, two long arms springing from that same central sphere. He breathes here, on his page. It isn’t craft that makes this figure come alive; Brian draws just balls and lines, in wobbly crayon strokes. Why do some marks seem to thrill with life, possess a portion of the nervous energy in their maker’s hand?

That big curve of a smile reaches nearly to the rim of his face; he holds a towering ice cream, brown spheres teetering on their cone, a soda fountain gift half the length of him—as if it were the flag of his own country held high by the unadorned black line of his arm. Such naked support for so much delight! Artless boy, he’s found a system of beauty: he shows us pleasure and what pleasure resists. The ice cream is delicious. He’s frail beside his relentless standard.

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