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## Prima Donna

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## About the Contributor (Optional)

Susan Brown is a junior English major. Susan's piece was inspired by a trip to Italy in summer '01.

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## Prima Donna

Susan Brown

I heard her well before I saw her; her song preceded her by at least four blocks. When I first heard her voice I began looking around, not for a woman but for some sort of barnyard animal—a goat or a sheep perhaps. Either would have been highly out-of-place on Via Velutti, not one-hundred meters out of the Piazza della Repubblica, but no more than she, filthy, toothless, bare-footed, and wreaking of booze.

Fellow passers by seemed unsure whether to be offended by, afraid of, or amused by her. I was all three at once. She carried several paper bags and as she made her way down the street I kept up with her—walking on the other side of the road. As she walked, she sang in unintelligible syllables, in neither English nor Italian. She stopped occasionally and, planting both feet firmly on the cracked sidewalk stage below her, raised her warbled voice about an octave and a half and sustained the painfully sharp pitch for what must have been ten or fifteen seconds. Her song was as crude as her appearance, her odor, her very existence, but she was no less dignified for it. She stood completely erect, with her head high and her arms extended in a dramatic act of musicianship. People crossed the street to avoid coming in contact with her, her filth, or the stench that followed her. Owners came out of their shops to see what was going on (the looks on their faces suggested that they too suspected some barnyard animal of

causing the disturbance). People peered out of second and third story windows. Some cursed at her, called her crazy. Others applauded mockingly. One man even offered her a cigarette as gratuity for her impassioned performance. She nodded her head at her admiring fan in graceful acceptance of his offering and continued singing her way down the once peaceful—even quaint—street.

I followed her for what must have been nearly a quarter of a mile, just watching. Whether out of disbelief or sheer curiosity, I simply couldn't break away and head back to my flat, to my friends, my life. Rather, I finally mustered the courage to approach her, to cross the street.

She smelled strongly of alcohol. And urine. Despite my attempt to be inconspicuous, she saw me and turned toward me. Her skin sagged, hanging loosely on her small frame. She appeared to be composed not of flesh, or blood or bones or skin, but of wax, melting in the hot Tuscan sun. Her curly brown hair was dirty and unruly. Her thin spaghetti straps hung loosely from her curved shoulders, revealing her bra and small breasts. She took my hand and began babbling, mumbling about her song, and her daughter, and her hunger. Her skin was surprisingly smooth and soft. I laughed nervously, unsure of a more appropriate response. She laughed back. And we stood there, hand-in-hand, laughing—neither of us sure why.