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*After “From an Atlas of the Difficult World” by Adrienne Rich*

I know that you are reading this poem
under the almost burnt-out
bulb of a lamp that is four times my age.
You sit in the plush chair, defined as such
long before plush was discovered,
in the living room inhabited
by sofas, who only have friends over
for the holidays.

And I know you are reading this poem
eventually—
    taking
    your
    time—
sitting on a new, torn couch with someone’s feet
in your lap, getting the page wet
by spilling a drink. (not that it matters, soon
it will be in the trash).

I know you are reading this poem in the empty classroom
hollowed out
by the two o’clock bell. You recline
in your office chair made when offices
had cave paintings on the walls, reading
with the satisfaction of seeing
an old friend.

I know that you are reading this poem in a room
so small
that even the light from your desk lamp
can hardly
fit.
You slide into your bed, lying down
where we move in whispers.
I know you are reading this poem in the room
that I asked you to read it in,
like the dutiful journey once a year
to visit a grandparent’s grave.
Sharing men with Sandra  
Anna Walsh

Before me, Sandra had arbitrated George’s love all over America while he was smuggling speed over the border and thinking of her.

When I found him, she was still inside his throat being territorial and it made him shake at night.

I know he remembers the morning he lapped up warm honey from my steady fingers in a café on South Main after hiding from foreign police all night in my bed.

But I know that, even this will never compare to the way he felt when he ate papaya for the first time, licking a glob off Sandra’s cheek in the airport after her Mexican abortion. Those hours before she blotted him out.
July 24, 2008
Katrina Hegeman

Time flows, a current.
One stroke ahead, two strokes back,
We swim, tread, drift, sink,
Small as winged insects that
Cling to reflections of trees.
Edward was dead—exceedingly so. Of that fact, he was entirely certain. The fact that he knew he was dead, probably was dead, and was able to remark upon the fact that he was so made Edward even more uncomfortable than using a knapsack lined with half a ton of beautifully finished Tuscan marble for a parachute.

On a perfectly ordinary Thursday that was completely devoid of all manner of uncouthness, Barking nuns, and large, extremely expensive wooden horses, Edward was drinking a civilized cup of tea. Suddenly, an unconscious Welshman fell through his roof. Close upon his heels was a remarkably large building, which crushed them both remarkably quickly, and they, remarkably, died. Irony, whose sway over Edward was complete and domineering, had arranged for the building that fell to have a sign marked “Beware Falling Rubble” pasted to one side.

When Death’s emissary, a tall gaunt fellow in funereal garb, arrived at Edward’s home in Wains Cotting, Edward was given five minutes to pack what few possessions he could. Edward measured exactly thirty-five millimeters of camera for his suitcase, and added a ham sandwich, several periodicals, his father’s silver cigarette-case, and thirteen blue marbles.

He remembered a time he had accidentally stepped on a gentleman’s toes thirty-six times in a queue, and the heartfelt distress caused when that same gentleman hosted a splendid garden party and neglected to invite him, by way of vengeance. Dying, however, Edward considered being somewhat worse.

As any man confronted with disaster, death, doom, and badly baked biscuits all in a single day, Edward naturally had some fears. He feared wrath, judgment, and God. God was a mostly harmless (but popular) ethereal mascot often credited with a sense of humour due to his appearing in various disguises (including, but not limited to incendiary fauna, clouds, and, on one occasion following rather too many pints at the pub on a dare, a rock), and is the author of a serious, weightsome book present in many households and hotels called the Yellow Pages. Every day, folk consult this book of wisdom for guidance and direction, and it has largely been given positive reviews by notable critics of the topmost echelons of academia. However, he possessed a singularly vicious temper when it came to breaking certain guidelines that he suggested some time ago, and got awfully upset over the whole thing when they were transgressed, making people recite penitential poetry in Latin, simply damning them for all eternity, or, if they were particularly naughty, putting coal in their stockings. It
was exactly that that Edward had a fear of.

Interestingly, upon arrival, Edward noted that the atrium of Death looked exactly like the Ministry of Motor Vehicles atrium that he, according to meticulous calculations, had spent approximately one third of his life in the queues of.

“Yes,” said the demon, when he had arrived at the front of the queue. “I’m afraid you’ve developed a rather acute case of death. You’ll want Cerberus’ line—fourth queue on the left for that, and the MT-1084 form in triplicate.”

With a shuffle of paper and clipboard, the demon shoved him off and gestured for the next person to come forward, its devilish eyes already diagnosing the poor soul that seemed to be overacting the role of Hamlet and devising a suitable remedy.

“Oh, my,” thought Edward, pale and appalled. He had never been very good at meeting celebrities; the one time he met the Prime Minister he tripped over someone else’s feet, and then his own. The experience of meeting the P.M. left him flushed and unable to stop humming “Rule, Britannia” for a fortnight. Meeting Cerberus was a rather different matter.

For all his shortcomings, Edward had been a surprisingly insightful individual, especially in matters regarding the human psyche. For example, he could nearly always tell when his housekeeper was peeved with him by the subtle signs that she expressed unknowingly: the rather Wagnerian manner with which she thunderously chomped her cornflakes at breakfast, the hasty staccatissimo snap of the front door at her departure, and the way she made his toast with butter and arsenic instead of the usual apricot preserves.

Of course, he often catalogued his own shortcomings as well: he was, for example, a lot better at not playing rugby than at not getting lost, something he did with alarming ease and spectacular alacrity. In his mind, Edward was the dashing hero of a brilliant, smashing adventure—but not one of epic proportions; he was at best a teatime gallant and a weekend brave—trite but true. Somehow, though, he envisioned that the questions that Cerberus might ask might possibly involve different parameters.

When he arrived at the front of the second queue some centuries later (he lost his place once when he foolishly went to use the toilet), Edward was pleasantly surprised: he saw no three-headed dog gnashing its teeth and spewing toxic slaver over the mangled corpses of its victims. Instead, a rather secretarial demon sat, its stony features etched in the throes of boredom, upon a tall stool with yet another clipboard grasped in a claw.

The demon scratched a thick congreve across the top of his horny head, where it combusted in a cloud of green smoke, and lit a large, foul-smelling cigar.
This he set in the corner of his mouth and chomped obnoxiously as he spoke.

“You work ‘ard?” the demon addressed Edward, spewing cigar-smoke.

Edward had held a job ever since he was fifteen. His current sinecure was in an unimportant government ministry, where it was his task to sit upon a leather chair and prevent it from flying off. He had been enormously successful in his career thus far.

“Yes; rather,” he said.

“Drink?” asked the demon, sending a stream of malodorous smoke across the counter. It smelt of fungus and rotten leaves.

“Yes, please,” he said; then, realizing what the demon meant, “I must confess that I do. Modestly,” he added, “and only of the best vintage,” so the demon did not mistake him for a beastly oenophile. He often had a glass of merlot with dinner, or a dry pinot during the summer months, and stopped into a pub after work for two or thirteen pints after a particularly trying day. He was rarely drunk; his first brush with inebriation had left him with a confounding aversion to the experience: during a time of celebratory activity at a local proprietor of temperance beverages, he had emerged not so much a man as two and one half bottles of the establishment’s best Irish whiskey on legs, and had rather been put off the stuff ever since.

Along the counter to Edward’s right, a large swarthy block of a man dressed in a gingham check tablecloth was picking his nose with gusto. Edward did his best to ignore him, focusing instead on the pickled heads arranged in neatly shelved jars behind the counter as the demon continued his questioning. It was made rather harder when the man rose, an intimidating six feet and nine inches of idiot, and began flawlessly reciting the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales in the original Middle English.

Meanwhile, the demon had completed his inquisition of Edward’s soul, and was prattling on about the history of Death (“You should ‘ave seen our first crowd o’ souls. Some demons in the Department of Reconn’ssance got a bit bungled after visiting your world, and a few ‘undred were treated to the most gruesome torture of comfy armchairs and brunch-time coffee they could ‘ave imagined. Got our facts straightened out after that, I daresay.”) Edward nodded pleasantly.

“It’ll be the brimstone mines for you, I’m afraid. Bit of a nuisance for the first thousand years or so, but after that ’really a walk in the park. Provided that said park is in an abysmal part of town, and paved in burning sulphur. Unfortunately, without a suitable bribe, there’s really not much I can do in the way of reassignment.”

“Bribe?” inquired Edward, pretending that such an option did not
make him slightly nervous. “What sort of bribe?”

“Well, I’m rather keen on a ham sandwich, several periodicals, a silver cigarette-case, and thirteen blue marbles, in fact.”

And so Edward was sent off to a sinecure in an unimportant wing of Death, Afterlife & Co., where it was his task to sit upon a chair and prevent it from flying off. He was enormously successful.
It was the day the sky opened like an empty crater, exposed and absent of planes. I ran in Van Cortlandt Park with the sky hanging close to my head. Each stranger I passed had the same stare, as though we all shared an awful secret. Breathing burnt tar I ran to the top of Cemetery Hill and watched as the blue sky grayed. Haze so thick it hurt to breathe, I pressed forward under the arch of oaks trampling wet leaves. Stillness guarded the woods, but there was a greater stillness still. I ran until the world hung upside down. Crossing the Henry Hudson Parkway, red and white lights disappeared south. The plains lay before me. I ghosted along and only heard the forgiving sound of the ashes. It was that unearthly day the sky blinked.
Hive Sentimentality
Amedeo Petrolati

The wasps had built a home in my absence, 
nested it safe in the corner of a window. 
It was a child’s fist 
that closed tight and gray 
around squirming white pupae. 
It was clear enough that, 
were one to stroke the side of this tiny hidden home, 
it would feel like newspaper 
under their fingertips.

Just a month ago, 
I could watch the wasps bustling 
whenever I left the building: 
there would always be five or six 
clustered and gossiping, 
wagging their striped behinds 
under the crystalline cape of their wings.

It was not long before Fall caught up with them. 
The trees changed, rained their leaves 
like tragic cherry blossoms caught in a firestorm; 
the cold sugared the mornings with frost; 
amidst the happy pumpkins and dried corn husks, 
the wasps dwindled 
in their numbers.

When there were only three left, 
did they know they were going to die? 
Did the last two love each other? 
Was the final wasp lonely? 
Did it have a reason to stay 
beyond the tyranny of biological imperative?

There are no wasps left. 
The nest is mottled, 
spotted with black blooms of mold:
it is as if the lights have been turned off,
as if years of disuse
have eaten through the ceilings and floorboards
in a few short weeks.
unforgiven in the early morning
Annie Laurie-Malarkey

I’m the definition of leaving—
my amber tendrils
brushing your forehead,
bodies finding their way
amidst half-packed bags
and the weight of time—
looking into you
so you won’t forget
this.
these apple eyes
telling you to give in
so I can leave you—
smelling of tobacco
and lavender.
i’ll hold you,
unforgiven—
in the early morning,
because the sky is turning
from blue to gray
and there is nothing left to blame.
“It happened like this.”
A paradisiacal mash up of disconnectedly undigested moments
I liked the little white lies tied with corner creeping smiles
I liked the sounds they made when they grabbed with your hands
And were an Icarus choked by the air
Delicious.
They go down smooth now
And settle somewhere anatomically in…correct
And undeniably in…the way
They gurgle in disbelief; safety pinned with a churn
Secreting baby afterthoughts and aftertastes
Escorting time on tiptoes out into the “afterwards.”
And they’re after my words.
I liked the shoulder blades and the braids; the things that criss-crossed
Shelved with gadgets like safety, and attachment
One reusable word
The indents of a wisdom tooth
And the intentions of the absurd
(These are what my insides look like).
They’re a tattooed stitch to the side; a fermenting cognizance
A punch-drunk binge; they fill me like regulation hunger
I swallow their rising reminders and exist, listlessly,
Unencumbered.
Dusty Pieces
Roxy Azari

I.
Within the unpolished corners of my mind, there’s a dusty realization kept blanketed beneath old memories. There you are, clinking ice in synchronized beats wearing your green sweater vest gazing into the present as if searching for an untold future smile, searching for innocent bliss existing in my Sour Punch soaked in Coca-Cola, gazing for the hidden secrets I kept protecting magic tricks. Within the beats, my heart’s memory always finds you.

II.
And in another dusty alley you Always appear, but you’ve stopped searching for my love through mixed beats on cds. I replay in my head lyrics like broken records, kept listening until scratches prevented your gazing for answers within my silence. Gazing between the lines of paragraphs. You know my sentences were always kept short. There you are though - searching in conflicted eyes, convinced that my fears would vanish through mixed beats that harmonized perfectly with the beats of your old skateboard. Sun gazing on broken sidewalks together outside my old flawless house is where you reside in my memory- still searching for answers to the secrets I kept.
III.
And you, were always loyal- kept
your tail wagging in rapid beats
on your hind legs desperately searching
for assurance of a walk, gazing
into my stares that begged you
to never leave my childhood my

heart can’t handle anyone else leaving me.
Within the unpolished corners of my mind
the three of you are tattooed to my memories.
I woke up this morning and my feet were gone. They left a note: We can’t take it anymore. Please forgive us. Love, Left Foot and Right Foot.

I did not forgive them.

I read their note so many times I see it when I close my eyes. I evaluate the situation. This is what I have come up with: having no feet hurts. It feels like my feet are asleep only the blessed relief of pins and needles never comes. There are ghosts of my runaway feet at the ends of my ankles. I think about wiggling my toes, and the thought travels down my body, bounces off my ankles and hits me square in the nose. It makes my eyes water.

I attempt to fix this problem with shoes.

I try wearing boots. I stuff socks in the bottom and shove my ankle stubs all the way down. The stumps on my ankles are rounded, so I feel like an elephant balancing on an undersized ball in the circus. Frustrated, I rip off the boots and throw them at the wall.

I look at my closet filled with shoes. They used to be full of potential, but now they are empty holes where my feet should be. I hate them. Their leaving left me vulnerable. I am never vulnerable. I jog, for crying out loud! Like frostbite, I can feel anger chilling my body, starting with my nose, my fingertips, my ankle stubs. Soon it reaches my heart and I can’t be in this room with these shoes anymore or I think I’ll explode.

We had our differences, but I loved them. I can’t imagine they liked being shoved in shoes that were too narrow. And I’m sure they felt my resentment at their size and general ugliness. But they’d been dealing with that for years! It was their job. Was the last straw my new job? The one where I stand for eight hours and don’t even bother to put them up and relax at the end of the day?

I pull myself up from the floor so I’m leaning against the wall. I look at the stumps. I rub my thumbs over them again, looking for any sign of my lost feet. The skin feels like flower petals and the white of a hard-boiled egg. I let my hands close over my ankles, and then I relax them. I hope this ordeal isn’t giving them ideas. I massage my hands together and I feel their discontent. It feels like that instant when you are on a swing and it hangs in the air for a second before swinging back down. It is that frozen second of hesitation.

I need to cheer up my hands so they don’t abandon me too. I decide to take them out for a manicure. I crawl and drag myself all the way to the nail salon. By the time I get there, my palms are scraped and bloody with small
pieces of gravel imbedded inside. The manicure doesn’t cheer them up. Especially not after it was entirely ruined by my return trip home.

Every movement I make with those hands is now sharp and barbed. They are letting their anger and pain take over my movements. With every little jerk and pinch I fear that they too will mutiny during the night. I pick all the gravel out of them and swaddle them in bandages.

I bribe my fingers with rings. I use my elbows to pull towards the mirror so they can see how sparkly they look. For a minute they flex and turn, looking from all angles. Good, I think, the bribery worked. They seem pleased. They cannot stop twitching to catch the light.

Later in the evening I have an itch on my nose. I want to scratch it. I reach my hang up, trying to exert as little force as possible. But the second I make my finger touch my nose, it stiffens and refuses to oblige. My hands are still sensitive, so I give them each small pillows on which to go to sleep. I hope this helps.

The next morning, my hands had rebelled anyways. They took the rings.
Cat’s Cradle
Annie-Laurie Malarkey

we were always becoming,
always discovering
frightening love—
no idea where we’d walk
it was terrible beauty
and it choked us by the throats,
breathing loudly.
there’s a word for that
in Bokononism.
it’s called herukima
or
magnetic love.
An Excerpt From My Father’s History
Danielle Lachance

**Week I**
California is blurred outside.
We’re 20 eyes watching it move swiftly
toward the end of the world,
80 toes crammed into the rickety trailer
(20 in the station wagon),
and Papa says we’re going home.
A la patrie.
Montréal.

**Week II**
Hélène remembers Montréal
and quietly paints
wild horses, but Celine cries
on the trailer floor because
she only has California.
Maman cooks meatloaf and green beans
at the dinette and
Papa stretches his legs on the
Nevada sand.
François and I sit at his feet,
and as the horizon pulls at the desert sun, we are reminded—
these are the last of the warm days.

**Week III**
We sleep in parking lots
like orphans
as Maman and Papa are warm
in hotel beds.
Pourquoi,
we ask.
Money, c’est limité.
Hotel managers shout in English
when they discover the sleeping children.
They are asking us to leave.
Again.
This isn’t Montreal but Papa says we’ve arrived.
Then why are we still sleeping in parking lots?
Papa visits homes and tells us he’s searching for ours.
We’ll have money now, he says.
Nice clothes now, he says.
La bonne vie.
Purple-Hazing
Bryan Holmes

You know me, no you don’t.
Trashing stages and lights, my holy guitar
in flames, feedback blaring, drum set
a junkyard. You think I’m
some kind of a masochist
with a ’fro.

I see signs nailed to store glass:
they say war,
Vietnam, Machine Gun E-string.
I think no,
war is no peace.
It is death disguised
as a purple-hazing graze
all in my eyes.

Land of electric ladies
swimming to save my people,
to save my helpless babies.
I am just a white-dwarf
in a world of red giants:
one-eyed red giants diving,
striving,
to take my heart.

Best player lounging
in this small, vacant chair.
I wouldn’t clap a mosquito
buzzing light years through my head.
Am I experienced? Not enough.
Never enough, to be bold
as love.
Tracing with my fingertip the brown, duck-shaped water stain on the wall next to my bed, I heard what sounded like a train whistle—a low, mournful howling that swelled like a wave, consumed me, and ebbed away. I drew my hand back from the wall, and my body stiffened, frozen by the lingering impression of the train still echoing in my ears. Despite the looming humidity left by the summer sun, a shiver crept up my back and around my shoulders. From that bed I had heard many things: my elderly neighbor yelling into her telephone at a son she does not have; the metallic clanging of the garbage can on the sidewalk, followed by slurred swearing and the smashing of a beer bottle; the creaking of the floorboards in the next room as my kneeling mother rocks to the cadence of her prayers. But never a train whistle.

I held my breath, hoping for the train to sound again, to assure me of its existence. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, I counted silently. I made it to eight and released my breath and body, exhaling disappointment and relaxing back into longing. I kicked my sheets off and crawled to the end of my bed, above which was the only window in the room. Pressing my ear against the cool screen, I gave the train one last chance. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand...

“Four-one-thousand, five-one-thous—” I break off abruptly as an enormous clap of thunder shakes the house. Rosie and I huddle together in a blanket at the foot of the bed, watching the leaves and sticks and trash blow through the street below.

“How far, Biddy?” she asks me, shining the flashlight in my eyes.

“A mile,” I say, taking the flashlight from her and putting it beneath my chin. “It was a dark and stormy night, and little Rosie and her amazingly wonderful older sister, Biddy, were waiting out the storm in a haunted mansion.” I pause for effect and assume the most terrified expression I can muster, dropping my jaw and glancing around frantically.

Wide-eyed Rosie squeals with delight and puts her tiny fingers up to her mouth to play along. “They were glad they had each other, because it was very dark inside the mansion.” She takes the flashlight from me and puts it under her chin. “And spooky,” she adds, raising her eyebrows to emphasize.

“That’s right,” I say.

“And then they heard a noise. It was like this.” Rosie scratches her fingernails against the wall. “And they knew that...that they were not alone.”

Alone. Nothing but the distant drone of a radio announcer and the rumble of a truck on the main road. I sat back and flicked my finger against the screen, catapulting a sleeping beetle to the ground below. Moths fluttered in
the lamplight across the street, and I imagined the soft grey dust of their wings floating down to earth, their antennae pointed toward God. And where am I pointed? I thought.

I crawled back underneath the covers and settled down again with the water stain—one of several on the faded pink floral wallpaper. It had been there for as long as I could remember, and before Rosie was born it was the last thing I saw before I fell asleep. I didn’t want to go back to that. I wanted to see Rosie.

“Biddy, what’s this?” Rosie asks me, her thumb and forefinger on either side of the stain.

“You tell me,” I say.

She squints at the stain and taps it with her finger. “A duck.” She points out the distinguishing features to me. “His head, his bill, and his cute, little tail!” She has just lost her first tooth, and she lisps every ‘s’. I laugh.

“You’re a clever one, Rosie.”

She turns back to me and puts her ice-cold feet on my legs, making me gasp. She giggles. “Can I sleep in your bed, Biddy?” she asks. “Just this once?”

I know that Rosie will elbow me in the most unpleasant places and jabber in her sleep and kick the covers off in the middle of the night, just like I know that she should learn to sleep by herself. I picture myself telling her no and her pinching me and stomping across the room to her bed, where she will glare at me until she falls asleep. I picture myself lying in bed alone. And I can’t do it. I need her just as much as she needs me, and we both know it. “Just this once,” I say.

The stain seemed to stare back at me, and I thought about how I used to see it as a respectably aged brown, like a parchment manuscript or something of that sort. But now I found myself beginning to hate it, to see it not as parchment but as something more like a spot of decay on someone’s tooth. Not historical, just old. Not unique, just ugly. A symbol of the rains that made it and the family that couldn’t afford to put a new piece of wallpaper over it.

I rolled onto my other side. Everyone has to learn to sleep alone, I thought. It’s just part of growing up. Thought after thought whirled around my head, like so many tornados carrying me off into a fretful sleep.

That night I dreamt of the train. Standing on the darkened tracks, I watched its black silhouette chug slowly, wearily, toward me, as though it were running on its last few coals. Black voids had replaced the windows of the passenger cars, and something inside me knew that the train was driving itself. Closer and closer. The tracks started shaking beneath my feet, and the train sounded a warning whistle. Whhhho00000000! I tried to run, but my legs were frozen in place. Whhhho00000000! I tried to scream, but my voice would not rise above a hoarse whisper. Clickety-clickety-clickety-clickety, rolling over the tracks.
Twenty feet. Fifteen feet. Sweating in the heat of the great black beast. Ten feet away. My stomach dropped, and I held my hands up in front of my face. Letting out a final lonely wail, the train passed through me and dissipated into the misty night.

My body jolted my mind awake. Heart racing, back and chest clammy with sweat, I realized that I had been crying. As I wiped the tears away with my fist, I thought I heard Rosie snoring softly. I looked over to her side of the room, hopeful. But Rosie’s bed was still neatly made. Covers tucked in tightly, stuffed animals arranged carefully. As if it could help. As if anything could help.

I got out of bed, walked into the hallway, and paused at the top of the stairs. I remembered how Rosie and I used to stand there together and try to guess what Mama would be making for breakfast. Sometimes we had heard the ting-ting-ting of the metal egg beater on the glass bowl, and we knew that Mama must be in a good mood because scrambled eggs were her favorite. Other times we had heard the wooden spoon tapping on the edge of a pot. Those were porridge mornings, meaning that Mama was still waiting on a paycheck. But the best times—and also the rarest—were when we caught that unmistakable smell of bacon cooking on the griddle. That had meant more than just a tasty treat for Rosie and me. For Rosie it had meant that she could sit on the counter and watch the grease pop and sizzle. For me it had meant that Mama was having someone special over for breakfast, maybe someone who would be kind to her. Standing there in my nightgown, clutching the railing, I closed my eyes for a moment, hoping to hear something, anything. But the air was just air. The same air as the night before. Empty.

I descended the stairs and headed toward the kitchen to see if Mama had come home. I could see from the hallway the empty sink, the drainer with its two bowls and two spoons, the bare table, the pushed in chairs. I had always imagined that houses in chaos had crumbs and dirty dishes and open cupboards and cockroaches. But ours didn’t even look lived-in anymore. More like a train station than a home, I thought. Just a place that people passed through now and then on their way to somewhere else.

Carrying her own suitcase in one hand and Rosie’s miniature suitcase in the other, Mama’s walks beside me through the station. She keeps glancing behind her, afraid that George has discovered our absence and is following us. The forty-minute bus ride to the train station is not far enough from him for Mama to relax. She turns to me. “Don’t let that Rosie get too far ahead. She’ll go on and get herself lost if you don’t watch her,” she says, gesturing with her chin for me to go get her. “I’ve saved for far too long for us to miss this train.”

I switch my suitcase from one hand to the other and take our tickets from my pocket. I can see Rosie’s red backpack weaving through the somber colored crowd. “Rosie girl,” I call,
quickening pace. She stops and turns, tapping her foot impatiently and biting her bottom lip. *I wave our threes tickets at her. “You’re not planning to leave without us, are you?”*

I paused in the doorway. All was still. Mama was not there pouring three glasses of orange juice and humming to herself. Mama was not there standing above the smoking toaster, fanning it with a dishcloth. Mama was not there at all.

A series of images of my mother swept through my imagination, one after another, like a filmstrip: Mama in the dim hallway of the hospital, alternating between pacing and praying; walking home along the sidewalk, with whitened knuckles clutching wooden rosary beads; at the side of the house, crouched down by the propane tank, where she thinks I cannot see her smoking…

A shuffling sound from the stoop outside.

“Mama?” I called. “Mama, is that you?”

Her wiry figure appeared behind the screen door. She looked insubstantial, as though she might blow away, as though she were hollow. “Biddy, you’re up awfully early. Is everything all right?” Her eyes darted about nervously as she opened the door and stepped into the kitchen. “Are you all right, honey? You’re not feeling sick, are you?” She came over to me and smoothed my hair out. Her pale blue eyes seemed to sag with the gravity of the dark circles beneath them.

“I’m fine, Mama,” I said. The smell of cigarettes hung heavily upon her breath and clothing and stung my nose, but something else made my eyes water. “How is Rosie?”

“Mama,” I say, leaning against the refrigerator and listening to the metallic ticking of the kettle on the stove. Rosie is absorbed building a fort beneath the rhododendron bush outside, so I finally have the chance to speak with my mother in private. “Mama, I think there is something wrong with Rosie.”

Mama finishes washing the last of the dishes and places it carefully in the drainer to dry. She wrings out the sponge and turns around to face me. “Honey,” she says, “We all know that Rosie is a little bit different than other children her age. She’s more imaginative, more inventive. But there’s nothing wrong with her.” She walks to the cupboard, takes out the rusted sugar tin, and places it on the counter. Her face is flushed from the morning’s housekeeping, and several auburn wisps of hair have escaped her braid and settled around her face like stray paint strokes on a canvas.

“I’m not talking about that, Mama.” Looking out the window above the sink, I can see Rosie’s corn-silk hair moving about beneath the rhododendron’s waxy, green leaves and magenta flowers. “It’s just that she’s been acting a little strange.” I shift my gaze from the window to the kettle spout, from which miniature clouds are now puffing out.
Mama walks over to me and lifts my chin up until I meet her gaze. Her hand smells like dish detergent, but still it is delicate and soft. “Is there something you’re not telling me?” Mama is checking my reflexes to see if they are quick enough to come up with a lie on the spot. Fortunately they are.

“Rosie’s been keeping me up at night. That’s all.” It is only a half-lie. Mama lets go of my chin and steps back to get an overall look at me. Avoiding her examination, I turn around to make the tea. I turn off the burner, pour the hot water into mugs, and add the teabags. I can hear Mama return to the counter and start measuring out the sugar.

“I know it’s hard, having to share a room with your sister,” Mama says. “But we do the best we can.” Mama tries to sound resilient, but I can hear the pain in her voice. She wishes she could do more for us.

“It’s not that, Mama.” My stomach knots up at having reminded my mother of her sin. I turn back and hand my mother her tea. Inside myself, I am screaming the truth so loudly that I wonder if she can hear it: Rosie says her bones feel broken! And she doesn’t eat lunch at school because she doesn’t feel hungry! She spits her food into a napkin at dinner! I can lift her with one arm now! There are month-old bruises that are still purple and swollen!

I want to tell Mama these things, but something in her voice—a sort of breaking sound like before something collapses—has rendered me silent.

Mama turned away from me and focused her eyes on the screen door. “Go get dressed, Biddy,” she said. “We’re going to have mass at the hospital today.”

As I finished buttoning up my best church dress, I glanced at my face in the mirror. What Rosie might look like if she grew up, I thought. If. I imagined Rosie’s sweet, impish face, heart-shaped with hazel eyes and framed with flaxen hair that moved in the breeze like wheat stalks.

In the train cabin, Rosie and I press our faces to the window, watching the fields of wheat pass by, imagining aloud what it must feel like to run through one of them as fast as our legs can carry us. What it must feel like to break the line between the soft, tawny wheat and the crisp cornflower sky. Mama sleeps beside us, finally at ease.

From the kitchen, Mama called my name. I pushed my hair behind my ears and rushed down the stairs to begin the five-block walk to the hospital.

We walked the dark, narrow hallway toward pediatrics, our shoes going clickety-clickety-clickety-clickety the whole way, their echo making us feel even more alone. We came to a halt at the nurses’ station, where a thin woman in a crisp uniform sat official-looking behind the desk, staring at us.

“Your tickets please,” she said. Her brass nametag glimmered as she reached out her hand to us.

“Our what?” I asked. Feeling faint, I grabbed the desk for support.

“Our names, dear. Just sign your names right here.” She pointed to a
clipboard in front of us. Then she handed us our visitors’ passes. “And just pin this to your dress, all right?”

I signed my name in letters that seemed wholly unfamiliar and then fumbled with the pin. Again and again I tried to latch it, but I kept missing, pricking myself. A tingling that started inside my nose seeped upward behind my eyeballs and escaped down my face in hot tears. There’s no time for this, I thought, brushing away my tears violently.

Mama fixed my pin and wrapped her thin arms around me. “It’s all right if you need to take some time before you come in,” she whispered. She released me and went to the double doors leading into the pediatrics wing. “You come when you’re ready.” I sat down in one of the waiting chairs, as Mama disappeared through the doors.

Lost in the whiteness, the sterility, of the hospital, I heard from some distant place the sounding of a train. Forlorn and solitary. My mind floated upward on the sound, out of the hospital, and back to my body standing on the train tracks. It was daylight this time, though there was no sunshine, just metallic colored clouds that rolled across the sky above me at unnaturally high speeds. Staring down the train tracks, I could see all the way to their vanishing point, and I anticipated the appearance of the train as a black dot growing larger and larger against the horizon. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand… But the convergence of the tracks and the sky remained pristine. Overcome by a feeling of having missed something, I turned around and peered down the other end of the tracks. There, the train was becoming smaller and smaller, leaving me alone to collect the little chunks of coal it had left behind.
Honesty
Nadia Elsayed

Love’s lunch special,
swallowed fiction
and spit out truth.
when i named my daughter pangea,
I imagined moons, loaves,
things whole.

I believed tsunamis, earthquakes, magma would rock
her faults to sleep, but she asked: “Why
no life insurance, why no house on stilts, why no fire retardant blankets in the
basinet?”

I nicknamed her pandora, or ‘little why,’
but from my core I answered with hot words:
“Because I am your mother, I am your protection.”

She dipped her toes in the ocean, felt cold,
called to say that she had peered into volcanoes,
saw lava, saw what I could not control.
It broke her in two, then seven, pieces.

daughter, I have shifted
am spinning
stories
to tell—bering, babel, equator, parallels, plates—
I hoped
in any case to warn you
how the waves
will gnaw your wounds until
you forget
your name.
Actually it was not a crazy person at all. It was just a regular guy, having a regular seizure, and that’s how that story ended and this one began. I remember at least hearing about my sister when she had her own seizure; she had lots of them, in fact, she was certifiably epileptic and climbed a mountain of pills every morning. The first time it happened she was swinging too high on the set in our backyard, blue clad in flip-flopped feet which pumped her up and out, and she came full circle quite literally over the bar above her. I never understood whether it was the seizure that made that happen or if she had pushed herself too close to the sky trying to see where it began.

My friend Andy is taking this class called Image and Reality and he’s always reading me these poems from the constant Moleskine in his pocket. I don’t think he makes anything up, really, and it’s interesting to hear about. He read me one yesterday called “Look at the Mess I’ve made” while we sat in his new apartment near the train station, the one he rents from Russians with karate children.

Nick said that when he woke up from his coma he couldn’t stand up; his equilibrium was lost to him. He had been in a coma for six weeks, and for a month after that he was alive in the hospital, and for two months after that he was still alive in rehab, all because for one split second another car made full speed metal love with his. The body belonging to the man in the first car seized and it was his stiffened leg that really started all this, over the divider and onto the wrong side of the highway, where Nick’s body was left crumpled with a hurt that lingered a long time thereafter.

One day last week we were sitting on the lawn in front of the library (this was before it got too cold out) and Andy was introducing us to this guy Julian, who has cerebral palsy and had to sit a few feet from us because the smoke bothered him. Julian told Nora that she was so beautiful and intelligent that he was sure to be so sad when she died, thinking that she might’ve lived longer if not for the smoking. Andy told him that he considered himself disabled, too, because he had Bipolar disorder. Julian said he did, too, and that his parents were both missionaries, that he grew up in Rwanda and had two dolls, both named Josephine.

That was one of the most efficient mass killings, what happened there. Some eight hundred thousand people in less than a hundred days, a rate preceded only most recently by the numbers in atom-bombed Japan. I remember going to the war museum in London and sitting in a room with blocks
for seats, trying to quiet my silver bangles, while the screen showed one man driving his violent steel limb into the neck of another. Julian was eleven at the time, imprisoned and fully aware that he always would be by a wheelchair.

He told us that day in front of the library about the first time he realized he was the only person in the universe with cerebral palsy, because that’s what he thought at the time. Prior to that he believed everyone had it, and when that fell, he said to himself that what can’t be beautiful should at least be extreme.

First he said he wasn’t going to show us the picture, but then he did. He opened his wallet and took from behind his younger brother’s school portrait, which he also showed us (“Look how cute that is”) the printed image of his mangled car. He pointed to the spot where he had been sitting, which clearly had no room for anyone to sit comfortably much less wholly, and said he was glad to tell the story because it reminded him of how happy he ought to feel now.

He dropped his keys on the floor midway through his story and, like anyone would do for someone like that, I picked them up. Halfway through the motion I regretted it, like it was too nice and too unnecessary, and I loosely dropped them on the table into a lid of honey mustard (that last part by accident). So, the sorry obligation was coated in sweet and yellow.

“Our problems are so trivial.” This was me and Leila talking, watching Nick from across the room, before we sat down to talk to him.

This friend of mine, this Leila, is collecting cigarette packs so she can tape them to her wall to spell “POURQUOI.” An attempt at artistry.

She was uncomfortable, sitting there across from Nick in the café. She introduced herself to him (for her, this was the fourth or fifth time they’d met; for him, the first) and he remembered that he’d seen her on Facebook. It didn’t help that his conversation topics of choice all seemed inappropriate in one way or another, especially at a table full of girls, three fifths of them foreign. The most consistent theme of his stories was this rough homophobia, qualified first by the claim that he didn’t ever really hate faggots. He talked about making his aide Justin clean up his shit and piss because Justin kept making him shower when he wasn’t even dirty, even though Justin was married with children.

It was funny, then, when he told his father that in his coma he didn’t see the light, rather the devil, who he wrestled.

Nora had known Nick the year before, though she was also introducing herself to him for the first time, and was sad because of it. To her, he was the sad leftovers of a wonderful dinner party. Stacked plates and collapsing brie, emptied bottles from that certain kind of guest, the tablecloths painted. He was too cold to eat, with scars on the left side of his body and an atrophied paunch. When I
made him laugh I could see the body he had before.

But there’s really no way to know. There’s the image, and then there’s the reality, and no one can really say if those two things are one and the same. And then he launched into another story that was really much worse than he meant it to be and much better. It was supposed to have been funny, I think. Anyway, he said that after he woke up (that’s what he calls it, like he’d just been sleeping for a while) he was in the hospital for another month. He was on lots of drugs, and he doesn’t remember much, but he remembers that he was popular. “People like me, I don’t know why.” He said he was popular and somehow that led him to the string of stories about how, whenever people walked into his hospital room, he showed them his balls. He used to do this to his friend Ben, who has been his friend since they both were small. This was before Justin was around, insistent with the showering-though-he’s-married-with-children bit, so Nick was sweaty and dirty with that sweet chemical hospital aftertaste, like the damp skin left over when you pull tape off it. He used to grab his balls, like this, he said, and showed us like what in the middle of the café. “And then I’d reach out to shake his hand, and he shook it every time.” And I imagined that Ben looked him right in the eyes when he did it.

I asked Andy if people dream in a coma. “It’s up to you,” he said. And that’s just it.

I ran into Andrew later that day, the day of the café, at the library when I was looking to waste time. We drove in his car after I ran to my room to get the Chanukah pop I stole for him to his apartment. “Thanks, but it’s a little out of season.” Nora and I had gone there the week before to waste time, too, and helped him hang pictures on the wall – a needlepoint slot machine, a Bar Mitzvah poster of a four-fold Andy, posed as Bond, and a small portrait of Tecumseh forged to the wall with a three pound staple gun. That night we ate Minestrone soup from a can, Nora and I, because we’re vegetarians, and Andy cooked for himself and his tall friend some mixture of meats and pasta.

Andrew writes poems all the time – he wrote “Look at the Mess I’ve Made” and it’s just a perfect example of something clean made dirty, which you then look to for pretty. Like a pile of sand in a box. You can trace and retrace the lines of your former coke habit or the time you kicked a hole in your bathroom door or threw yourself so far into a love affair that you fell right through it.

I once read about this drag queen in a magazine that used to wipe her face at night with tissues, tissues that she one day looked at and realized were beautiful in their multicolored tracks and glitter. She took them out of the trash and made a lot of money selling them to rich people who wanted stuff.

And this beautiful war museum. Where we posed next to lame missiles
under Nazi aircraft, listening to Churchill stories and looking through haunted telescopes. On the second floor we looked at the paintings. They were of men with no limbs, and women with no men, beautiful impressions of the ugliest thing alive or dead.
Progress
Scott Whiting

Quantities of smoke billowing in the air,
The rim of each stack embedded with flashing red jewels.

What was it—
She said, sitting on the quay—
What was it that e.e. cummings said about Man-unkind?

Something more universal than this,
your school-loaned English anthology
with its inky celestial photographs and
faded nineteen-eighties typeface that
told you to go places and give a damn.
You cared about it once, this world we’re in,
Before there were lazier monsters to be pitied.

Throwing her head to the orange clouds,
She took the last drag of her cigarette and threw it in the river.
I was
full and overflowing
with his accent but
we were smokers then
and didn’t say much.
We ate pizza.

He closed the car door
while I waited inside
quietly. His friends,
who also had cars
thought I was special
because he acted unlike himself.
Without any patience he would
kiss me in public like nobody else.

One night, the moon was
brilliant and hiding
in the stitches of my inseams,
so he petted my hair and
saw the light coming out.
Both of us agreed—
we were unhappy, but
I never saw him drunk,
all of those times we spent together.

I would fantasize sometimes about
throwing a lamp against a wall.
He made me want to be
that angry, but there was nothing
like not being in love. Our time
was always pacing.

His cheekbones screamed
when he lit up cigarettes,
like James Dean, and
it made me think he was
a journalist near to burn out
but really, he worked for
Ford Motors, in an office,
with a chrome stapler.

All of this though,
we could care less because
there were no leaves falling.
We flat-lined a number of times, you know,

an innumerable amount of times,
together. But kept living asi,
y asi y asi.
Sonnet II
Emily Ayer

Her long, plaintive vowels still roll along the paths here
though her children have begun to resemble her in shades
of gray. Now she waits: setting each plate at the table,
circling the stove to the hum of old camp songs, bending near
a crossword in the first slanted rays over the brambled front
stoop. Island: she is used to being alone here. There were cows
at home; someone needed to relieve them daily and it was him,
doing the work of eight for two weeks each summer: pitching
the hay, collecting the eggs, feeding the dogs. Miles away,
slack-limbed and sunburnt in the evenings, he sprawls in the blue
corner chair in the farmhouse kitchen, long floorboards stretching
away into dusty corners. The angle of his thumb and forefinger
cradles a pipe; he conjures images of her from its cloud. The dusk
comes on slowly, until only the smoke is left hanging in the air.
Dear Blues Girl
Martin Chang

Dear blues girl,

Imagine coming home after putting in 9 hours for your hard earned pay check only to find your place robbed of all your valuables by some lowlife with a crowbar and a balaclava. It’s unpleasant for all involved. You’re mad about the money. Mr. Balaklava is living a paranoid life of burglary for the money. That’s why when I robbed your place I left your TV, stereo, and computer alone. Instead, I stole things of sentimental value. Photos of your cat back home. Your neat bill fold of grape bubblicious gum. I have a bit of OCD too. That movie ticket stub from your first date. Kevin didn’t deserve you. I read your diary by the way you should seriously consider parts of it. It was quite profound. The stuff about your parent was a bit dry and self indulgent. Your parents love you and raised you well. I can because I’ve spent the day living your life while you were off worried about money and because you’re not a complete weirdo like I am.

Everything I took is uninsured which must tug at the old short and curls so for that I am genuinely sorry. So I feel I owe you an explanation at the very least.

Well first I saw you, yesterday, at the frozen yogurt place next to the books store, sorry I forgot the name. One of your friends said something very funny, again I forgot what it was. I have a bad memory, but what I did remember was you not laughing. Even I laughed. I chose you because you were interesting. I followed you to this building and I went home and got my can of keyboard cleaner and lock picking set. I made it myself out of paper clips and hockey tape because you can’t buy one without a license here. Sorry, but your lock is a bit scratched up now, you might have to jiggle it.

Well this morning I waited for you to leave for work. How, you be asking yourself. Well that was me who asked you to hold the door open because I lost my keys. You’re trying to remember what I looked like but its not going to work. I’m as gray as they come and I don’t have a record. I didn’t use a balaclava. Little insider info, cat burglars don’t wear masks because if we’re caught we get the luxury of acting confused or misunderstood. I picked your lock and entered your room. Took a nap. Listened to your iTunes. Never pegged
you for a blues girl. I took some of the codeine left over from that skiing accident. I also had a half glass of your pino grigio. That’s what the glass is about. Before you even think about it, only criminals have their prints taken and only the most heinous criminals have their DNA registered, you’re Mr. Balaclavas for instance. I took a can of keyboard cleaner, turned it upside down, filled the padlock of the trunk in your closet with Freon and hammered the lock apart with your tape dispenser.

I went through some of your emails and I’m sorry you got passed over for that promotion. From being you for the day you are really lucky. You have a loving family, friends, youth, and best of all I will never come back.

Yours truly,

A Maudlin Thief
Pangea, Leaving
Meghan Smith

My moment is in E minor,
same as all canine howls:

this atlantic instant when
feet dissolve into damp silt as

suitcase handle sears
a cigar shape across my palm.

Same as all transitory toes, mine
clutch soil like bird claws round wire,

fashion a crowbar out of dirt
to wield what is beneath me and

Who are you to say it’s easy,
this business of wholeness,
when I’ve the Nile and Amazon for arteries?
A rushlight, flickering and small, is better than no light at all.