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# Cornelia Street: 6 A.M., Railroad Bridge, Far from Home, Bees

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# Four Poems

NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER

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## Cornelia Street, 6 A.M.

I'm buying hot bread  
from a woman with fingerless  
gloves and a harsh cough.  
Snow is falling fast  
and the sidewalk over  
the bakery's basement  
ovens is steaming.  
The proprietor of the fish  
store is leaning in his  
doorway, hands on hips,  
with fish blood smeared  
across his apron.  
The off-duty detective  
enters the coffee shop  
and removes his coat,  
revealing the .38  
revolver that is licensed  
to take human life in  
the defense of human life.  
A man walking a pair  
of dogs is peering through  
his own reflection  
in the pawnshop window  
at a broken violin.  
Four storeys up, light-years  
away from all of this,  
a woman who hasn't slept  
in days stands by an open  
window tearing a letter  
into tiny pieces which

blow out into the snow,  
 indistinguishable from  
 the snow, and melt the moment  
 they touch the street.

## Railroad Bridge

A woman is running along the gleaming tracks,  
 trailing a scarf, clutching a suitcase.  
 Every ten yards, she passes through a cone  
 of light, freezing her in motion for an instant  
 before she merges back into the darkness.  
 Darting in and out of sight like that,  
 many times, as she heads toward the lone tree,  
 shining like iron, that stands beneath  
 a streetlight at the foot of the bridge.  
 It is there that the overnight express will  
 rush in from the east, caked with dirty snow,  
 and send the pigeons flying from the trestle.  
 So that all at once the brief shadows  
 of their wings will be swallowed up  
 by the river below, the jagged water silvering  
 at the edges while the train whistle screams.

## Far from Home

A broken-down hotel on an inhospitable sea,  
 and behind it, a field of thorns in which  
 a man wearing white gloves is digging a hole  
 with the exact proportions of a grave.

Down the hall, the young chambermaid  
 is staring into a basin full of red water.  
 Her hair is white and her hands are wrinkled.  
 A shark tooth dangles from her ear.

In the evening she leaves a tray by my door:  
 a glass, a carafe of water, and a bottle  
 containing liquor that swirls like mist.  
 Mornings she brings bitter tea and a map.

Always the same map—not of the island  
 we're on, but of one I left long ago.  
 (If it were this island, I wouldn't know,  
 having never ventured from the hotel.)

There is a bowl of black seashells by my bed.  
 The maps—thirteen of them—are stacked  
 between the lamp that flickers like a star  
 and the quartz lions veined with light.

The clerk at the front desk could be a statue.  
 His dark glasses reflect the bare lobby,  
 its leafless plants and shuttered windows.  
 At his fingertips is a tumbler filled with dust.

The day I check out, the other guests line  
 the balcony, wrapped in sheets, speaking  
 a language I've never heard—sibilant as  
 the sea, but with no two words sounding alike.

The man in white gloves appears, to carry  
 my suitcase, and pauses before a mirror  
 in which I see, not his image, but towering  
 iron waves, rising to mesh with an iron sky.

## Bees

### 1.

With three hundred lenses in each eye  
 a worker bee gazes on the same glass  
 skyscraper six hundred times  
 from the blossom of a solitary tree

2.

During a solar eclipse all the bees  
 from a single hive stop  
 flying at the same instant  
 and cluster low to the ground

3.

In the chapter of the Koran entitled "The Bee"  
 they receive a single passing verse praising  
 their honey ("a syrup of different hues")  
 as a cure for the myriad maladies men incur

4.

A girl on the island of Naxos was stung  
 over her entire body in a rainstorm  
 in December (when bees hibernate) and for  
 a hundred years could prophesy the future

5.

When Benvenuto Cellini was imprisoned in Rome  
 he dreamt of bees swarming the head of a woman  
 on a golden staircase and this became the "Medusa"  
 (with bees instead of snakes)  
 he cast in gold for the Duke of Parma  
 who placed it on a pedestal opposite his bed  
 where it remained gazing at him  
 (& emitting a low hum) until the day of his death