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

Nicholas Chistropher
Four Poems

NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER

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 silverying 
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