

Poetry by Katie Riggs  
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Day-return tickets are a parenthesis.  
The conductor's hole-punch clicks:(  
a comment and a cup of tea  
and click:) you're back again,  
trying to finish your sentence.  
Stardust Mini-holidays  
on the sunny banks of elsewhere --  
toilets down the hall, there's a view --  
you can footnote them.  
Tunnels draw you back to the main clause,  
creeping in from the outskirts  
on the map of subordination,  
but just missing connections.  
Coming into a station  
reading the overhead wires  
like a blank comic strip,  
after countless hours riding backwards,  
looking out for the 41st shade of green.

Seeds escape the planting hand  
into trowelled furrows,  
dark and acrid with compost,  
soil patted over, tucked in.  
Hoze-nozzle showers bathe the  
    fuzzy zucchini leaves,  
    clambering beanstalks,  
    new tomato blossoms --  
Summer growing,  
salads making themselves.  
The physical language of  
    sweat and strain and  
    dirty clothes in the washer and  
sweet, small carrots in July.  
Judicious garden --  
no crime in weeding,  
pulling the unnecessary to grow  
    a radish.

Passing through on his bicycle  
he'd noticed the dusk-light in this courtyard.  
The images clicked off  
by the turning spokes  
lay half-developed in his mind --  
he's come to hunt them down.  
He puts an eye to the camera --  
today it is a willful thing, a blind lense  
that makes a horizon of 35 millimeters,  
shape a matter of shading.  
Where there is no inspiration, there is method --  
adjustments of speed, aperture, angle --  
there is some art in precision.  
The lush light, rough terracotta brick,  
shadow arches; they resist two dimensions,  
space will not yield to the shutter.  
One roll exposed, the light fades,  
images still agitating in the tray.

2 a.m.

A light comes on in the house behind,  
coming over the shutters to make  
a big T on my wall.  
The house still smells of  
the second pot of rice I burned.  
From the next room,  
the dreamy declaration of a sleepwalker:  
"She cheated."  
The day's mail brought a letter from Mom  
saying, Beware of terrorists,  
and, I'm tired of fixing food.  
And a letter from a friend --  
next year I'll be living in the old infirmary,  
the scene of so many bladder infections.  
A room with illiterate insignia --  
poster shadows, petrified gum.  
And no house behind  
to turn on lights in the middle of the night  
and make letters on my wall.

We sat in accompanied solitude  
at the tables of a summer cafe.  
Waves relaxed up the shore --  
in the still moment between coming and going  
reflattened --  
and pulled back through the rocks  
sounding like the applause of some other audience,  
tugging loose the seaweed tangle of thoughts  
knotted up by hostels and bureaux de change.  
We watched the day slip away,  
a strange day that had tried to happen  
despite the clouds and eery wind  
through the wriggling telephone wires, humming  
a native tune of somewhere else  
-- a wind that might have been fierce  
if it had been cold,  
that raised the dust from a dig  
into our mouths and eyes,  
so we chewed on grit even as we stood in the shower  
excavating our ears.  
Waves swallowed the day in regular gulps,  
taking us farther from any idea of why we had come,  
of why these low stone walls and stumpy vineyards  
crouched on the stair-stepped hills,  
or how mute they would remain, rooted in  
the rocky soil, pale in a sunbeaten country.

I

Dusk met me on the doorstep  
where I sat waiting for it,  
watching a man wash his truck,  
singing to the locked neighborhood  
out of tune, with headphones.  
A girl passed, absorbed in the sidewalk,  
the click of her heels  
spelling out going.  
The clouds, shadows  
against sky, like twilight bicyclists,  
blinked a partial moon, blurry  
as through suds-smearred truck windows.  
I was looking at the streetlamp  
just when it went on.

II

Night-shuttered, I sit  
by my heater, circumscribed by papers  
that started as final copies  
and became rough drafts.  
Wind in the flue rattles  
the plywood face of a fireplace  
where a gas heater wheezes  
through its textured log front --  
benign asthmatic, allergic  
to itself.

III

A holiday wakes up to lawnmowers  
grooming clean-shaven gardens.  
A boy on a bike  
clicks a stick along the fence  
of the park perimeter, clockwise.  
Next door a man trims his front hedge,  
clipped into the shape of a dog --  
a colossal terrier.  
He prunes its belly, pares its ears,  
snips its leafy expressionless face  
that watches people going to and from  
with dog-shit on their shoes.

On a Moroccan Bus

Sandwiched between towel-wrapped women  
carrying children and live chickens,  
we shrink under the dark leers  
of foreigners who find our fairness strange,  
and the radio wails something reminiscent  
of a cat being tortured.  
We turn to each other  
and we are at home, on the lawn,  
arranging flowers, balloons, canopies --  
you in white, veiled,  
I in pink, garlanded,  
and the man in black --  
he's sitting three rows in front of us,  
a suitcase jiggling over his head,  
precarious in the luggage rack.

I sit on the bus,  
my groceries perched on my knee,  
smiling back at the bland smiles  
of fair people who don't find me foreign.  
A glint of sun  
and I'm at home, on the lawn,  
sneezing from the pollen,  
writing you a letter with questions  
about things that haven't happened yet.

The wish for watercolors --  
no lines  
or definition,  
just color melding into color,  
a range of grays.  
The dipping and the washing --  
fading and  
gently fading  
to the smallness of suggestion,  
the pen a brush.