The Blue Route
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The Disaster Box

by: Melissa Bierly

The disaster box had remained unopened for five years, since the day Caroline's dad had finished packing everything into it and shipped it off with her to Fordham for her first semester of college. It survived several moves – from dorm to dorm to apartment to this small, one story house she was now renting. She always stored it under her bed, right against the baseboard of the wall. Caroline had to wriggle under the dust skirt hanging from her mattress and propel herself forward on her stomach, pushing the other storage containers out of the way in order to reach it. She pulled it out and set it in front of her on the carpet, resting on her knees. She remembered how she had felt a little bit funny about unpacking it here, in this room where she could see the tree lined, suburban street through her window. It was far away from the pounding rush of New York, where she was most likely to need it.

When Caroline got her acceptance letter from Fordham, her dad was on edge for days. At night, she could hear the murmurs coming from within her parents' bedroom, her father's voice more urgent than usual, and when she walked past their door, their voices would stop and then cautiously rise again as she rinsed her toothbrush in the sink. He watched the news more, staring intensely at the screen, drumming his fingers on the dark green fabric of his favorite armchair.

It had been six years since September 11, but she knew that's what he was thinking about, that and how foreign the city seemed to him, a man who had spent nearly his entire life on a farm in a little rural corner of Pennsylvania.

Caroline kept waiting for the moment when her dad would ask her to sit down with him and say that he really didn't think it was a good idea for her to go to Fordham because she was his baby girl and he'd be worried out of his mind and wouldn't she rather go to one of the other colleges she'd been accepted to, perhaps that nice one that was just forty miles away and had a dairy farm nearby? About a week after the letter from Fordham came, he did sit her down. That was when he proposed the disaster box.

He hadn't called it the disaster box initially; when he first told her what he was doing, he called it an "Emergency Terrorist Attack Kit." The name was pretty self-explanatory. The kit would include all sorts of things that would be useful in the case of a major disaster: flares, a first aid kit, a flashlight, canned food… At first, she couldn't believe him, but he had on the face he wore when he was completely serious–wide eyes, eyebrows pushing up against the wrinkles in his forehead, lips pressed tight–and it was much better than being told she couldn't go to Fordham, so she just nodded.

Some of the things he could only order off obscure websites like the NASA space blanket or the universal radio that didn't require electricity and that worked with every cell phone

carrier. He seemed proud each time he found a new item to pack, mentioning it to her as they passed each other in the stairwell or as they ate their identical bowls of Raisin Bran with soy milk for breakfast after their morning run together. Each time she had to choke back a laugh and drown the tiny kernel of embarrassment that she felt in the middle of her stomach. She wasn't sure why she felt that way; as if it were the equivalent of him insisting on picking her up from school in the old station wagon they had sold when she was in eighth grade.

At the end of the summer, he used clear packaging tape to seal it up and wrote "Winter Coats" on the side in black marker. When they arrived, it was the first thing he brought up to her dorm room, and he carefully slid it under the bed, pushing it back into the corner. "So no one sees it," he had said as he reemerged, looking up at her, with all fours on the floor. He stood up and brushed his jeans off and then glanced at the open doorway through which Caroline's mother had just disappeared to get more boxes.

Her dad leaned forward, dropping himself a few inches so he was at her eye level. "Now you have to promise me one thing, Caroline," he said quietly. "That you'll only open this box if there's a disaster. Only if there's a disaster."

"Okay, Dad."

She'd been tempted a few times to open it because one of the provisions he'd put inside was two hundred dollars. But she hadn't come this close to actually opening it until right now. It was right in front of her, as she sat with her bare feet pressed against the carpet floor and the dusk of twilight coming on fast outside her window.

Caroline wished that she were breaking her promise by opening it. She wished that the disaster hadn't happened.

Some girl, Caroline imagined her as looking like herself at seventeen, drinking too much at a party and then driving too fast, too fast for 5 a.m. in the morning on the thin stretch of road that Caroline's parents lived on. Too fast for her dad to react when he saw the car blurring toward him in his peripherals. Too fast for him to break the stream of the routine morning run that they had once shared. Her mother called her an hour later, her voice saturated with tears and dried out by their salt at the same time.

Caroline drove the seven hours it took to get to the hospital without stopping, even though the needle on her gauge was dangerously close to empty when she pulled into the vast parking lot. Her mother wilted against her when she came into the waiting room. Caroline could smell the oil on her mother's scalp from not showering that morning and imagined she smelled about the same, a congregation of the scents of the day before clinging to dead skin. She wished that she could be the one wilting into her mother's arms, instead of this strange role reversal. She did not want to be sturdy.

Her dad was not in the standard hospital gown television had prepared her for. There was a single white sheet wrapped around him like bath towel. His arms were bare, with

needles slipped below the skin at the underside of his wrist and on the inside of his elbow. Caroline noticed how distinct his sleeve tan line was and realized that she had never seen her dad shirtless before.

The doctor said he didn't know when her dad would wake up. After a week of sitting bedside with her mother, Caroline drove the seven hours back to her one-story house in Ohio. They had decided that she would move back home for now, so she could be there when he woke up. Caroline did not let herself use the word "if."

She packed all her other things, save the disaster box. She was not sure if she would even bring it back with her. This was not the disaster her father had envisioned.

Caroline sliced open the piece of tape with a pair of scissors and opened the box. There it all was–the space blanket, the universal radio. On top sat the checklist he'd written up. She recognized it because it had been hung up on the refrigerator that summer, right between her senior picture and the grocery list. But beneath it was another piece of paper that she had not seen before. It was a letter in his handwriting. As she read it, she gently sunk against the side of the bed.

Caroline,
I want to tell you I love you because if you're reading this, something terrible has happened. Remember the promise you made me when I told you not to open the box unless absolutely necessary? Now I need you to make me another promise. Don't give up. Everything you need is right here.

Skeleton Pieces

by: Dana Diehl

We paste skeletons to note cards,
mistaking bird ulnas for mouse femurs,
connecting vole skulls to spines
made of wings.
Put them back together,
our teacher told us,
handing us each a box of bones.
But stripped down to their cores,
coracoids jumbled with ribs
and vertebrae closing against teeth,
what makes them different dissolves
into what makes a cell a cell
and how many seed-sized cervicals
it takes to support a body.
We place the bones in lines
like rows of piano keys
with all the sharps and flats left out,
because like this, they have order again.
Like this, they can stop being pieces
and become parts.
Every ten years you grow a new skeleton,
our teacher said.
Your cells constantly renew,
rebuild,
replace.
And so when we take our skeletons home,
Frankenstein-monsters with the hips of a mole,
rib cages of a snake,
and tape them to the spaces over our beds
or to the fridge next to the coupon clippings
or bury them in the compost heap
where tomatoes and apple cores and peels
also disassemble until they
become something whole and together again,
we run our hands over our own ribs
our knuckles
our jaws
feeling for the soft spaces that hold us together
feeling for growth rings
feeling for all the hard parts.

Mutation

by: Dana Diehl

The frogs this year are climbing
from the shallow river puddles
with extra limbs.
Seven-legged Northern Cricket frogs.
Six-legged Pickerels.
Each with four back feet,
two that drag in the mud,
creating prints that I won't
be able to recognize
next to the padded fox prints
in my parents' backyard.

I wait all winter, dreaming
frog-dreams of icy underground
pockets and pressing soil and deep
dark ponds, sleepy fish swimming
circles over my head.
I wait as the frogs dethaw
and move one night, silently,
to the lake by my house.
I wait as they lay black nets
of eggs in the cattails by the dock.
I want to see this animal.
A frog defying three hundred million years
of walking on fours.

When the first tadpoles hatch,
slippery black commas in the water,
I ladle them into a jar I keep
beside my bed. I watch as
they grow, sprouting legs
from rubbery flesh.
I watch as their tails shrink
back into their spines.
And I watch for the point when
their fusing bones decide that
four isn't enough,
and that it's time to diverge.

Stigmata

by: Alex Guarco

The rubber band rosary beads Pa channels through his thumb and forefinger are worth more
resurrections than I think he realizes,
and he's one who prefers Georgia's summer thunder to its church pews,
letting Saturday night rain seep in to his knees
as he picks clover from the sandstone path out back—says he'd rather *put my faith into somethin'*
solid enough to actually fall between my fingers, give me a reason to hold tight 'fore I get
plucked and tossed myself,
and the dirt stains on his pants are worn like white collars
washed after dinner in the bathtub with baking soda and a steelbrush confidence that his weight
will bring them back by noon,

While he looks up from the tub, he says
Son, I ain't found no betta' bible than this here backyard
and I don't see god in a father whose teeth have more holes than the gloves he wears,
but rather, in one whose hands never will.

At the Bottom of a Swimming Pool

by: Connor McNamara

You can feel every inch of your body
without meaning to. You wonder,

though you know the answer's no,
if this is how it feels to hate making love

and to do it anyway. You will learn
a new language and forget your first.

The new tongue is sanded smooth.
It owes nothing to the mouth that made it.

Eroded tongue hums you a hymn
and you try to spit your name.

You may lease out a little reality
to a favorite idea. You can earn back

a few stray notes of Lady Day.
It won't last, and when you run out of music,

you will find that there is less of you left
than when you started.

Broken Plate

by: Michael Plunkett

I broke a plate and decided not to tell anyone. I cleaned up the mess it made. It was easy enough, only took a few minutes before it was gone and in the garbage with the rest of our used and broken things. I broke a plate and no one noticed. Not my mother, not my father, not my sister, or my dog, or my priest, or my teacher, or my girlfriend or my doctor or the waitress at the diner. None of the other plates seemed to notice either. They didn't seem scared of me when I walked into the kitchen the next day or the day after that. The sun kept shining, the moon kept glowing. I kept my secret.

And then I broke a cup. It was a tea cup, a tiny little thing. It was not really my fault, it was so thin, and I so thick. I didn't tell any one about this tiny cup either. And once again no one noticed. It was gone. The cup had been nicer than the plate and yet no one noticed either of the two were gone. All the pieces look the same when something breaks. It doesn't matter how nice the thing was when it was whole.

I broke a plate because I wanted to. Because I was sad, because I was lonely, because I was mad and wanted revenge. I broke a plate because I could. And no one ever knew. I broke them because it was easy and any guilt I had slipped from me into the garbage with the pieces of all those broken plates.

And then one afternoon I walked in on my mother breaking a plate. It was the most disturbing thing I ever saw. Maybe it was the jerking motion with which she dashed it all to pieces, maybe it was the sounds of a thousand tiny little explosions. Loud smacks of anger, or was it pain? Or was it… pleasure? Strange, from where I was standing I could not tell the difference.

She said she was angry at my father, she had caught him breaking the fine china dishes we kept in the living room. Such smooth plates, so smooth they looked soft. Soft shiny pale surfaces. He was just throwing them in the garbage and loving the way they shattered. He told her he was tired of looking at them, they had been there in the living room so long. He was tired of them, sacred delicate little forgotten china dishes. Looking at them, he said he thought the dust that collected on them was the beginning fuzz of an old man's beard. He didn't want them anymore. So he broke them, dust and all, in the garbage pail in the kitchen where my mother found him.

I had no idea what to say. I did not know how to clean up this broken plate. So I ran. I ran away to my sister's room. But when I burst through the door I saw that she had already heard. She was breaking cups and plates too, her little toy tea set, it flung from her window like a bird without wings and all I could think was how could such a young girl, my little sister, know how to break so much?

I heard my father come through the front door and I heard my mother toss the garbage with all the broken plates out of the back door. I ran down the hall with its wood floors and descended the stairs quite recklessly with nothing on my feet but quick slippery socks. I met him in the parlor and told him everything, every little plate and cup I had broken, the plates mother had broken, my little sisters tea set, I told him all about the broken things. But he didn't care. He just shrugged and said he knew, he had known for some time, but it was ok because were all still living together, and we all still slept together, and we all still ate together, so therefore we were still a family and you know what? It's ok. Before I could answer my mother told us dinner was ready.

So we sat down to dinner, my sister across from me and my parents on either ends, but when I went to the cupboard to set the table, I realized there were no plates. There were no cups either. And strangely enough all the silverware was gone too. My father burped. What do we do? We sat around for maybe a moment but we couldn't go hungry. So we dug in, with our hands. We didn't mind the food in our teeth, or the mush between our fingernails, or the stains on our faces, the moist crumbs on our lips. We ate dinner as a family, with our hands, like the animals we really were.

Outside the kitchen window a man rode a bike down the sidewalk weaving around all of the garbage left out for pick up in the morning. Down the block and onto the next he passed by every house and their plastic cans and bags, finding a way to get around each one. He looked up and smiled, smiled at the thought of all the warm people sitting inside, eating dinner with their families. He kept riding down the street past all the yellow windows glowing like Christmas lights in the blue night.

Comiendo un Mango en El Salvador, 1982

by: Annaliese Wagner

My teeth plunge
into sweet flesh,
the juice stains
my fingers and face, pulp
sticks to my hands.
I eat my fear,
let it slide
down my throat,
enter my blood,
sit in my belly, wait
to be born.

From behind a fetid
garbage pile, I watched
my friend die.
A soldier beat him
with the butt of his gun
until his skull broke,
pieces of grey matter
clinging to hair, bone, man, boy.
My friend was twelve,
the soldier had orders
to strip him from family, childhood.
To train him to be a soldier, a man.
Take him to a darkness
he can never return from.
He would not go.

I hold the mango's core in my hands
like an offering
and pray that I will never be a man.

Glaucoma

by: Annaliese Wagner

The first time I saw the night sky upside down
was when I was in an airplane.
My legs were too short to touch
the floor and they ached from hanging in midair.
My father let me sit by the window,
and when we were close to landing
he gestured with his weathered hand
for me to look outside. The clouds were bruised purple
as they drifted through the black
where I expected to see stars.
But they were below us,
translucent red, go-green, mustard, orange.
Brighter than starlight, they polluted
the night with their glow, dimmed
the trillions of distant burning plasmas,
that the Greeks and Romans told us
were dogs, warriors, and haughty monarchs.

When I was in college I laid in the dark on the football field,
the little black dots in the Astroturf poked me, latched
onto my hair and my clothes. I stared at the moon,
the looming stadium lights,
their radiant fibers of light
stretched out into the ink sky fingering
the stars, the nebulae.

But I am old, my eyes swathed in blue film,
the pupils obliterated by a silent thief.
I am imprisoned in eternal moonless night,
my gleam and glimmer of stars under a veil of pitch.

Contributors

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