

*from*  
PARAGRAPHS FROM A DAY-BOOK



*Marilyn Hacker*

*for Hayden Carruth*

Filthiest of cold mornings, with the crumbs  
of my breakfast *tartine* and the dregs of tea,  
to clear away. On the market street the bums,  
long-term jobless, stateless, *sans-abri*—  
meaning, those without shelter—  
crouch on cardboard, wrapped in frayed woollens, filter  
out the wind as best they can, discreetly beg:  
a plastic bowl beside rag-swaddled legs.  
They all are white, and half of them are women.  
I talk with one: tall, stained teeth, arched nose and cheekbones  
like Norman gentry. She's soft-spoken  
as a fifth-grade teacher, who'd have shown  
me fluvial maps, and pointed out the human  
scale of geography. She huddles down  
on the florist's doorstep in the rue Saint-Antoine.

Her friend camps daily on the métro stairs,  
a tiny skinny woman with blue eyes.  
I gave her my old gloves and a blue mohair  
scarf when it was five below. Despite her size  
and lack of an ounce of fatty insulation,  
she vaunts her indomitable constitution  
to layered housewives who pass the time of day  
with laden caddies, homebound before noon.  
In summer, they more or less live on the Quai  
Saint-Bernard. The little one strips for the sun  
to shorts and a tank-top, turning crinkled coffee-brown  
around her aster eyes, and looks even thinner,  
while her friend tucks a print skirt over her knees and relaxes.  
Close to midnight, I sometimes see them sharing dinner  
on a plastic plate, on the steps of the Bureau of Taxes.

But it's January now, it isn't summer  
 and even dog-walkers stay off the quais,  
 while I remain a late-comer  
 whose own taxes bloat strategies  
 of empire that bring sitcoms, sneakers, "fast food"  
 and strident tourists to the neighbourhood.  
 Tired of their solipsistic booming voices,  
 I walk in parks they don't know. Under bare elms  
 and maples, Chinese schoolgirls draft their own  
 fables—homework, after La Fontaine:  
 a pigeon tells a mallard the advantages  
 he's gained from learning other languages.  
 They don't simper when they're joined by boys—is  
 subservience now just one of their cultural choices?  
 "Our" foreign policy chair's Jesse Helms...

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I almost gushed to my friend about a movie  
 I'd just seen: the son of a concentration-  
 camp survivor's homage. Mother tells son  
 the volumes she remembers. Now she's seventy-  
 something, tangoes in high-heeled elegance  
 over the abyss of memory.  
 But we were balancing fine points of translation  
 with forkfuls of ratatouille in a café  
 the freezing afternoon of New Year's Eve,  
 and both of us had other things to say.  
 Our plates were cleared. With habitual diffidence,  
 she handed a new manuscript to me  
 and took (to the Ladies') momentary leave.  
 I turned a page and read the dedication  
 to her father, who died at Bergen-Belsen.

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Grasp and turn a moment, make it stop,  
 stand in view, like the freesias in their green  
 moon with arboreal ribs. A lapsed  
 monk worked the Burgundian  
 clay he'd learned, cloistered, to turn and slap,  
 fire and glaze. While he talked, wet clay dripped  
 down his bare arms. The moment turns  
 like clay-slip on a wheel, or burns  
 with sweetness, like the potter's clover honey  
 offered to us as we  
 moved with the wrapped box back into the rainy

winter morning. He'd told me he  
read Henry Miller, then re-thought his vows.  
Six months out of chemotherapy,  
I heard his daughters singing in the house.

What are the engines of that energy?  
A path around a vineyard, sandwiches  
and Starbucks' coffee  
above the Hudson, a long kiss,  
five flights of wooden stairs worn slant by three  
centuries' footsteps, an old library  
book with bracketed sentences  
may make the metamorphosis  
to firm words from memory's shift and slip  
the way the moistened clay  
turned and handled on the wheel whirled up  
and swelled into the belly of a vase,  
and curved out to the flower-implicit lip—  
the movement is the potter's, not the clay's:  
a flaw, and he aborts it with a slap.

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For twelve years, I've lived in this nascent slum  
where shabby Jews in sweatshops, with irregular  
papers, wherever they came from,  
gathered mid-morning around a samovar  
enthroned amidst rows of Singer sewing-machines.  
They trusted the Republic. They were last seen  
being beaten with rifle-butts onto sealed trains.  
Their great-nephews are Orthodox extremists;  
their great-nieces are hash-smoking anarchists.  
Some of the sweatshops are high-priced oak-beamed flats,  
but I live in one of their tenements  
with smeared hallways, corroded pipes, centenarian drains  
and five flights of ancient, patinated spiral stairs  
getting junk mail from clothes-jobbers and bureaucrats,  
sheltered from fascists and the elements.

When I've described my life like this, I've lied  
I also live in six airy rooms on upper Broadway  
just south of Harlem, which I bought when my mother died—  
a school-teacher whose penury  
left me the wherewithal for bedroom windows  
with a view, two long blocks west, of the Hudson.

One friend thinks I'm a coddled American  
hypocrite after she spent ten days with me there,  
America, whose deep thumbprint of blood's on  
cachectic brows from the Bronx to Zaire.  
Addicts with AIDS warehoused in SROs  
hidden on sidestreets south of Riverside  
Drive might not find Sarajevo  
or Kigali on a map, but tonight, they know  
people like them will starve and freeze somewhere.