

Nancy Eimers

Born Worrier

The afghan folds around my sleeping cat, lapping her back and belly,
 all intersecting loops and openings,
 all nesting flowers brown and periwinkle blue.

I could almost believe to pluck one flower out of sleep
 begins a terrible unravelling . . .

one out of every seven people slept in the Underground,
 in London, during the blitz,
 and the other six awoke to airborne rumblings

that died in the gutters and hinges every night in September, 1940 —

I am falling asleep over *Photohistory of the 20th Century*,
 snow falling through empty branches.
 Snow like a newsreel played in my head:

IN THE WINTER OF 1909, NIAGARA FALLS FROZE SOLID!
 The frozen falls looks like a stand of trees . . .

one Londoner out of seven, despite official objections.
 London Bridge Station, bombed seventeen times that year!
 as passengers to nowhere prayed to a sleep of flake and bones:

fall over us from the ceiling tiles, rise to us from the floor tiles,
 black on white on black.

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If flesh is a bombed-out city and spirit the aftermath,
 is light snow powdered bone and salt?
 Once, in Avignon so far from ice and snow I saw

in a glass case, bone shards: wishbone, eyelash, funnybone.

In a bedchamber at the Palace of the Popes,
birds on trailing vines looked down from the ceiling and walls,
an empty mitre was folded across an empty bed.

Next door, in the study of Clement VI, the Chamber of the Deer,
I saw frescoes of stag hunts, ferret hunts, falconry.

I thought, how could anyone sleep through the din?
Bird-cages with open doors painted in window embrasures.
How could anyone sleep through one more painted tendril's hush

behind all noise, waiting for something, anything to rise?

When I was a child, Chicago lived at the end of a pointer
held in Khrushchev's hand. Lying in bed,
I could hear the dotted lines of my parents' late-night talk:

somewhere bombs are falling down, falling down,
shrapnel softly blizzarding over my head in the dark.

Mama used to call me a born worrier.

Sheets and blankets cold as pewter candlesticks,
light a thumbnail under the door.

Through the window I watched snow falling out of the streetlight,
watched it assemble, bone by bone, with airplane glue,
the disembodied trees, *phalange, tarsus, metatarsal* . . .

all the bones we'd learned at school, until each tree was whole and I slept.

*

Sleep's at the eye of a vast impatience, though I'm not sure whose it is —

trains rush out of it, Omaha to Chicago, the El goes underground
and comes up roaring into London, Victoria Station, Marble Arch . . .

the minute hand on the Big Ben clock is the size of a bus,
 St. Bride's snowy spire on Fleet Street resembles a wedding cake.
 Once from the open top of a red double-decker

I saw the half-bombed churches, the Roman statue of Mithras
 resurrected to street level because she was a goddess of light,
 stone face eaten by traffic fumes —

I could almost feel some part of her still underground, waiting for
 something;

almost asleep on the other side of a rushing train
 or a stand of frozen, circuitous trees

was the underworld, a series of black-and-white photographs,
 pictures of the frozen Niagara, pictures of bedrolls lined
 on cold cement —
 unhinged each night, a people asleep down there . . .

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. . . as I am half-asleep, looking out through remembered snowfall,
 or is it dust
 blowing back to us from the Dust Bowl Days?
 Have I travelled anywhere but into this armchair?

Sleep is erasing my parents' Cold War talk, though not the cold,
 not the snow,

sleep is erasing the empty branches aimed at my bedroom windows
 blind as the subterranean eyes of potatoes.
 But my childhood house is still lit inside, eternally guttering

in this book of the twentieth century that I'll never get to the end of
 before sleep blows the candle out . . .