

Dreams Before Waking

Adrienne Rich

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Despair falls:
the shadow of a building
they are raising in the direct path
of your slender ray of sunlight
Slowly the steel girders grow
the skeletal framework rises
yet the western light still filters
through it all
still glances off the plastic sheeting
they wrap around it
for dead of winter

At the end of winter something changes
a faint subtraction
from consolations you expected
an innocent brilliance that does not come
though the flower shops set out
once again on the pavement
their pots of tight-budded sprays
the bunches of jonquils stiff with cold
and at such a price
though someone must buy them
you study those hues as if with hunger

Despair falls
like the day you come home
from work, a summer evening
transparent with rose-blue light
and see they are filling in
the framework
the girders are rising
beyond your window
that seriously you live
in a different place
though you have never moved

and will not move, not yet
but will give away
your potted plants to a friend
on the other side of town
along with the cut crystal flashing
in the window-frame

will forget the evenings
of watching the street, the sky
the planes in the feathered afterglow:
will learn to feel grateful simply for this foothold

where still you can manage
to go on paying rent
where still you can believe
it's the old neighborhood:
even the woman who sleeps at night
in the barred doorway — wasn't she always there?
and the man glancing, darting
for food in the supermarket trash —
when did his hunger come to this?
what made the difference?
what will make it for you?
What will make it for you?
You don't want to know the stages
and those who go through them don't want to tell
You have four locks on the door
your savings, your respectable past
your strangely querulous body, suffering
sicknesses of the city no one can name
You have your pride, your bitterness
your memories of sunset
you think you can make it straight through
if you don't speak of despair.

What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other's despair into hope? —
You yourself must change it. —
what would it feel like to know
your country was changing? —
You yourself must change it. —
Though your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?