

# **The Things I Didn't Know to Wish For**

by

**Linda Hillringhouse**

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*For Mark*

*and in memory of my mother, father, and brother*

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The Bristol Plaza Hotel, Wildwood received the *Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award* from *The Paterson Literary Review*.

## New Dress

I'm going to tell you something even I don't know  
& I don't know how I'll find it but I'm going somewhere,  
down into something, looking for that thing that I will finally  
tell you & a girl appears walking her way back to the living  
room in which she will wait for her parents to come back  
from their first trip. She's wearing the dress, the heart-stopping,  
paralyzingly beautiful dress that Lenore, the neighbor, has bought her—  
red plaid, big crinoline & best of all, suspended from the belt, a real plastic  
pocket watch forever displaying seven o'clock. She is aglow, for when they  
behold her, they will run to her, kiss her, lift her aloft & she will see herself  
in their eyes & grow into someone alive in the miracle of the world who will  
take root joyously and in sorrow.

She stands, arms outstretched like a supplicant or little model & they are walking  
through the door & her father picks her up but unbelievably her mother walks by,  
smiling, in the full beauty of her days, at the neighbor & past the dress like no other  
& the thing that was known & not known became flesh & I'm finally telling you that  
right there in Lenore's living room time stopped & the future turned to dust.



## Essex Mill, Paterson

*For Mark*

We finally met at the Roma Club on Cianci Street  
when Angelo was king of the espresso machine  
and the soccer trophies stood like centurions  
among the philodendra and, across the street,  
the blue metallic door of the laundromat  
looked soldered shut.

You lived around the corner, at the Mill,  
the artists' housing, when we sat in your loft  
among the piles of books and, out in the back,  
the ruins of the Colt Mill and the Allied Textile Plant  
amid the weeds and bricks and old boards with nails  
so big we could see them from the third floor.

And scattered everywhere: curls of corroded metal,  
rocks, branches and bottle shards, as if they'd been flung  
to the ground by a petulant god trying to unbuild a world.

I had never looked into someone's eyes without seeing  
a diminished self, but that night in the loft, the doorknobs  
gold as the sun went down, we looked at each other beyond  
the broken things.

And afterwards we walked up the hill to the Great Falls,  
past the hydroelectric plant, its turbines twirling like prima  
ballerinas and past the gorgeous concrete steps leading down  
to the river. When we stood on the bridge and could see the Falls,  
they rushed forth over the cliff as if the earth had just begun.

## The Bristol Plaza Hotel, Wildwood

From the fifth floor balcony  
of the Bristol Plaza Hotel,  
I watch families on the boardwalk,  
parents in flip-flops and tank tops,  
kids on invisible leashes running  
up and down the steps to the sand  
in that delirium of summer when  
memory and history have just begun

And what would it have been like to have  
had children, to unpack bathing caps and board  
games, cough syrup and calamine, to wrap  
bologna sandwiches in waxed paper and buy  
peaches from the produce truck parked on the street  
between the hotel and the dunes

And look at us, how happy we were, positioning  
the blanket as carefully as a communion cloth,  
placing a sandal at each corner, the Atlantic  
behind us, ready to roll, and the kids  
running into the waves with joyful terror  
and I, exalted by love, carry them aloft  
out of the sea

And all around, from Pompton Lakes,  
Far Rockaway and Parsippany, people  
come with can-openers and band-aids  
and stories of splinters and shark scares  
and we smile and nod at the way life  
is unfolding at the Jersey shore while  
the kids stick shells and bottle caps  
atop their castles and run caravans  
to and from the sea to fetch water  
for the moats and ponds

And when the sun gets low in the sky,  
we pick up the sandwich wrappers,  
sweatshirts, and checkers, shake out  
the blanket, pack the towels and tubes,  
and the kids say heartbroken farewells  
to their new friends who are leaving  
for Metuchen in the morning, then we trek  
to the shower at the bottom of the bleached  
cedar steps and wash the sand from our feet  
as the sea behind us stops swirling

And when it's nearly dark and the moon,  
up over the Ferris wheel, is almost too big  
for the eye to bear, we go to the boardwalk  
and take our place among the generations  
and I hold the hands of my children  
and lead them to the ring toss and skee ball  
and to the mechanical claw that descends  
in somnolence from the ceiling of the glass tank  
to hover above the hill of trinkets  
and the arthritic metal fingers open  
and grab onto a rubber spider, a skull ring,  
or a capsule containing a pink plastic seahorse  
and the claw lifts the prize as if it were Venetian  
glass and drops it down the chute into the frantic  
hands of my children who plead for more tokens  
while the life-size gypsy, turbaned and bejeweled,  
watches in malice from her lacquered ticket booth

And I lift my kids up onto the carousel horses  
where they sit enraptured by the leather reins  
and the lunatic eye of the horse looking backwards  
and I live to glimpse their faces and fluorescent hair  
as they ride by rising and falling to the old-world organ  
and I will not be dreaming this or thinking  
the way I always think, in dark conjecture.

## Salt

We're driving across the George Washington Bridge heading back to Jersey and a saltshaker appears in his hand which is lying on his lap, his other hand on the wheel, and I'm thinking Holy crap, did he just pull a saltshaker out of his pants? And he starts shaking it out the window and I go What are you doing?

And he says It's my mother and I say What? Then he says You know, her ashes, and I say Shut up, you're scaring me and he says C'mon, you know she loved the Hudson.

And now I'm covering my face against the blowback and rolling up the window to stop the draw and trying not to do one of those laugh-cry yelps, picturing the times I saw her use a saltshaker at Sardi's or The Heidelberg or put one on the table all those Friday nights in the Hackensack apartment and I'm thinking that everything we say or do has its own little future—and know for sure my own grim irony is in play.

Now he's saying Yeah, I sprinkled her at the Met, too, and I go Where, in the Lehman Collection? I'm flashing back to him acting weird, not getting off the bench, staring straight ahead even as I wave to him to come see Reclining Nude by Suzanne Valadon and his feet doing something strange like they're moving on their own and I say Why didn't you tell me you were gonna do this and he says You woulda spooked me.

And then he says Yeah, I was lucky, the guard was zombied-out, and now he's putting the shaker in his jacket pocket saying I still have more, for the Delacorte maybe, but I'm gonna use a parmesan shaker next time as he swings onto the Palisades Parkway asking me what we need from Stop and Shop but his voice sounds like it's being broadcast from a root cellar and I'm sitting there marveling at the idea that he would risk arrest at a New York institution for a woman who broke him like a wishbone.

## Revision

Stand still right now. This is your chance.  
Tell the guy with the ponytail you're taking off.  
Put down the drink. Grab a cab and go home.  
Don't stop at that bar on the Upper West Side.

Take off the Lucrezia Borgia rings, the Afghan bangles  
and Balinese earrings. Shower off the Shalimar. Put on  
the corny slipper socks that no man, except the super,  
has ever seen. Don't call anyone. Don't read. Don't smoke.  
And stay away from mirrors.

Soon you will hear a voice that sounds like a newborn  
with a ten-word vocabulary. This will be your first attempt  
to form an honest sentence. You'll grab your makeup kit  
and get ready to hit the bars along Broadway, see who's there.

But stay put. You can do this. You'll be here in the morning,  
still in your twenties, with a drop of truth on your tongue. Maybe  
it'll be September, leaves sprinting in circles on the sidewalks,  
trash cans standing like little kings in front of their brownstone castles.

And you'll get dressed like a girl in love with books, not flattery,  
and you'll walk over to the Hungarian Pastry Shop across from St. John  
the Divine and on the way all the windows on 110<sup>th</sup> Street will whip open  
and everyone will wave and wish you luck, and you'll break into a run,  
future remorse rising from your skin like steam from the city streets.