

“Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’ hierarchies?”
--Rainier Maria Rilke

Dumbo Elegies

for Renee

1.

What was it about that elephant--
that bit of Italian sawdust in the shape
of an animal—that has haunted me all these
years? They traveled, went on trips,
long lecture tours, expeditions.
And when they returned,
they brought us back
relics, things to exhibit:
mermaids, in glowing
jewel tones, that floated atop
swizzle sticks; metallic, personal
packets of peanuts; child-sized wing'd
plastic pilots' pins; tiny vodka bottles—
large and unseemly for a Barbie, perhaps—
but perfectly sized for a baby
doll.

2.

The elephants came from a town
in Italy with a tower and bells,
that smelled like cheese. We were certain they spoke
fluent Italian. We each got our own, small enough to
fit in a fist, different colors, but other—
wise identical, so you knew you were
a part of a herd.

3.

When you lost yours, we did
our best to find it—we went on
safari. We crawled under bushes,
turned over leaves and rocks,
measured the arc of the swing
set, formulated theories,
did our best to map the way
an elephant might have flown,
to find our way in the dark.

4.

The first day we walked you to school,
you remembered the elephant, kept it
safe--in your fist, your long gray nap
towel dragging behind us. On it,
a circle—an oval really—dutifully drawn
in black marker, according to school
instructions, the empty head a lesson
in hygiene, a reminder to keep your head
down at nap time, that your face
and your butt were separate spheres. No
circles, arrows or boxes, no instructions
on where to wipe your nose
or your tears--just that hollow egg,
that would grow familiar as the fallout
signs around the school, a hieroglyphics of loss
and longing, a warning that object
permanence was a lie, that people,
like things could break or disappear
suddenly, leaving only an impression
on a bed, a cigarette, a puff of smoke,
a shadow. I wrote this poem to tell you
when you were little, I heard you cry.
I wrote this poem to let you know
I'm still here.

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