

Homeless

Do you ever wonder how it feels
 To be one of the ones
 Whose existence has been declared
 illegal
 Because their poverty has been pronounced
 a crime?

It means your every daily activity
 Has been declared
 in valid
 And therefore,
 interruptible.
 It means that when you wash dishes
 You are causing
 "a sanitary problem."
 It means you are expected to feel
 guilty
 For merely being alive (and I do.)

When will they learn
 That it doesn't work
 To be angry with me
 for continuing to exist
 and having nowhere else to be
 and therefore remaining
 in their faces?

They have too narrow a definition
 Of what constitutes
 a valid existence.
 But it doesn't matter what I think
 of their definitions
 Because I am still the one
 Whose existence has been declared
 invalid.

Don't they know how it sounds to us
 When they endlessly bellow,
 "you're still here!
 You were told to leave
 two weeks ago!!!!"

Pardon me, sir, for remaining
 on the planet
 Beyond the time limits
 Which you obviously have the right

to set.
 I guess I need it explained to me
 again
 That I have no right
 to exist.

—Bridget Reilly

The Promise

At the homeless shelter I promised
 you three that one day
 we'd have all the holidays.
 (Birthdays were the hardest then;
 spinning out food to make a
 party—a cupcake with a candle
 poked in it;
 "Happy Birthday" loud enough so
 you wouldn't hear the
 drunks fighting.)
 You looked at me and sighed
 sometimes, but never once
 complained of it.
 You hunkered further in your clothes
 went on to school in coats
 I found in a Dumpster
 in a better neighborhood.
 We slowly climbed the ladders
 thrown to us, down in that place
 where the ladders start.
 We found the sunshine,
 blinked our eyes and sailed
 away in our safe ship.
 Our harbor became a house
 with mice.
 The first snow came and
 our pipes all burst.
 I saw you dreams leak out your eyes
 as Christmas literally went
 down the drain.
 But fresh new snow is made for
 stamping we made a snowman
 and a nuisance of ourselves.
 Waiting for the plumber I
 looked through the window
 and all the footprints
 in the yard were dancing.

—Roberta Guthrie Kowald