

BEATRICE K. BALKCUM RENAISSANCE LITERARY AWARD WINNER

Somewhere in the Northeast

Mary Truhan

Just past midnight on the NER from Boston
Or on the LIRR Oyster Bay branch
A man hunches over his spiderwebbed phone,
His breath fogging the screen as he whispers,
I don't know, it's not working anymore
He could mean his marriage,
His spotty cell service, anything else,
The cars only sway, offering no answer
Rushing by a station in Connecticut
Or northern Long Island
Both empty, save for a stray dog
Nosing at a trash can in the salty air

A family laughing as they swarm
The platform to Oak Grove at State
Luggage brushing past a sullen man
With his shoulder pressing his phone
To his ear, unaware of the youngest
Fascinated by his heavy accent
That years of London elevators
Still haven't sanded smooth

A father leaning against an A train window,
Scrolling through photos on his phone—
A birthday cake, a child on a swing—
Shoves it back into his coat instead
Watching the graffiti under bridges
Blur into meaningless shapes
His own dark eyes staring back at him

A teenager on her way to Rockport,
Rainbow hair draping over her shoulders
As she sketches on an old Dunkin' napkin,
Smudged ink of two couples from Lynn
Sharing their favorite bands,
Legs stretching out across cracked seats

At Park Street, or Tufts, an iced regular,
Half-melted, leans against a trash can—
It's December in New England,
Faces tucked into black and yellow scarves,
Watching someone's torn lottery ticket
As it floats onto the third rail

Further south, on orange seats—pale
From being streaked with sun for decades,
Or on blue vinyl flecked with crumbs
From bagels bought at Union Station,
A woman exhales into her phone,
Well, I told her that's his problem, not mine.
Her reflection catches her mid-sentence,
But she doesn't look back.

An elderly woman in pearls turns
To her neighbor, a quiet whisper
Is this your stop as well?
The pause that follows carrying
The weight of all the miles
Between here and where she began
A lifetime like suitcases
She no longer has the strength to carry

The hiss of brakes—
This could be Providence,
Or Washington,
Or Metro Center
Or Newark,
Or Hartford
Lynn, L'Enfant, or Lechmere,
South Station, North Station,
Or somewhere in between and
The next stop is yours, and
The escalator at your station
Is out of service for the hundredth time