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Sidewalk Wandering

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Author Bio

Sara Thomas is a soon-to-be Gettysburg College alumna. She wishes she never had to sleep and often pretends she doesn't for days at a time. She loves dancing, especially ballet and hip-hop, and the GC Dance Ensemble! Every time she sees a dog, she gets overly excited, jumps up and down, and squeezes it really hard. Her favorite food is macaroni and cheese. She finds homemade and Kraft equally delicious, which is good because she can only make the latter herself. She is a terrible cook but a good friend! Come be her friend and make her some delicious food. Also, be her friend on Foursquare because she is obsessed with checking-in everywhere she goes. She is currently the mayor of Writing House, Plank, Breidenbaugh, Mama's and some other cool places.

SIDEWALK WANDERING

SARA THOMAS

With inspiration from "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" by Virginia Woolf

Perhaps no one has ever felt passionately about a loaf of bread. But, there are moments when it can become very appealing to buy one; moments when we feel cramped inside a stuffy apartment, weary of a housemate's tired jokes, or hungry for a sandwich. With this mixture of escape and necessity, grocery shopping makes a plausible excuse for partaking in the greatest pleasure afforded by a beautiful historic town—wandering the streets of Bath.

The stroll is best begun at the first hint of dusk amid the cool of late fall. For in fall, the leaves on the trees emit their pied hues across the sky. In fall, the rains of winter have not yet begun to pour from the clouds, forcing us to take shelter beneath umbrellas and awnings. The dusky air, too, casts a glow of romance onto the façades and the faces of the passersby. When we leave our houses around five o'clock, we shed the confines of our daytime selves and dress in the garments of mysterious possibility. Gone are the fragments of identity that label us between the boundaries of our bedrooms and classrooms. The research paper that bears our name, for instance, written and left for dead in a folder on our desk. We would like to pretend that we did not waste hours typing that mundane essay, but the black and white scrawling font reveals our name in undeniable truth.

But when we lock the door behind us and set that first hesitant foot on the street, all restriction vanishes. Abandoning careful steps we bound down the hills toward the city. How incredible is the metamorphosis of autumn! The plugs drop away that filter our ears during the day, and we are able to hear everything. The veils unravel that prevent our eyes from staring; we can gaze liberally on anything.

The evolution of metropolitan life pulses, oscillating between the thumping sneakers of a herd of schoolchildren and the beep of a car horn. On one side of the street a performer blows into a recorder, while a bearded man paces back and forth, calling, begging for someone to purchase one of his magazines.

Here, we pass the Co-Operative, a fair-trade grocery selling organic foods that never overreach the jingle of pounds in my pocketbook. The cashiers smell of body odor, and some wear their hair in dreadlocks. We could stop here in good conscience and buy our loaf of bread, quitting the quest laid out ahead of us even before the sun hides behind the trees and the nocturnal shadows creep from between the shops. But we are not yet

ready to rest our legs. We continue marching, zipping our jackets higher and pulling our scarves tighter around our necks, bracing our flesh and bones against the chill of crisp air.

A couple of retail workers stand in a doorway dragging on cigarettes. The orange ends burn like sparklers, leaving cherry trails tangling in the dust passage. The smoke curls up around their faces and dissolves into the sky, and I raise my chin to the clouds and watch its pirouette. Then down I look, where they flick ashes onto the ground, forming tiny puddles like the pitter patter of raindrops. Their voices clink against each other, as they converse about nothing in cockney accents.

Down the sidewalk, a girl in a purple dress and pink stockings twirls, her hands grasp the hem and her shoulders sway left to right. Her eyes follow the ethereal chiffon of her dress, imagining that she is a princess dancing at a ball. Her teeth are stained, not from Royal wine, but from the lollipop of which she has bored. Her dad holds it for her like a little wand between his long fingers in case she decides to revisit its sugary deliciousness. Her hair is braided in two pigtails, but frizz sticks out from the crisscrossed sections of hair, as if she has been climbing trees and rolling down hills since her hair was plaited this morning. We see bits of dried leaves stuck between her auburn strands.

A street performer strings a tightrope between two corners of a store, and he balances on one foot while playing the violin. A crowd gathers to watch his plucky rhythm, clapping and cheering and tossing coins into his upturned top hat that rests on the pavement.

Others beg for coins in a different way, half-asleep and crouched in doorways, calling out for spare change, using words like darling and honey to summon the shoppers and making vulgar comments about the females' bodies. A woman dressed in rags staggers down the street clutching a nearly empty bottle of cheap malt liquor; she jeers and swears at everyone she sees.

At the contrasting sight of this ugly reality against the dream of the shop windows, we freeze in our steps, and our eyes only blink in disbelief. The homeless dwell mere steps away from the consumers, blurring the lines between the lost and the found, the influential and the ignored, and the sparkle from the filth. Vagabonds block the entrances of shops filled with alligator handbags in jewel tones.

This town is rich with places to purchase things; sparkling baubles strut across translucent window displays. Flashing fabric and trendy vestments beckon the shoppers with ready wallets and glamorous fantasies.

Perusing these storefronts, we can transport ourselves to the interiors of a lavish ballroom, our necks decorated with emeralds and our stomachs full with a gourmet feast. We can select the Oriental carpeting for our long hall and the gilded chairs for our sitting room. In the next breath, we can demolish this mansion and create another with sleek modern architecture and glass walls.

But are we only dreaming? It is almost six o'clock, it is fall, and we are walking through Bath for a loaf of bread. Mother Nature seems too generous in allowing the colors, sounds, and smells of life to all blur together in the tie-dyed image of Man. Is the true self this one, lying outside a shop on Milsom Street or that one, attending an elegant soiree?

Nonetheless, we remember our task, to enter the grocery store. The automatic glass doors part to permit our entry into the chilled white warehouse of food. In aisle six, a frustrated mother shakes her head at her son, who is clutching a water gun and jumping up and down. He climbs onto their cart, already full of syrupy snacks and school-lunch ingredients. "Pardon me," we say to squeeze between the pair and stare at the various loaves of bread; white bread, whole meal, whole grain, pre-sliced. So many to choose from, and the mom and her son stand in limbo as she waits to push the cart ahead until he returns the toy to its peg on the wall. Too embarrassed to continue the tantrum, he concedes and obediently follows his guardian to the next aisle.

By the time we emerge from the land of consumption, the streets are deserted. Heading home, we could tell ourselves the story of the cigarette smokers, the little princess, the tightrope walker. We could become derelicts, temper tantrum throwers, mansion owners.

Truly, to escape is the wildest adventure and an adventure is the safest escape. Back at our own doorway, we hear our housemates telling their same old stories, but now the rhythmic voices are a comfort, and we return to dock like a weathered rowboat. Here is the same tiny apartment that we left with bare cupboards and the desk cluttered with our schoolwork. And let us look with respect at the only souvenir we have discovered among the shops in town, a humble, practical loaf of sliced white bread.