

Breadcrumbs

Dixie Lee Partridge

(for the latchkey kids of our city)

*Now who will tell the children fairytales? the ones where simple crumbs
over the forest floor endure to help us home.*

—Jorie Graham

The fairytales were wrong:
to identify big feet
with wicked stepsisters, ugly with unloved,
princes and frogs with anything
but world news and the bog by the river.
Ducklings grow into ducks,
a beauty set apart from swans.

Still, I cannot think of childhood
without my mother's voice unraveling tales:
"There was a bear
whose name was Jim.
Children weren't afraid of him. . . ."
Whether ironing clothes or bottling fruit,
her words moved with her work—
their steady rhythm drawn
into repetition as we begged for more—

and in the end were stored up with sleek jars
of cherries where a shaft of light made them glisten
like jewels I reached to touch
again and again.
And I took for granted coming home
to the yeasty smells of rising bread
and my mother so in place there.

Today in a grey winter light
I drove toward home through rush-hour traffic:
street upon street of darkening houses,
drapes unclosed, a faint flicker
of blue from each window . . . again and again
the curved glass of screens
that sell us our stories.