



When Peeled Back

by Mary Ann Honaker

Beneath morning Folgers, hazelnut creamer,
beneath wet hand-prints of fog lifting slowly from the window,
beneath thick-inked newspaper and glossy ads rolled into it,

Beneath the smudge of newsprint on your forefinger as your heartbeat
drops another octave, as all the fucks you could give drain from you
more slowly than floodwater drains to lowlands, to ditches,

Beneath the archaic metal dragon unfolding its thin tendons
over the parking lot of smashed Biggie cups and tumbleweed napkins,
all of its teeth filled in, jagged, askew, with bedewed shopping carts,

Beneath neon codes of signs and symbols of every chain restaurant,
store, coffee shop, the same everywhere beckoning you to the same flavors,
beneath the crushed liquor store box the dread-headed homeless woman sits on,

Beneath the coin you do or do not drop into her strangely fresh, white paper cup,
beneath words you speak flatly over and over again at work, because it's a script
and you cannot, must not deviate, because they are always listening,

Beneath the momentary joy of finding sugar-skull themed coasters,
beneath the low frequency satisfaction of setting them out on your end tables,
and how quickly that glow, like drunkenness, is replaced by a hollow ringing,

Beneath getting everything you want and finding yourself still unhappy,
beneath making a new list to tick off and fall of the cliff of,
beneath how the bones of your city are starting to show, siding in the side-yard,

rafters bare now that the skin of roof has been peeled off or has fallen in
like the cheeks of a young woman's body as it mummifies on some remote hillside,
beneath the bruises on a child's arm, the circular stains in the crease of a father's elbow,

Beneath it all when peeled back you find the cruel face of some fey spirit,
whose plump pink hands rub together all the smooth stones of your riverbed:
a god guileless, feral, who smirks at you from under the skin of the world.

Image: "Indietro" by Marc Alan Di Martino. "When Peeled Back" was written by Mary Honaker for *Rattle's* Ekphrastic Challenge, February 2020, and selected as the Editor's Choice.