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Song of the Drunken Man

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SONG OF THE DRUNKEN MAN

There's nothing you can say to a man who drinks.
He rises in the grey mist of morning and lights
his cigarette, knowing that soon he'll be elsewhere.
Out in the world the old men sweep their shops
and the barber nods. The full-breasted woman
airing her pillows, she smiles and squints—
seeing it is only him, she closes her window.
But it doesn't matter. There's no way of hurting
a man who drinks. His wife floats in his pocket.
His father twists open the cap. His mother whispers
Drink, drink. He moves on down the street.

There are times you feel obligated to speak
to a drunk. Taking your hands from your pockets,
you slide your glass away from him. In earnest
you say something—anything, the weather . . . your son—
and he'll argue at you from some place
you can't know because you're not a drunken man.
Perhaps when you stagger home your wife screams
to shut up, come to bed like a man. Your face
reddens, your shoes drop, you burrow into her flesh.

But a drunk is like a cloud, is like a ship
that sinks but never drowns, is like a feather bed.
Already it is noon. His mother and his father
are half gone. He's weightless now.
Don't waste your pity on a drunken man.
There are too many of him. At night in the bar
you are his weakness, his hope and his family.
If you argue back, if you armwrestle him,
if the bartender is embarrassed by your antics,
it's time to go home. Go home. Go home to your noisy wife.