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Living Alone

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Living Alone · Hayden Carruth

For John Cheever, from whose writing this epigraph is taken:

A few minutes later a miscalculation of the helmsman sent a wall of water up the side of the ship and filled the stern deck with a boiling sea. Up swam the Ping-Pong table and, as I watched, it glided overboard and could be seen bobbing astern in the wake, a reminder of how mysterious the world must seem to a man lost overboard.

Mystery! Seed of every motion.
See out there beyond the thermal-pane that last chrysanthemum
in the bed frozen by the concrete wall
swing wildly its lavender
and shattered head. How fast
the wind rises! How the mud elaborates in patterns of ice!
A gull, hovering, shudders and cries.

***

And what if as often does
this epiglottis fail to close
once for all
and need is final,

comfort, alas, who will me then?
Or otherwise that time soon when
writhing by wayside clover
I shall be like the snake run over?

***

Jettisoned in one night
from her house by my successor I was as if
falling as a parachutist might
in vacant air, shocked
in the silence, nowhere.

***
No more than a bad
cold and a deep cough? Suppose
really it might be

pneumonia? No one
to call; phone useless; fever
smoldering. I see

the winter sunset
behind my curtain casting
its thin light on me.

***

No. Experience is unique and equivalent.
I have always asserted it, I won’t
look for similitudes on other gallows.

O Villon! O Spartacus! Yes,
I know. And also I know this other,
a cruel, stupid, and bat-sighted lover.

***

Flu, bronchitis, pneumonia
("a touch of")—as I thought
timid to seek help. Being right
justifies me some. Euphonia—

but I am done with you! Weak
as a kitten. My Song, you alone
not faithless and more or less at one
with me, let us not be to seek
timid any more, but tough
in our own melodiousness
toward everyone. The hell with her madness,
you and I in each other being enough.

***
Peculiar now I have come among all these so laboring and academic young my own language is to me (although intermittent, it’s true) easy, strong, and flowing in natural cadences of song.

***

Let go, goddamned Fate! Sixty years sufficient! Eleven women, how many jobs, and still I wait for one free choice. Ah, heaven only can be this earth, the best lost years of life. What’s the rest but now, now, eternally too late?

***

These walls are I think well insulated, not much sound comes through, except the American ubiquity of flushing water, yet down in this one corner voices float as if telephoned from Hell. “Shut up! Shut up, you little bitch!” I hear. A woman screaming at her wailing daughter.

***

Housekeeping an endless joy. Endless and a joy, maybe because. No use for the coy poets who say they’ve finished something. So this baby spider (small anyway) has made his web conveniently in my bath tub and has already waylaid two flies—in December! There in his solitude he sits. And burnished are his eyes in the small night light, complete his aloneness, complete his care for his bundled deaths to left and right.

***
Rachel, your name won’t rhyme, the language itself has given up on you. Zilch. You and your great fat stuffed bulging shapeless antique ego that you lug around like your grandmother’s satchel.

* * *

Depression—commonest word in smart vocabulary and never understood, though they regard their heads so snug and clever.
I, I am depressed!—ready the world to murder or myself. Whichever.

* * *

I feared death and I sought it like other men and doubtless like women too though I disclaim whatever knowledge I thought once to have of them, but that was in the mid-years of anguish and pain.

Weariness at last overcomes all, six decades. Who cares if I fall sick unto acceptance in this small bed indifferent now? Either I am alive or I am dead.

* * *

Nevertheless one rebels. “I disacquiesce!” The funerary stars burn relentless over the dying earth that drops through silence—emptiness as the order of reality.
"What barbarism!" So slight the words
they cannot flutter up the darkness
on their shredding wings. Nevertheless.

***

Matter? Does it? Anything
in this world of equivalence
(“my only”), the one comprehensible
in all incomprehensibility? No.
Bare-ass in radiant fever, I
shiver from window to window,
twitch the drapes apart, look
out to red-neon Pizza Hut
in the rain, while the radio
plays “The New World Symphony”
all night long. Matter if it’s
Vermont, a squalid farm, or here
this two-bathroom squalor, this
suburb? Don’t be fooled
by “w/w carpeting” in the ads,
what it means is wall-to-
wall pins; also tacks; also glass.
I put on slippers. All equal,
all the same, and boredom
no longer stylish, just necessary.
Who, who could have foreknown
the best of thought would come
to this inevitable meaningless?
Lord God, you who are not, we
who are imploring go down
on our meaningless knees to you.

***

“All one can do is to achieve nakedness.”

And do you—
You, Friend, Foe, Unknown—
see me here in this garden apartment complex
that is otherwise called forsakeness
(no different, of course, than anyone)
bare-ass in woe?
The notion of an austere measure
and speech once more purged
of vulgar inconcinnity
seems by solitude not only urged
but offered as a negative pleasure.
So I'll go back to it someday. Maybe.

When the studio
musician remarked
that Russell had
no technique, there
in that dark room,
Pee Wee picked up
his horn and blew
a mistake so lovely
I saw a tear
even in the eye of
the idiot.

O Monteverdi. O Mahler.
In the dark room.

Sleeping, the lovers. In the wet dark of morning
these millions, the young and fair who still outnumber
the old and ugly, the abandoned and sorrowing.
And insomnia's streetlights shine on the black
peaceful windows of their slumber.
It is four-thirty, hour of weeping or not weeping,
hour of rhyme.

And the neon is gone and the rain
falls on the end of time.