By and By
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ALAN SHAPIRO

WAYWISER
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A Loft

My two tall windows let in so much light
I can see kiln fires in the facing
floor to ceiling red brick wall
that moodily all day smolders
and flares up and dies, but never quite,
so that it’s never altogether dark
in here until it’s black out there.

A cooling one could mistake
for calm expands around me
as the day dims. “I don’t miss anyone,”
I say to no one when my damaged
left hand starts to ache and,
on its own, is slowly
opening and closing
as though around a hand
it’s trying to remember
till the ache passes, and it then forgets.
And I’m calm again, or cool,

just as earlier this afternoon
I didn’t notice
the continuous low
rumbling of a generator
somewhere below me
on a rooftop till
it switched off and
the in-rush of quiet
brought it to my ear
the way an even keener quiet
rushed in when the cries
I also hadn’t heard were all I could hear
once the crying stopped.

******
Each window is a Facebook page
the world is doom-scrolling down
past sirens mixed with howls and
cat calls and the shrill beeping
of an Amazon van backing up
inside a larger hum of traffic
where a hey hey ho ho
is chanted too far off for me to catch
who it is that has to go.

******

By the time I passed them
beside the flashing ambulance,
the paramedic had gotten her
carefully up from the sidewalk
and to a bench, and now
was bent over her
holding her gently
upright, speaking
in low tones
that the space between us
blurred to parental
baby talk
as if I’d stumbled
upon a living creche,
or pieta, and yes
I know it was probably
just training, what
he did for pay, but
even so
it felt just then
like there really were no
edges to the world, no
line that marked
the end of this the
start of that, all of us
together dodging and
weaving in the chaos
of a cosmic there-
but-for-the-grace.

At least until
I reached my building
and realized my palms were burning
from the two big sacks I carried:
one full of the colorful
produce of the season,
the other almost bursting
with the chicken I was coming home to roast.

********

It darted bird like
frantic bible black
around the paralyzing
tar pit of the bed I woke in,
panicked by the poof
and sudden clotting of its here
no there hysterics,
encircling my shrinking
from it, the sense of
nowhere else to hide,
as if some bad debt
long past due
had come with its null
and void eye
for the eye I owed.

********
The ceilings are too high for the room not to echo no matter what I fill it with.

It’s like I haven’t finished moving in, or out.

Which may be why I’ve never learned to think outside the box, especially on Zoom.

Every home I made of love had an escape hatch.

Knowing I could escape is how I stayed.

And now, in lieu of love, my mind is the house I can’t escape.

And so I fill it up with life-size dolls.

And the dolls I fill it with are faceless.

And each doll has a name, which it never answers to, in its own way.

Unlike the dog I own, who comes every time I call.

******

Once upon a time, in the dark wood of my second marriage, I lived in Chapel Hill but worked in Chicago where I would stay with my late friend Tim, an unmarried chain smoking recovering alcoholic, whose favorite thing to do was go to bars with me so I could watch him try to pick up women and he could watch me drink.

We were, Tim would say, a match made in a heaven of compatible deprivations. I remember how he used to douse his feet with baby powder so they wouldn’t stink, though they always did, and how he’d leave
all through the flat a trail of spectral footprints,
which now I track in every dream of him, here
in Durham, North Carolina, in this apartment,
back and forth across each room he seems,
when I enter, to have just this second left.

******

The fake fire in the real fireplace
is made of red and yellow strips
of cellophane lit up
from beneath fake logs

and blown by a fan
to a chilly flicker
I nonetheless move close to
every day at drink time,

where, sip by sip,
they come to keep
me company, in silence,
all the old friends

who are friends no longer,
each fallen away
or fallen out with
pal-O-mine, best bud,

wingman and sidekick,
my one time boon
companion, without whom
life was unthinkable

for a while, intimate
as romance, and as frail.
They come now not to
speak, not to look at me,

and the not looking
not speaking is a dense
unairing of their
plaints and charges,

like mute furies
at a deaf and dumb
assizes, whose judgment
has no appeal

before these puny
flaps and freaks
of cellophane
inside a heatless hearth.

******

Most of the books on the wall of books are pushed
too far back on the shelves to catch the hour or so
of morning light that moves slantwise down across them
so that only a few spines stand out briefly
as keener greens, sharper reds and browns, and even the black ones
turn for a moment brightly black among the merely so.
Turning, you could say, the way a plant does,
as if something older than words or pages, some
light-stirred chlorophyllic trace from deep inside them
were beginning to awaken, and you could smell the leaves.

******

Outside, there’s a crumpled unrest of flyers and mad horn blasts
down the street and past the building, on
and on and yet from up here, and once it’s passed,
and all through its long subsidence,
you could think it’s almost restful, soothing even.
It’s a kind of poison, surely, the big picture,
the long view, that turns great squalls of outrage
to confetti littering a noiseless street.

*******

All night long, there’s a party
in the next apartment; everyone’s carousing,
singing, but the individual
voices by the time they get to me
through the walls are blunted
to a group voice that is pure
John Cage clogged
atonally with hooch and cake;
a corporate belting out of joy so sloppily sincere
it might be touching
if it weren’t so late.

O come off it. It’s all a load of self-
applauding, self-
exonerating crap, this
group allergic
comic/melancholic
clinging to particulars,
when all you think of
in their presence is
“the icy silence of the tomb.” Anyway,
tonight there is no silence. And the joy
is general, and it isn’t yours.

*******

To the next occupant: you’ll never hear of me,
and you won’t read this. And you’ll never know
the painted over buffed and freshly polished
void of me is how this now no longer living hand,
not warm, incapable of any grasping, will be reaching
for you from the icy echoes of the room. Wide open,
empty, everywhere I’m not. Look, even now, it holds you,
what you’ll never feel feeling you all over.