

Leaver, Stayer

We become one or the other
as if they were demographic facts:
gender, color, leaver, stayer.

No one knows at first
which one will cut and run,
or which is prone to soldier on.
They circle as boxers in a ring,
gazes locked, until – perhaps – the cleaving comes:
one searches for a means of slipping out,
the other for the wherewithal within.

I was in the thick of middle-age
by the time I diagnosed myself:
some airborne seed in me
had turned into a tree,
and I was a planted man.

I was a stayer as much as
the old Norway maple in my back yard,
that gentle giant with a sweet sap
and a canopy to retreat beneath;
a living pillar you could lean against.

But once I saw it trying to escape.
In a summer squall as the rainfall rose,
a limb took on the shape of an arm
flailing over a boat, snatching at air
as if desperate for rescue
and straining to shake itself loose.
It kept stretching out until the wind died down.

Indeed

Our pillow-talk was always the same
when we awoke on Easter morning:
you said he was risen, and I agreed.
Say on Saturday we'd had an unholy row;
say we despaired, or say betrayal filled the air.
At dawn you still affirmed the ancient tale
of the empty tomb, and I said it was true, indeed.

Did I believe it then, and do I now?
Last month some lab out west conducted tests
which proved beyond a doubt that it didn't occur,
and I am sure the data is correct.
It didn't happen, and also it did –
that's my credo, and it gets even more absurd:
I can imagine God, who wasn't in our world,
at last having seen enough of suffering
and deciding it was time to be.

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A pale stew of last year's leaves and stalks
was stirring in the soil out by my garage,
thawing into an unwelcome mat
of wind-strewn lilies and columbine
that winter had woven into damp thatch.
Easter came early this spring, on a raw March day
when I went down on my knees
to clear the garden matter up, and saw
beneath the dead, wet weight
a Lenten rose in bloom,
so meek its flowers hung their heads,
so bold it joined the Sunday call-and-response:
Is the earth alive again? It is, indeed.

How Did You Sleep?

i

Speaking of happiness, who ever
mentions our resignation from the day,
that moment of gravity and relief
when a bed receives our fatigue?

ii

At night I turn into a diagonal,
the long extent of me joining up
the opposite corners of my queen-sized sheets.

iii

How strange it would be to occupy
my mattress' other half – like stepping
into a ghost town or onto a grave.

iv

Even in my dreams, I make a hash of things!
Why did I lend my members
to that anonymous scrum of pink limbs?
I really should not have kissed
my boss' lips, and also kissed his wife's.

v

Does that siren somewhere in the city
keen for me? Not tonight, it seems,
and so I retreat again from wakefulness.

vi

Here's a sign of my blindness:
in the thousands of times we slipped under
the conjugal blankets and turned out the lights,
I always assumed your dreams were purer than mine.
You would not yield to such escapades!

vii

In some hour before dawn,
I release a pent-up piss-flow as *timor mortis* sets in.
I am alone in a cold, dark world.
I will be dead before too long.

viii

I lie awake. I wait and pray,
lucidity burning the fog away.
I throb with desire. When will this night end?
Later, there's a snatch of nonsense:
'Finish the classes of white mercury.'
Mind-drift at last! I may yet doze off.

ix

It used to be when you had nightmares
you would sob and clutch me in the dark.
Do you still grasp the man at your side,
even when those awful dreams concern me?

x

I meet the morning light
with coffee, music and the news.
I speak the day's first words
when my child comes down the stairs.
'How did you sleep?' she asks. 'Alright. And you?'

Screen Blues

I: Bits

The deer thirsts for the forest spring
no less than I, O Lord, for my delight
to vibrate or intone its special ring.

Each moment we're apart, I want to glut
myself on texts from you, yet when we come
together, something is missing – but what?

O wild wind and rain that can
blow the power down – Christ if I
only had access at home again!

If I ever gazed into a lover's eyes
with the lust I lavish on my screens,
she would feel devoured by my appetite.

On the bad days, I'd sell my birthright
for a fix of messages – for a midnight
injection telling me I've got mail.

Is that heavenly melody I hear
the ringtone of my phone?
Alas! It is only a passing ice cream truck.

Picture the assembled family
sitting rapt in chiaroscuro light.
Are they present at the Epiphany?

When I recall the Dark Age prior to
our i-birth and our e-naissance, I know
how Dante and Giotto must have felt.

II: In mid-Stream

The day before I suddenly died
in a morning drizzle on a city street,

I got a great deal on the eStream –
the sleeker, two-toned version, that is
(not that clunky monochrome device!),
the one that came with a family plan
and a lifetime promise on parts (its, not mine);
and although I took forever to decide
if I should bundle the Xcessories
or select my own, in the end,
I just bought the whole lot. The pity is,
I'll never know if the reviews were right.

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and also to the many disasters
that might have struck but haven't, yet:
a tree limb in a windstorm,
a murderous end, cardiac arrest.
He is grateful to the agent
of his consciousness; that it's he who knows
is owing to utter chance.
Any fine phrasing is due in part
to a furnace working in winter
(and when it failed, and the cold sank
through his insulated sense of self,
to four hundred dollars in the bank).
For insights that only maturity
can bring, credit must be given
to chlorine and penicillin.
He acknowledges the paradox
that despite his dependence on cosmic dice,
all errors are the author's own.