PREDICAMENTS

QUARTET IN THE SURVIVAL KEY

*And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning*

*Clangs*

*The bell... T S Eliot*

I

*They have laid me here in hideous darkness... William Shakespeare*

Here

looking out

at the world this day in January

of a year,

fifty feet from the flags

of the floor

I cling to the keyhole

blinking through

into the wonderland

giant world

at which the rest of you

preside.

Fee fie foe fumble

I smell the blood

considered by you to be

expendable.
My land
    is an ancient one;
there is no abraded tableland
    has survived longer;
but it disturbs —
    out of joint tree-trunks
bush flowers shaped like
    paws of kangaroos —
because into my head it puts

    the thought of survival.

And when I open the door a crack
    or look through the keyhole out
I keep seeing
    what you, my fellow man, have done
against your mortality.

So I turn again
    to this flatland homeland;
descending fleshy vine
    that sometime I had climbed.

Let us begin with the shore
    the jaws are worn, fretted
where the salt sea and old rock have met
    in agony countless times;
the fine grains blow in flurrying sweep —
    cloud shadows flying across dune grasses.
This has been such a silent land
up until now.

You would think perhaps

this is a place

where a man might stand alone,

gaze at the blooded sun

and, as it sinks in that broken sea,

easily with his utterance

scribble the silence

smoothed by each successive wave.

And he may even discover what to say

having the time and space

to consider.

But even despairing tears

will not come;

the wet rocks cluck their untoothed gums

receiving unresisting

the upswelling of brine

in stony palates.

Yet here I stand: the sea breathes

and breathes again.
II

*Blind he all things saw...* George Chapman

The shortening shadow flees before each speeding human cargo borne: into the brassy sky he sweeps — sunvisor up he meets the morn.

A freshminced cat’s corpse thuds underwheel and instinct twitches the driver’s brain; survival is buried four fathoms below. He yanks down the visor, wipes out the stain.

Morning rush hour traffic passes, the land’s hot breezes flick through the pines, paper stirs in fumeblackened grasses, drink tins roll under hoarding signs.

Afternoon hours shuffle by in the heat. the human arises, discovers a yawn; when shadows begin to lean out in the street it’s time to dispose of the day that’s outworn.

His key slotted in, he recovers his power as hammertone sky brushes out to a sheen, and with knob of the gearlever moving in hand drives from his shadow, peers through the screen.
III

*The way ascends not straight but imitates*

*The subtle foldings of the winter snake...* John Webster

Funny how images will linger
like scent under the fingernails.

‘*Then why to fall to weeping?*

*Yonder stretches the whole vast world of past time;’*

it is surprising grey and dim;
I could swear, almost it is fading away.

What spirit moves; moves within me what?
I doggy go to my dirty straw to rest.
Why do you follow? Turn away, turn away.

‘*But it is a melancholy of mine own*

*Compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects:*

*And, indeed, the sundry contemplation of my travels,*

*In which my often rumination wraps me*

*In a most humorous sadness.’*

So turn away, turn away. Unclean
these leprous hands, feet, lips.
Not deserving to be washed, even by you,
most of all. Straw
and the shadows mingling on the cell floor.
In the cell door the key stirred. Was it for you?
The end might be viewed: you to be taken out
of my hands by strong, sane sons
of justice. Somebody is always left
to feel, in exacting the punishment,
a sense of righteousness.

Blurred vacuity, grey-mouthed
as mosquitoes’ vengeful choirs.
strange how the far-off pursuing sirens
sound like that.

Twist and turn, lingering
sand-track ways: ‘Life is full
of predestinations’.
Peering at my panic, my lust,
the quiet and innocent trees
shamble close.

I thought something stirred at a window
of my cell. A hand? Something to help?
There, it is gone now.
Retribution comes
ordered and arranged: what I have
written need not have been.
But having been
survives.
IV

You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness

Samuel Beckett

Lingering
I am
on the eve
at the shoreline,
as words shudder in,
where the strong-scented sea shrubs
move softly beside me.
The darkness invades
the image recedes.

Heart of light
yields only
involuntary gesture:
hand raised
visor-like to shield
glistening sockets.

So I turn in the straw
and discover my smell
this part I have played
in creating my cell.

Yet lingering
I turn
hand half-raising.

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