

Farther Along

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John DesCamp

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Notes sur la Vie

Homo duplex! Homo duplex!

The first time I perceived that I was two was at the death of my brother, Henri, when my father cried out so dramatically, 'He is dead, he is dead!' While my first self wept, my second self thought, 'How truly given was that cry; how fine it would be at the theatre.' I was then fourteen years old.

This horrible duality has often given me matter for reflection. Oh, this terrible second me, always seated whilst the other is on foot, acting, living, suffering, bestirring itself. This second me that I have never been able to intoxicate, to make shed tears, or put to sleep. And how it sees into things, and how it mocks!

— Alphonse Daudet, *Notes sur la Vie*



The Midwife

Words are the enemy of feelings:
deeper meanings lost
in the dictionary's shiny steel
building-block certainties.
Write down what I feel?
Try making bricks out of fog.

There's a slippery, bloody gulf between the two:
feelings struggle to be born whole, expansive,
without limits—words struggle to contain them.
We're left with the rude newborn: twisting, squalling,
raw and inarticulate.

We swaddle feelings in words,
grasp their bare essence, avoid
their inconvenient mystery.
But meaning shifts,
changes the subject like an old man,
slides away, begins anew,
leaves the old conversation unfinished.

In this uncertain ground between two kingdoms
I tend my brood.

Figuring It Out



Sisyphus in Hades

A sunny morning in mid-July finds me
a skeptical, resigned, unwilling captive
in Hades: which, this time, is a room
in a conference center I would never willingly
be caught dead in; pushing uphill the rock
of my continuing education sentence
for a profession I've grown to hate.

Somewhere, unseen, but right before me,
there's a door into summer:
to the sun, the warm stones, and the bright sea,
to a life and work blessed with light, warmth,
and the certainty of significance. A life
I crave to live, but cannot find.

At least it sometimes seems that way.

Seen from the other side of the river,
I've found the Elysian fields:
the very same life fulfilled, gifted with children, family,
deep friendships, love, poetry, laughter,
and the cool blessing of solitude.
Which of these would I trade
for that which I do not have?

Or, maybe that's not the right question.
Now how do I talk my way out of here?



The Library

Parquet floors creak with age
like an old man's knees.
Tattered paper bindings, worn with time,
stretch up from floor to ceiling.

In the center, an ancient table
and a Chinese lamp beside a high-backed chair.
Quiet, a scent of dust and paper;
a place to read or think, a private refuge.

This room of mismatched books contains
my life of seventy summers:
the hurts embraced and joys endured,
images grim, humorous, trite, and tragic.

The wins and losses, high goals and low gods
that fed and drove me down the years—
all here in these books. Yet now
they seem unreal, someone else's story.

As for the details, all these books will tell,
if you spend the time to take them down
and read. But no, I've got a better thought:
Let's just sit here on the couch and talk.

Olympia Breakdown

One hundred miles from home, white smoke,
ancient color of bereavement,
tells the death of some essential part
of my blue chariot's inner workings.

Charon arrives—black cap and shades,
green tow truck his funeral barge,
black driving gloves, and quiet drawl—
relaxed; it's not his misfortune.

The road to Pluto's kingdom shines
green and gold in late March sun.
Persephone returned, winter banished,
we drive south to the I-5 bridge, and

whitecaps dance the river.
Not at all the Styx that Homer tells;
perhaps the blind poet saw it wrong.
Death is joy on a day so bright.

May the dark angel come for you
with sunglasses on.

Toward Home

“It’s unsettling,” he said, “this Brownian motion.
A life lived provisionally, incrementally;
contiguous, casually related chapters,
in which the central character
embraces, then abandons,
one home, wife, job, enthusiasm,
for another.

“Often the landlord, sometimes the tenant,
one week the windshield, next week the bug,
but always holding the hope that this time,
this place, this person, this next best thing
will finally be the home I’ve searched for.”

“Wait a minute,” she said.
“Home isn’t where you go; it’s where you are.
Stop looking for home somewhere else
and see it where it has always been:
in your own heart.”

He thought for a moment. “What happens then?”