

The House Was Quiet and The World Was Calm

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
The access of perfection to the page.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

—Wallace Stevens

The End of March

for John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read: Duxbury

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
—*it* was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over. Finally, they did end:
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost...
A kite string?—But no kite.

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of—are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a *grog a l'américaine*.
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
would waver, doubled in the window.
There must be a stove; there is a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
—at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair

to something off behind the dunes.
A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
even to get that far,
and of course the house was boarded up.

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.
The sun came out for just a minute.
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
the drab, damp, scattered stones
were multi-colored,
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.
They could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
—a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

—Elizabeth Bishop



Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad (1925)

Out here in the exact middle of the day,
This strange, gawky house has the expression
Of someone being stared at, someone holding
His breath underwater, hushed and expectant;

This house is ashamed of itself, ashamed
Of its fantastic mansard rooftop
And its pseudo-Gothic porch, ashamed
Of its shoulders and large, awkward hands.

But the man behind the easel is relentless.
He is as brutal as sunlight, and believes
The house must have done something horrible
To the people who once lived here

Because now it is so desperately empty,
It must have done something to the sky
Because the sky, too, is utterly vacant
And devoid of meaning. There are no

Trees or shrubs anywhere--the house
Must have done something against the earth.
All that is present is a single pair of tracks
Straightening into the distance. No trains pass.

Now the stranger returns to this place daily
Until the house begins to suspect
That the man, too, is desolate, desolate
And even ashamed. Soon the house starts

To stare frankly at the man. And somehow
The empty white canvas slowly takes on
The expression of someone who is unnerved,
Someone holding his breath underwater.

And then one day the man simply disappears.
He is a last afternoon shadow moving
Across the tracks, making its way
Through the vast, darkening fields.

This man will paint other abandoned mansions,
And faded cafeteria windows, and poorly lettered
Storefronts on the edges of small towns.
Always they will have this same expression,

The utterly naked look of someone
Being stared at, someone American and gawky.
Someone who is about to be left alone
Again, and can no longer stand it.

In the Empty House

1.

Why do you call it empty?
You yourself are there
and your companions
the chairs, one dark green,
one rose color. Now, at twilight,
they compete for your weight.

And across the room
a pencil forms, the painted wood
fills with a cylinder of memory.
Already it contains your dreams;
it lies, rigid with them,
until one by one
they disappear into writing....

2.

Afterward you have no needs:
The past is tired of you,
it has closed your room,
it has given your treasures to someone else.

A broken moon hangs in the window.
Below it is a small mat.
You used to sit there
writing in your book.
The room was full of voices,
the voice of the bed,
the guarded voice of the mirror,
counseling stillness.

3.

So the stars come forward,
pressing at the cold glass.
Once, long ago, you lay
beside a stream, not sleeping.
Cells of light floated on the water;
they rocked gently,
held by white threads.

And in the deep grass your lover stirred,
as real as memory,
his mouth touching your cheek
so the skin
was marked when you turned away.

4.

It is as though they were still
waiting for you.
The light is on, the potted jade
covered with thin hairs of dust.

Soon for the first time
the house will be empty
where your parents lie
clinging to one another
with the same loneliness
that forced you to be born.

In their dreams they are safe:
it is summer, the lawn
in its green slipcover
gripping the street.

—Louise Glück

My House

A vine drapes the fence
in its cool enthusiasm,

stemmed cascade.
My skin

has collapsed in flounces,
in anticipation.

•

Look how I change the subject
without changing,

I appear to say —
which seems like nothing

but is practice
for the bigger change
to come.

•

My mind is just
like the stance

and disposition of these trees —

dense, sparse, conical,
lopsided, frilly

(as was the mind
of the tenant before me

—Rae Armantrout