

EARLY RISING

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At first you were famously not good at it.
You were coaxed, given cocoa, lectured a bit.
On the morning of a journey they would gather you up
And bundle you into the station wagon, asleep
Or pretending sleep, among pillows and soft voices,
While the car made its turnings through darkened places.

Later you found within yourself a scoutlike
Hardihood, and it became a point of pride
To be up and about before the world awoke,
Crossing in darkness an unruffled lake,
Cold air stiff in your face, the revved-up outboard
Full throttle, with a full day's fishing up ahead.

Then it was books and mugs of tea and the search
For knowledge—the milk jug on the windowsill
Filling with snow, clock ticking, the scratch
Of a fountain pen that moved trancelike in your hand.
And from some far-off church the sound of a bell
Profound as the unplumbed depths of Walden Pond.

But now when you wake you are old. The years
Come crowding back. When you get up, the boards creak
Underfoot. You are the first to tread these floors
Today. When you switch on the light you take the clock
By surprise. You want a bell, but the air here is silent.
The only church is the church of early rising.

If you could find the book you want to read
Before the sky flames and the east goes apple green,
You would find in it the poem you want to write.
You would find there a bell, a lake, a boat,
The clarity of first light and first manhood,
The journey over still waters before dawn.



TWO BLUES

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Two blues—one called serenity,
one looks like the gathering storm.
I had a tube of each in my paintbox in art school.

Two blues,
the bland and the profound.
The ho-hum of a sky over Southern California—

you could call it *bleu celeste* or Egyptian blue.
Canaletto ground it out of lapis lazuli
for his Venetian skies.

That other blue might
have rendered the scary ocean depths
off the Cape of Storms,
the color of the sea in Winslow Homer's "Gulf Stream,"
terror in the black castaway's eyes
almost blanked out with titanium white—

perhaps the same pigment
Homer daubed on as turbulence
atop the cobalt blue waves
running battleship grey through the comfortless Gulf Stream.
Sharks circle, knowing they will eat red meat
when night falls.

Those two colors tutor us in disaster,
at first as we have no hint of anything gone amiss,
anything to threaten our obliviousness,
our sense that life sparkles,
that there is such a thing as a career,
goals to be set and achieved.

Sometimes existence becomes a substance so depleted
one says to oneself:
If I can just make it across while the green walking light
stays illuminated,
then I'll walk halfway down the block
one step at a time,
watch the footing,

then back to the apartment,
make tea and, grasping the tray firmly with both hands,
inch back upstairs.

Though surely existence is limitless—
the spirit's measureless reach,
all the mind does,
memory's scope and inside-outness.
All that one understands now
which one previously had not.

To look out at traffic,
hear a taxi honk its horn,
and not have to venture out into otherness.

Recovering from an accident where one is obliged to
get both feet onto a step before moving
down to the next,
how enlivening it is on such a morning
to sit by the radiator and read sentences like these:

*Drake had him beheaded alongside the gibbet from which Magellan hung his
mutineers, Quesada and Mendoza, fifty-eight winters before. Wood preserves
well in Patagonia. The coopers of the Pelican sawed the post and made tankards as
souvenirs for the crew.*

Two blues open the world.
I'm almost glad I fell.
How else would I be made aware
of those realities the staff in the emergency room
see nightly
and gladly try to hide
behind their talk of weekends
and Valentine's Day?

And these bruises on my face—
purple of the two black eyes
rainbowing to the mood indigo Duke Ellington wrote about.
Next an unsavory yellow
like the rind of a gone-off Persian melon
scattered among coffee grounds and empty *rakı* bottles
outside a waterside restaurant in Istanbul
on the last day of August.

Burgundy blooms under my eyes
like the velvet of a sultan's caftan,
and then they glow with that
red in the morning
where sailors take warning.

