

Arthur Saltzman

LIVING SPACE

I am moving back into my house again.

Once the place was thick with us, its shelves and cabinets packed like flesh in a fish. With impending company came the controlled havoc of policing the area: giving loitering toys the bum's rush, coaxing mail and lolling magazines into piles to be crammed into already outgrown closets and bulking drawers. Glut was the family genius. Elves filling Santa's bags, hired jammers flanking Tokyo subway trains, knob-knuckled grandmothers stuffing sausage skins—all were kindred spirits of ours. The place was fat with consequence. We lived in a huge digestive system that broke down imports—packages, bills, coupons, party favors, souvenirs, and other burrs brought idly, hourly, in—and distributed them like nutrients through the rooms.

In particular was the back bedroom, which we called the Conrad Room for its horrifying, dark heart, where stacks of the latest hasty immigration (“Hurry, they’ll be here in ten minutes!”) stood on the verge of topple. Beyond them stood other surplus populations of the outdated and forgotten, diaspora’d by other visits. Meanwhile, coats bloated in the hall closet, our resident pashas. The cupboards were crap-stashed as any stretch of Portobello Road. The medicine chest was a munitions plant, which concealed a gunnery of lipsticks and powders in cunning disks like land mines. The pantry held a hundred cans, and you could hear bottles in close-order drill shiver against one another in the refrigerator. Yes, our home was as saturated as a softball left in the rain.

Now I stand in the thin midst of what it took a single small truck but one trip to deliver. I open boxes like a demolitions expert, suspicious of the meager inventory, but all is secure; there is not a thrum to wonder about. I begin a tidy, frail occupation. With so much space, anything could go anywhere: books above the stove, say, or extra batteries in any of a dozen drawers. Strange that the abundance of space and the arbitrariness of the organization will make it easier to lose things now, as though I were unpacking starlings in a park.

I put these distractions aside. I need to deploy my forces, such as they are. I cast about to decide where best to plug in the lamp, the one lamp.

The floor creaks, and the report runs down the length of the hall; a dropped penny rattles conspicuously against the tiled entryway; a spastic light jangles on the kitchen floor. I will have to close off rooms to stanch the flow. I will work on a hospitable philosophy for living like Jonah in my own home. The whole house is in a drowse, but something is quietly proceeding—a devouring absence, perhaps. A questioning of tenancy. I begin to plot consolidation against a siege I alone detect.

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This is the rectitude of emptiness. Getting clean, getting clear, getting it over and done with, getting down to it. The bone, the gist, the nub, the mean lean. Assault from a Shaker. A Jack Sprat rationale. Girding loins, tightening belts. Lessening in stages of decompression; better, obeying a law of measured jettisons to move out of a mundane orbit. Shoring up, digging in, laying low. Architecting essences. Becketting. Speaking in contractions to minimize the echoes. Making the darkling plain.

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Pablo Neruda reminds us in his poem “Investigations” that “nothing is empty— / everything is a box, a train, a boat / loaded with implications.”

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Movies do not prepare us properly. In the movies, a man comes home after long absence with his arms full of groceries or scrolled documents. Either way, he is visibly a man of substance. He can barely spare three fingers to extract the keys, and he pushes his way in with his hip. A moraine of mail has massed at the door, and the answering machine flashes with persistence. He has been in the hospital or in prison or overseas, but legitimacy still ripples all around him. Clearly he is a man whom the world has not deserted. He is our protagonist, and engagements await him like clamorous fans. He is unabandonable. Such a man can start his car without bothering to insert the ignition key or pick up a telephone at the office and begin speaking without dialing. Such a man gets his tie right without benefit of a mirror, for all

exteriors reflect him. A born instigator, he carries plot the way the rest of us carry bacteria.

Movies prepare us for movies.

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The Spartans landed among us in sixth grade as half of an object lesson. They were the antidote to the Athenians, who, for all their touted Periclean ambitions and the gleaming Apollonian marinade in which Mr. Lyman laid them lovingly down, seemed too pampered by half for adolescent boys. Athens was a classroom of teacher's pets, shrilly seeking approval in clothes their mothers set out for them. We preferred the severities of the Spartans, who represented muscularity and hunkered-down discipline of their own devising. One Batman trumped a dozen Medici, after all, and one Bogart a squad of plodding cops.

We were warded off the Spartans because they were the bullies, whose performances were coarse and ideas squat. They refuted school. No instruction could pierce or art insinuate past such cultural bluntness. They were also brave the way we hadn't the chance to be and would not be if we had.

Massed in battle gear and encircled against impossible odds for the Friday quiz, they retained their discreteness somehow, as their Athenian counterparts did not. Citizens of Athens were a burnished composite, but a band of Spartans were one and one and one and one and one. Thermopylae was a false density.

In the movie, a rain of arrows did them in.

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Soon will come the validations of occupancy. The Girl Scouts will find me out, surely, or kids from the elementary school descend from the bus to bear the latest racket to my door. Soon, I tell myself, I, too, will be buying up the peanut brittle, outfitting local campers, battling local cancer. Right now, my being here is barely sufficient to satisfy the neighbors who used to know me. I practice attitudes of groundedness and credibility before going out to claim the mail. Children stop pedaling as I near the street. Dogs stall. I tuck a notice about extended mall hours beneath my chin as though posing for a police photographer. I recall how amply the world once knew this house, how insistently it sought us out here. "You see? OR CURRENT RESIDENT, it

says. That's me. See the resemblance?" I show my papers: they tell of white sales, starving Ethiopians, the Republican National Committee, lingerie. Mothers steer their charges around me, reel the dogs in tighter to their sides, and press cautiously by.

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In "I Look Out for Ed Wolfe," Stanley Elkin presents a man who commits himself to systematic depletion. Ed Wolfe siphons himself out; he drains his excesses as if his possessions were boils that needed lancing. Where he wrings himself he leaves a brief cash flow, then he ends up dry and anonymous in an alley. Poured out in words. Decultivated. Out of words.

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My journals used to germinate everywhere, my books bloom. I am down to eleven and eighty-three, respectively, not counting the nests I've scraped together in the office. Maybe instead of shelving these together I should seed the house with them to see what might prosper in this light.

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William Gass writes of "Simplicities" that they represent "a longing: for less-beset days, for clarity of contrast and against the fuddle of grays, for certainty and security, and the deeper appreciation of things made possible by the absence of distraction, confusion, anxiety, delay." They testify to "completeness and closure, the full circle, something we can swing a compass round—to hammer out the line—get really straight." I mull this over and the circle widens; with so few interrupting objects about, it spins out to vanishing. I should keep to unadorned, simple sentences, I think, the one-two-three-kick of subject-verb-object.

Gass spreads beyond the ordinance, of course, even as he estimates its appeal. I have been to his house. Tastefully appointed, is the conventional approval. His wife is an architect, I remember, or a designer. Richly upholstered. Snug as parentheses. Endowed. That professor could land a chair anywhere, I know. Any home would gladly have him.

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The human body is a dispensary. The annual output of sweat and urine would fill gallon jugs. Howard Hughes, miserly even at the level of his own waste, would know how many. We speak, spit, shed, shit incessantly, ousting ourselves from ourselves, skimming the cellular topsoil, showing our excrescences the door. Nature takes its tithe, its house percentage. We give off enough carbon dioxide to sustain a garden. Not to mention words, nails, regrets, and a laboratory's worth of stinks. Even dandruff comes from the day's steady sanding us down.

The valediction of the body is a daily performance. Everything physical is prone to centrifugal forces. We are nothing to hold on to.

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Here is a phrase from Emily Dickinson, who lived in her house like a sachet in a dresser drawer: "sumptuous Destitution." She bundled her poems in fascicles and kept them, well, like sachets in her dresser drawers to scent her solitude. How could her house help but be full of her, who found a thousand ways not to leave it? Here is another phrase: "Banquet of Abstemiousness." Dickinson even capitalized according to some secret caution.

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Park Superintendent Griffin is speaking on National Public Radio in the wake of the recent flooding at Yosemite. She says that the first job she faces once the park can be safely reentered is the restoration of the infrastructure. I am surprised by her application of "infrastructure" and pleased to hear that it extends beyond corporations. I like the word, which connotes something at once fundamental, organized, pre-existent, inextinguishable. Auden once described the work of the poet as scraping away at a dusty stone to see what the inscription is. I like that, too. The true sense of things is already in place.

Surveying my carpeting, I realize that I could very well abide by the impressions left by absent furniture and duplicate that logic now. Certainly it would be reasonable to hang pictures over the scars left on the walls by the removal of previous pictures. Even the most flagrant traumas caused by the last move—the gouges where the bookcases were nailed in, the bleached

linoleum opened like a surgical field where the refrigerator had stood—could be countered by savvy interior decorating.

The park superintendent is reminding the reporter that Yosemite National Park was established to respect and preserve natural phenomena. It might be argued that we should not except floods, fires, foliage diseases, and the like from that protected status. From one point of view, she says, “natural disaster” is a contradiction in terms, for it has only to do with human inconvenience, not with what nature needs. She quickly admits that this is only a philosophical premise and that it does not affect her commitment to getting the park in shape for the influx of tourists expected this coming spring.

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If we think on the scale of human history, the private domestic retreat is a relatively recent concept. Among its fundamental concerns is the nature of the furniture it will contain, in part, one suspects, because that furniture is in some sense assigned the task of containing us. Vitruvius listed the ancient standards of furniture as “commodity, firmness, and delight,” a trinity of canonical virtues. Although it is not explicitly numbered among them, “comfort” is surely suggested, as are “leisure,” “security,” and “intimacy.” Nevertheless, one of the prerogatives of contemporary furniture design appears to be a subordination, if not a wholesale repudiation, of bodily imperatives. The interior designer seeks to create objects of attention whose presence supersedes the function of accommodating the human forms slumped, squirming, or collapsed upon them. Instead of constituting a servile background to human drama, pieces of furniture bargain for prominence in the households they share with us.

One of the hallmarks of modern art is self-conscious unease, so we should hardly be surprised to learn that furniture artists can be just as presumptuous as painters, musicians, and poets about lacing their works with reflexivities. Witness the chair that does not invite us to sit but rather remarks upon the concept of seatedness. A couch becomes a context imbued with couch theory. A credenza is stocked with implied commentary. The deconstructive thesis of the modular sofa. Coffee table ironies. Contemporary decor is another embattled imaginative precinct. Collectibles nudge one another knowingly in a breakfront built to look like a breakfront. Nothing brooks innocence. Nothing we live with lets us relax.

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Suddenly it is important to find out why fish survive the winter in frozen ponds. It so happens that ponds freeze from the surface down. This makes sense and coincides with what I already know of ice in glasses, buckets, and puddles, but the discovery still packs force. Beneath that rigid ceiling, the fish move imperceptibly, but perhaps somewhat slower for the cold, in a secret cortege. Although it is difficult to detect, life keeps happening to them below.

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“Westerners are amazed at the simplicity of Japanese rooms,” writes novelist Junichiro Tanizaki, “perceiving in them no more than ashen walls bereft of ornament. Their reaction is understandable, but it betrays a failure to comprehend the mystery of shadows.” Westerners plump where Japanese purge. Cultural distinctions are captivities as well as subjects for discussion, so it remains debatable whether habitation is better achieved in alliance with light or shadow.

In his honor I listen as I drive a spoon down the black lacquer bowl through the pasty sludge of rice. The resistance is contemplative, intestinal. The tip of the spoon meets the bottom of the bowl with a pleasant “cluck,” sufficient to center the evening’s solitude.

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As I climb the aluminum ladder, I can feel the gutter give in rhythm to my ascent. The rubber feet of the ladder are unequally steeped and unsteady in the pebbly muck. It is a self-conscious, tentative business, scaling the house.

There is no proper tool for ridding the gutters of debris. I have brought with me a garden trowel, a screwdriver, and a plastic drinking cup, having rejected the kitchen knife as too risky to clamber about with. Yet there is nothing delicate about the surgery, which consists of a lot of fumbling, scraping, and coaxing lodged matter to arm’s length. It is hard on my hands, too, but it would not be possible to negotiate the metal narrows with gloves. I stop often to let the pain rinse out of my shoulder and wrist—there seems to be no way to make this a natural task, so I am constantly wrenching myself—and I scan the neighborhood through my trees. For some reason, this proves to be

a noisy perch. The birds are louder up here, the branches chafe against the roof, and conversations in adjacent yards seem to rise to find me out.

I think of clichéd pirates lifting glittering slaws of treasure from stolen chests while I remove one organic glop after another. I let each one fall with a weightlifter's smug disgust as he drops the dumbbell after the last rep. When the right bulge is loosened, water starts to gurgle through the clawed club oak leaves and the obscene ropes of blackened pollen. The sound this makes—snarled, sucking through—is the sound of craving.

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In *The Amityville Horror*, a young family purchases a haunted house. The curtains molest them; the windows shatter, flinging glass shards at their heads; the hallways moan at their approach; the walls pulse and bleed. Committed to their investment and to feature-length, they endure this for days before evacuating. There is a sequel to this movie, in which the house has been resold for \$70,000 to another young family riding the crest of their own devotions. Assorted morals are available here, the most obvious of which relate to the seaminess of American popular culture, the predictability of consumer taste, and the lucrative possibilities of a career in real estate.

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This is poet Mark Strand commenting on a painting by Edward Hopper: "The house shines with finality. It is like a coffin. It is beyond us, and so absolute in its posture of denial that attempts—and there have been many—to associate it with loneliness only trivialize it." The painting is entitled *House by the Railroad*. "The house demands nothing from us, in fact, it seems to be turning away from wherever we are headed. It defines, with the simplest, most straightforward means, an attitude of resistance, of hierarchical disregard, and at the same time a dignified submission to the inevitable."

In Hopper's paintings, people cannot improvise. The rooms are immune to further narrative. People often seem to be waiting, yet there is the sense that their gears have locked before some vague confinement or unknown defeat. This may be a trick of the light.

Regarding another Hopper painting, *Hotel Room*, Strand recognizes the "cramped neatness of the room, the merciless white of the illuminated walls."

The window reveals “nothing but a black square, an irreducible conclusion, a place for a vanishing point.” This, too, exhibits the artist’s manipulation of perspective.

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Missouri features regular outbreaks of ramshackle barns along its highways. They are the state’s broken scabs cauterizing in the weather; you can drive through Missouri the way a dermatologist hunts across damaged skin. If the photo calendars are any indication, these barns are regarded as more picturesque than bleak or forbidding. So it might be appropriate to view them not as symbols of loss and the irretrievability of the past but as larval casings, as if things have gotten out and obtain elsewhere. Optimism is a choice we have to be alert to when the opportunity arises.

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I have turned up the loudness on the telephone ringer so that it can find me anywhere. It goes off like a bomb now, leaving me too frazzled to deal with the cable television inquisitor on the other end. At the very least, she deserves coherence from me. I consider explaining why I sound so flustered when she asks about why I no longer subscribe, but I know that hers is a volume business and that she would treat anything other than a direct answer as abusive. I suppose I could muffle the telephone, but I might miss an important call or insult someone who knew I was there. It is a dilemma, but I keep it to myself and let her go on about how the cable company is concerned about my satisfaction. From where I am standing as I talk to her I can see the black cable cord, now unattached and extending like a tentacle from the baseboard, still groping blindly about after it has been severed from the beast.

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By way of clarification, Harold Pinter provided an insert to the program brochure for the Royal Court Theatre performance of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* on 8 March 1960. He included the following warning:

A man in a room and no one entering lives in expectation of a visit. He will be illuminated or horrified by the absence of a visitor. But however much it is expected, the entrance, when it comes, is unexpected and almost always unwelcome.

Pinter then offered the following parenthetical comment, an insert to the insert:

(He himself, of course, might go out of the door, knock and come in and be his own visitor. It has happened before.)

How much help or encouragement these koans gave the audience is unknown. The playwright could conceivably have added a further insertion within that one, and so on, enfolding interiors ad infinitum, with each gloss increasing the density, compounding the darkness. Pinter has a knack for triggering susceptibility, so it is likely that people latched hopefully onto whatever direction was given them, however obscure.

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Living alone accelerates the progression of absent habit into studied ritual. For example, it may begin when you decide against spooning the beans onto the plate and opt for eating out of the pot directly. Soon enough you find yourself eating over the kitchen sink to catch the spills more efficiently. You define the elimination of social graces as efficiency. What keeps you from turning into the sort of person whom the neighbors say kept to himself and bothered no one when the police find his cache of plastic explosives or human teeth? Perhaps it is that you look out the window as you eat or that you remember to turn off the television when you leave a room. Habits can keep you afloat, too, keep you a member in good standing in the community in spite of your eccentricities.

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The opening lines of a poem by Donald Justice:

Men at forty
Learn to close softly

The doors to rooms they will not be
Coming back to.

I would call this style of writing winningly elegiac or craftily poignant. Whatever I would call it, it would certainly be deftly phrased as a contradiction in terms.

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Here is the dream: Two hoodlums break into the house. One restrains me from behind while the other demands some valuable of mine which he does not name. "Where is it?" he barks. "Where do you keep it?" I don't have a clue as to what he is talking about. I tell him that I am not hiding anything and even suggest that he go through the house if he wants. Once I am awake, of course, I realize the absurdity of granting him that privilege as though I could have denied him anything anyway at that point. I also realize that I have never seen him or his partner before. If either or both represent a symbolic composite or disguise or personified neurosis, it is lost on me. In other words, if there is a lesson that my subconscious is crafting for me, it is not coming through.

In any event, he starts savaging the place, which in the dream provides more to tear up than my waking state reveals. In fact, there seem to be infinite particulars for him to handle, rage at, and roughly disqualify. "Tell me where it is!" he roars. I am willing to comply, I think, or at least so it seems to me in the dream, but I haven't the means.

I tell him the joke about the man with the wheelbarrow who passes the consternated border officer each day. The officer is convinced that the man is smuggling something across the border, and each day he rummages through the straw in the wheelbarrow, inspects all around and beneath it, picks with a penknife at the wooden handles, and goes over the spokes of the wheel with a magnifying glass, but he comes up empty. Finally, overcome with despair, he decides to quit his post. He pleads with the man to tell him what he has been smuggling, for he knows that it must be some subterfuge that brings him there each day. "I give you my solemn oath that I will not turn you in, only you must tell me what it is you are smuggling." "Wheelbarrows," he replies. I tell the hoodlum this joke, which in the dream seems to me not only acutely relevant but richly insightful. Perhaps I think it is what he is looking for after all, although, either awake or asleep, I cannot be sure. Whatever the case, he

thinks I am trying to get something past him. The dream ends with his moving menacingly upon me, ferociously unimpressed, although not necessarily unjustly so—an equanimical position I arrive at only well after I have been awake. Humor is a fragile, subjective enterprise, and the dream does not repeal that fact.

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“The Burrow” is Franz Kafka’s paean to paranoia. “I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful,” it begins, as our unnamed narrator proceeds to congratulate himself on having battened down the hatches and restricted the risk in the vicinity. Obsession is his idiom in consciousness as it is in construction, so he goes on for forty pages, keeping watch. This is not to say that there is no self-satisfaction to be had in “The Burrow.” We are advised that “the sheer pleasure of the mind in its own keenness is often the sole reason why one keeps it up.” The “it” refers to the method of tunneling, which the narrator achieves by ramming his head against the walls. We need to be alert to the joke here. “Sometimes I lie down and roll about in the passage with pure joy,” he confides.

Exhilaration is a rare commodity in Kafka. When a character does somehow accomplish it, it tends to be at unexpected, even inappropriate, moments; in view of the general tenor of his life, how could it be otherwise? He takes his incongruous pleasures when he can.

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You can make a distance out of almost anything. This is not news. Anger, laziness, stress. The talk shows are overwhelmed by consistent evidence. Disappointment, preoccupation, indifference. A battery of bestselling books can be brought in to verify. Success, too, oddly enough, as well as money and lack of money, career advancement and stagnation. Distance is cutting edge, rivaling breakthroughs in dieting and foreplay for prominence in the marketplace. Distance covers familiar ground, but our appetite for distance shows no sign of slackening.

There was nothing ingenious about the distance we made. It fared better than the checking account or the houseplants, continuing to thrive even on days we were gone or distracted. Boredom, despair, betrayal. The tests com-

ing back positive or the tests showing nothing at all. You nurture distance through concentration or neglect. It feeds on the atmosphere itself. The hard sciences have not yet weighed in conclusively on the matter, but preliminary indications are that distance contaminates everything in the area, disrupting structures, loosening bonds. Desire and resignation. You watch it wear away the fabric, craze the enamel, split the seams. You swallow it down and start to come apart.

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In the dream, or in what I make of the dream after its departure, the most significant distortion is the ferocious assault. What is really most ferocious, I have found, is composure.

I organize a card game, and all the glad chatter and the cadenced snap and sougning of the cards are drawn up on invisible strings into a delicate, tensile network above us, which we ignore. All of us make the same salary, more or less, and the game soon finds its proper level where there is just enough interest and no real damage possible. No one will make a killing or take a fatal hit. Under these rules of commerce, which we understand and know not to mention, we feel companionable, snug. Ours words ascend and disappear into the insulation. I think I could risk a name I have not yet spoken aloud since returning to this house and wait for it to be gathered up.

I check the window to confirm the change in the weather. Robert Frost noted “the thin frost, almost in separate stars, / That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.” Frost was never too somber not to enjoy the pun that took his name in vain. If it weren’t so cold out tonight, I might take time out for a look at the night. I admit to a taste for astrology, which turns the heavens into an interior, too. The sentient sky presiding, all inlaid with reference and cause. The woven stars presuming overhead.

The game needs me, so I stay where I am.

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Within this house there wait for you such gifts
From which I urge you help yourself, for this
Is hospitality’s domestic law.

For homage is true enterprise of grace.
Let no one pass his grieving unassuaged
By fullest tribute, as befits his needs.
No lamentation here shall long ensue
Till it be salved by proper amplitude.
Although this hall is simple, it abides,
And all within may soon serenely dwell.
Let goblets swell and heaping bowls bestow
Such tidings as your hardships now require.
Let gentle welcome compensate and soothe
The stranger landed here, so softly bear
His murmuring descent from better days.
And so with blessings victuals be spread
And everywhere unmeasured portions set.
Crowd out the clinging absence that besets
Him so, nor let him make a harbor of regret.
For here provisions, honor, courtesy,
And all heroic custom shall obtain.
Remove your rags and coarsened attitude.
Remove the rotting mantle of your loss.
Within this house, permission and fair sleep
May freshen you and stave off vacancy.
There will be time enough to listen when you rouse
To tales of separation and dismay.
But now, most worn in thought and trial, partake
Of these my comforts and solicitude.
My lot is small, but offers well enough
To make a stay, then speed you on your way.

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“These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” Eliot wrote. The sea-blue volume is tightly fitted among the rest of my books. Their spines protrude like the staves of the hull of a ship that bears me, somehow, onward.