

Dirty Old Man Throws Caution to the Winds

The longest half-hour in his day,
that between four-thirty and five.
By then he has done everything
he should have and didn't want to.
Left to do is what he wants to do,
have a scotch on the rocks.

But custom as well as caution
forbids a drink before five.
Were he to transgress,
it would mean he lacks the discipline
he has always counted on.
It would mean he's a stumble away
from the Hilton Passageway in Penn Station,
where he will lie in a pool of his own urine.

Were he to have the life-threatening scotch
now, at four forty-two,
he would be asking for another at five,
which would be doubly fatal for his future.

And yet some allowance must be made
for long years and commensurate grief.
Surely he did not come this far
not to allow himself the joy of a drink
before five. For men his age
the future arrives in half-hour increments.

Drink up, D.O.M.
Let the malt tickle your tongue.
Let the future end eighteen minutes too soon.

Dirty Old Man, Road Rage

Driving from one home to another,
the Sinatra channel on the radio,
he's daydreaming about his birdfeeder
when Annie Lennox shatters the peace
warbling "You Belong To Me"
in a voice harsher than a grackle's.

After years of marriage Mrs. D.O.M.
has learned that when her mate slips
into melt-down mode, as he is about
to do because he has turned down
the radio, no amount of tender
decontamination can bring him back online.

She watches the road, driving by proxy,
while he fulminates against singers
who can't sing, the overture to a rant
in three movements – grouchy, more grouchy,
grouchyssimo. Between the last rest stop
on I-85 and Richmond, D.O.M. grows silent:

A song he has never heard before.
He turns the volume up to make out
the words but all he hears is the toast,
"May the last voice you hear be mine."

Dirty Old Man Talks to Himself Behind His Back

For several minutes he has been watching three squirrels chasing one another up and down the scaly trunk of a pine tree. They jump to the sweet gum and start all over, spiraling around: the first is chasing the third, which is chasing the second. Then the order of pursuit is reversed: the third chases the second chasing the first.

D.O.M. gets up, opens the sash window. The creaking scatters the squirrels into the woods. He sits down again, places the heating pad against the back of the chair. The room is still buzzing. Nothing to do.

Moments later he looks up from the book. There they are, leaping like gymnasts, one after the other, from the trunk of the pine tree. Destination: birdfeeder. They lunge, barely miss, crash land on the azaleas. Then begin again.

Pedro

He was the kind of man who believed in sudden endings. That afternoon he had gone through his house tearing up the things that had taken him a lifetime to acquire - letters, photos, passports, insurance policies, slips with addresses and names and numbers. But had you asked him several hours later how he had spent his day, he would not remember, and then, because he realized that he didn't remember, he would rage. He did remember pushing his daughter and her friend down the corridor toward the front door, and his daughter screaming, "Enough, papi, enough." Peeking through the drawn venetian blinds he saw them getting into Ani's car, Ani's friend in the driver's seat. When he lost his wife, he lost his daughter.

Now he was sitting on a folding chair in his sister's backyard, under the grapefruit tree, beside the shed that he had built years earlier. He felt scattered, an assemblage of limbs and organs and needs and thoughts with no connection among themselves. He believed that he didn't remember things because they had happened to someone else. Each hour brought him a different self. He was perpetually meeting a stranger who was himself. The only link between selves was his name, but even that meant nothing anymore.

He had lost his watch weeks earlier but he knew it was late because his sister's house was dark and she didn't go to bed until two or three in the morning. He wasn't going to knock like those other nights. Even if she heard him, she might not open the door. He just wanted a place to spend the night, where he could collect himself. After Ani and her friend barged into his house, he no longer felt safe there.

From where he sat he could hear a radio in a neighbor's house. The voices were speaking Spanish, but he couldn't make out the words. One of his sister's cats walked across the yard and leapt onto the planter with the curled-up hose. His hands hurt. He clenched his fists several times. He had been a compact, muscular man, but the only part of his body that retained its strength was his hands. His fingers were as thick and calloused as they had always been and the wedding band squeezed his ring finger. The pressure reminded him of Ampa. He wished he had yielded to her more often. Guilt, regret, sorrow - those were constants in his life too. His word was *remordimiento*, remorse. After Ampa died he had found this word, not learned it but found it since he had known the word since he was a child, but he had never thought about it, never thought about any words really, until after Ampa's death.

The word struck him one day as he was walking back to his house from his mid-afternoon coffee. He was crossing Douglas Rd. right in front of the awning on Gilbert's Bakery, hurrying because he saw one car coming fast from a distance, and then the word hit him - hit him like the car he barely avoided—the word that summarized everything he had been feeling: the anger, the despair, the bitterness, the guilt, the waste. He began writing the word on scraps of paper which he kept around the house to make sure he didn't forget it. Ampa was gone but he had *remordimiento*, a more fitting legacy than her memory. In his sister's backyard, he takes a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. It's dark but he knows what it says. He crumples the paper until his hand starts hurting again.