

Domestic Operetta for One Voice

I

aria con coloratura

Beyond this empty room, the empty house
Offers condolences.
A faucet drips its intermittent tears;
The furnace stutters, stunned; the glassware stares;
The fridge retreats to silence. Is
Nothing intact? Outside, a wound-up hose
Gargles its sudden grief, the hollyhocks
Stand openmouthed, and sputters of sorrow cascade
From a scrapped engine that the neighbor kid
Patiently chokes.

Forgive me, love, if all this grief appears
A little overwrought;
Somehow I always find it in these empty
Rooms—this anonymous farce of empathy,
Worse than the worst I ever wrote—
A poltergeist or haint. This house conspires
Against me, every bit from grout to grating.
The wall-cracks speak, the peeling paint complains.
We both know theirs are not the only lines
That I'm regretting.

So I immerse myself in mindless chores:
Vacuum five times a week,
Empty the trash in every room once daily,

Scour the shower. If I lie here idly
Thinking, my thoughts keep me awake
Until I start up odd jobs at odd hours,
Like last night: washing dishes, wishing, dreaming,
I let hot water run so long it scalded
My hands. You would have kissed me, pointed, scolded,
Our glasses steaming.

II

monodic reprise

Another Friday night.
Strata of dirty plates,
Outcrops of opaque cups,
And, yes, the kitchen sink.

Plenty of time to think.

I stop the drain and twist
The scummed hot water knob,
Start throwing in the dishes.
Amidst the mess, I note

How little a man keeps

After the all-out screaming:
Gone are the crystal stems;
Gone, the heirloom silver.
Now in the crumb-filled drawers

I catch a glimpse of silver-

fish flashing umber backs
Before they disappear;
Now in the sudsy water
Plastic utensils bob

Like drowning mariners,

And I rinse out cheap glasses
So fragile that at times
One shatters in my fist—
In this, my empty empire,

The least of many losses.

I wish the hardwood floors
Presaged a better future,
But every single feature,
From red wine stains and cracks

To waxy sheens, inures

Me to the facts: my wishes
The days alone have trampled;
Ditto the nights, my dreams.
I stand here washing dishes,

My flannel shirtfront rumpled,

And know that nothing sweeter
Looms in the air, no kinder
Version of life awaits
Me, so I slip my hand in

The angry sink, abandon

Caution and feel the water
Scalding my skin. (No wonder
that at this point when
I set it on the counter,

The glass keeps steaming.)

III

sotto voce

The tepid water ripples in the sink,
Then settles, smooth and gray as dirt-grimed glass.
I never needed you. These evenings pass;
So will the oddness of my solitude.

I read, I write, I think
About *Persuasion*. Thoughts of you intrude.

I've run the gamut from *gemütlichkeit*
To spite, and nothing works. I can't ignore
The frigid gusts breathing across the floor
(Ghostly enjoiners not to walk alone),
The bedsprings' overbite,
Or the late traffic's faint, bathetic drone.

Sometimes I dream you'll make it back to me:
I'll hear your tires crunch in the gravel drive,
You'll sing how grand it is to be alive,
And, à la fifties scripts, we'll start the weeping-
And-kissing jubilee;
But when I dream those dreams, I'm rarely sleeping.

Sleep is too honest an activity
For those scenarios and their reprieve
From waking life; in all real dreams, you leave.
The screen door slams again. The car horn blares.

I shout, "At last, I'm free!"
And climb the porch's Sisyphean stairs,

Which leaves me here: awake in bed at night,
Trying to map our life's disintegration,
Praying for some last-ditch illumination,
I am (and am no longer) of two minds,
And all I get of light
Are passing headlights punching through the blinds.

IV

grand finale

Look at me, decomposing on the couch—
A grade-A, grand slam, dumb, disgraceful slouch.

I've ditched love, lust, and even innuendo
And now devote myself to my Nintendo,

Whose buttons I can push without concern;
Plus, since I'm flying solo, it's my turn

Whenever I decide it is (which rocks).
I've spent four days in the same pair of socks

And somehow think myself fully equipped
With just two food groups: Fried and Double-Dipped.

I'm getting by. With fewer gasps and thrills,
I'll grant you, and I've found my social skills

Need cleaning up—for everyone I meet,
I've got one cycle: Blather, Wince, Repeat—

But still, I'm getting by. Which is to say,
I miss you, Sara. Pardon that cliché.

I know that nothing I dream up will be
Perfect enough to draw you back to me,

That we have lost our chance at growing old
Together and will never be consoled

By one another's wrinkles, that I am
Unlikely to become your Abraham;

But hear me out. Table that last decision
And see what I see with a kinder vision.

Years have elapsed, and you have called at last.
We have agreed to share a brief repast.

You bring a salad in a wooden bowl
Pitifully dented, scratched, and pocked, but whole;

Its blemishes resemble woodcut rain.
The salad is your specialty: romaine

You surely bought this morning, walnuts, pears,
Raspberry vinaigrette. We scoot our chairs

Closer together. Somehow we've forgiven
Each other everything that would have driven

Us crazy had we tried to make it back
When, grain by grain, the strain began to crack

The hourglass of our love. Would we have lasted?
Who knows? But now we feast where once we fasted,

And I can tell that you have missed this place
By every ghost that plays across your face:

You wonder where our drinking glasses went,
Why the new plates, given the old ones meant

So much to both of us. Gone, my dear. Done.
Over the years I broke them one by one,

Some in the grip of fury, some in grief,
Some from pure klutziness. Is there relief

In knowing parts of me will never change?
Even the meal I've cooked has come out strange,

But we partake of it as if it weren't
A hodgepodge hot dish, part half-baked, part burnt.

And then? Well, just dessert. Our time is waning.
We thank each other for the entertaining

Evening, you grab your purse, you glance at me;
I hear myself blurt, *Would you like some tea?*—

As if our first shy tea dates hadn't led
To making love at daybreak in your bed.

(We must have drunk a thousand cups before
We realized we were becoming more

Than friends, before the red parenthesis
On the cup's edge—your lipstick's half-a-kiss—

Became the understood *of course* to whether
We'd ever always want to be together.)

You sit back down, and from a topmost shelf
I bring out what I'd hidden from myself:

The fragile china cups we used to use
Back in our love-drunk days. I didn't lose

Or break them. No one else has ever sipped
A drop of tea from them. The rims are chipped,

And small gray fissures spread like tiny maps
Of where we might have gone had we perhaps

Had better luck, more patience, fewer words.
Since second looks become diminished thirds,

Suspended fourths, and hollow fifths that fade
Into the separate parts that we have played,

Why take those steps down memory's fractured lines?
I measure out the tea. We'll read the signs—

The tacit, loose leaf patterns in the lees—
Later, for now, there's now. No prophecies.

I pour the water. Sara, let's be clear,
Now that we're near my vision's end, that here—

Wherever *here* is—is where I will be
Should you decide you want this cup of tea;

And I will wait here, as our tea leaves steep,
Content to keep whatever we can keep

Together as our cups release their pair
Of mist-skinned tendrils curling through the air,

Vaporous cracks in the invisible
Wall that divides us, loose threads time will pull,

Sweet incense smoke that means we can redeem
All we have lost in sarabands of steam.