

Sonnet 29

ALLYN WOOD

THE boy Argus, who is nineteen, with palette colors in the corners of his fingers, turns back to the house as if to make a last precautionary round before a journey. Instead he has decided to stay. He leaves his belongings in the debris of the hall. A cat from the end of the hall peers and they exchange reserves across silence heavy but for a hum, compoundly powerful and accustomed, like a thousand cats purring, or as a tornado may sound to those it has left behind, with implication eternal, both retrospective and ominous; from the core of which pierces a steady tapping of his father's typewriter. The boy starts to go through the rooms when something rises and catches in his throat, a cough or a cry, unclasping time that rolls out before him. 'How did it begin? By what way have I come?'

His mother was dead and he was four, drawing her portrait with enormous head in a sunny room. His father, Pere, began to care for him with preoccupied tenderness. Papers collected on the floor and on the furniture. Strangers came who made tables rap and curtains move, who looked down at him as if he were too alive. One night Pere pointed to the bottom of the bed and said, "Your mother's there, if you could see her." Thus had begun his father's journey to find the meaning of death.

Then rain was falling through immeasurable afternoon and he was eight. His father was reading aloud Shakespeare's *Sonnet Twenty-nine*. Deeply, softly as a lute he sang the words—lute in a troubador's hands who sings of love and the crusades. The child drew, frequently looking out into the strange dusk that brought

Pere so near and held him becalmed, or even had delivered him to stay. Pere sat in shadow, only the book extended to window light; seeming to shrink, to let the rest find its way toward Argus. So reading, darkness became complete, when suddenly as his father rose to pull the curtain, scent of thaw filled the room, which they stretched to breathe, held on the pinnacle of a wave that was too great to be of one, or even two, or even three.

Then pitched into stormy blackness, unmapped chaos, while the dead were deracinated! The crusader found not a holy land, the explorer not a welcoming world. Did Pere, trying to be open-minded, know when he looked without or when within? Driven, tormented, pursued by the unseen, he said that in seeking her he had asked the way of others who had fallen upon him and were robbing him of life. He told the boy that his mother was trying to save them, "us," he said, although Argus did not feel in need of rescue. "People must know about death," cried Pere—"What a difference it will make!"

Gradually as time passed and less and less could be changed, the house grew to look as if they were starting for a long journey. Trunks containing his father's manuscripts—diary of the invisible odyssey—pressed the furniture toward the centres of the rooms. The world of their domesticity shrank until it was only channels such as a mole makes. Isolation pressed inward; his father was too busy to be hospitable, and friends made a detour of thought about him as they do about one dead, seeming reluctant to admit that he had ever lived. At night Argus, waking, heard Pere's typewriter tapping, or his

voice talking with whom he did not know. He tucked in one of the great purring cats that had come, been named Lares and Penates, and remained. In pauses of typing, through the room channels that by night were the interior of an ear, he heard the other purring. But he waited to hear the typewriter again. Pere was ill and lay on the couch too long, laughing grimly at the suggestion that a doctor be called. "I know what it is. He wouldn't believe or help." But when he rallied, their life was a citadel, to Argus exciting when curious, officious persons from without tried to invade; from which they frequently emerged to mingle unrecognized and happy.

Time grows short, is almost now . . .

When did the citadel fall?

He was sixteen. He called toward clear faces, and the call shook the walls. He summoned Pere to adventure in artists' terms of space and harmony and light; for a while he stayed by Pere who yearned yet feared, until seeing he grew adamant, not bold, at last he went out alone. Until after sunset he roamed through strange streets—streets that climbed hills and rolled into valleys; wherever he walked, children on roller-skates followed sliding through melting ice on their skates, which were Christmas gifts they had had to wait to use. Scent of northern thaw swelled strong as magnolias or vast tea shops. Then twilight came, tea-colored, with porcelain sounds through opened windows, with a lost kitten that he tucked inside his coat. Home was so different now he scarcely knew it, a ruin with a door, though outwardly the same. Pere would not forgive him but took the kitten.

Being part of the world, he returned to it many days. Never quite gone: sometimes in the midst of life his soul stood in a doorway barring the sight from something horrible. Among certain persons he

felt ashamed, until he went back to the beginning of the journey to find the meaning of death, and understood that no matter how mistaken he might be, Pere was brave.

The cats increased. Huge impenetrable cats slunk about the house keeping their counsel, children of Lares and Penates, the first pair, or others that came along the street; huge pent cats that felt not want nor weather. Their purring and singing were intense and loud, sometimes a tremendous largo, again, as they divided, spoke, and answered, a fugue of Bach's aspiration. There was never silence until their sound became silence in his exhaustion or preoccupation. Sometimes it did not speak contentment, but was a vast voice of resentment Argus heard, a rumble that masses make before a revolution, rumble that is ignored until too late. He asked Pere to let him give some of the cats away. Pere replied bitterly,

"They do not desert me. See! they watch the mystery that you deny." Tears rose to Pere's eyes but did not flow. "The thaw—the late thaw, my father, remember?"

Argus is climbing the stair to his room. Papers crackle about his ankles and piles of manuscript ascend the stair. If this morning there had been poetry, even a poached egg, what a difference such things make! But he had had an idea; he had wished to paint; the cats were maddening. Suddenly he went downstairs into the crypt filled with morning light where his father was writing, and told him that he must make a choice between himself and some of the cats. His proclamation was far from amusing or dramatic; he trembled for the decision, which Pere made silently by gathering the cats about him. So Argus went upstairs to pack, calling down hopefully, "How about Othello? . . . Poe? . . . Jenghiz Khan? Won't you give *him* up?"

Then it was time to go.

Pere stood in the hall holding a crucifix. He exorcised his son, but there was no appreciable change. Argus was in agony to stay and yet to go. He thought of Pere filling his empty room with cats; the walls of the citadel raised, reinforced, the walls besieged and someday broken. And he thought of the intervals of peace when Pere read, a wanderer barely touching shore; life like people streaming to the shore from a ramparted city beyond, bearing food and clothing; for Pere was both within walls and without. He asked his father again and then went out.

There was a sound of something falling.

Pere lay on the floor in the corner where he had shrunk. The boy fell beside him and raised his head, which was very red. He was gasping. Argus shouted in his face things one shouts to another be-

loved, who sails, when many waves are between, and the words must carry above the deep. He ran to the telephone to call a doctor. But Pere rose unsteadily and snatched the receiver from his hand. "I know what it is. He wouldn't believe or help."

Argus stands in his room. Presently he must bring his belongings up again. His father is typing and the cats sing a tremendous largo. Pale gold eyes stare from under his bed; his tired mind thinks, 'color of wine that goes with fish . . . translated fish.' There is a fish-spine on his bed. Among his belongings is a canvas that he had prepared for his idea this morning; he feels a faint magnetic pull toward it that tingles his fingers, or are they going to sleep? 'Yet I wouldn't be anyone else,' he thinks,

Though for such, an uncertain individual eternity at once begins.

