

John S. Copeman

The Moist Season (In the Penitentiary)

Sitting on top of these wet gray tiles,
trying to ignore everything including myself.
Can't help but notice it's all the same—
That I'm sliding across the slimy literary page of inadequacy;
as well as the sweating bathroom floor.
My shoes, which are dirty or walls that are deliberately short,
covering little more than intimate parts in public spaces.
Dropped paper rolls stick like thoughts,
wondering if Emily had the same problems?
Or could she write like that from Scotts in Huron Valley?
While summer in prison bakes just like Sylvia's oven, too.
The nerves that are frayed, over-crowded, the same.
Inmates mostly zombies coming at you, crisscrossing paths.
Moaning convicts sharing miseries, missing lives
they treated with utter contempt while still alive.
Measuring out my own life with Prufrock's coffee spoons.
As I am also pinned and wriggling on the wall;
slipping further down the mental road
they told me doesn't exist.
As an incarcerated veteran, No PTSD for you!
Without the "cakes or teas or ices."
Likewise not having the strength to force the moment to its crisis,
in short—I was also afraid.
Now I sit and watch the Perspiring Clock
drip strange time for us. Slowed down for those gone from the race,
but sped up for the highway crowds. Gasoline refugees going somewhere,
somewhere, somewhere they hope, but no where.
Just thinking that they are really moving on schedule.
Distracted with their plastic toys—heads bowed in free minutes.
The electronic worship at the temple of social media;
really caring about what strangers think of them.
Good citizens putting on pounds they didn't want
but can't seem to lose, like bad habits or bad news.
For those of us who watch and drool on shiny wet floors,
wishing we too could chew on the same fat calf,
or at least get some of the marrow reserved for their dogs.
While they heat up the planet with their unquenchable combustion
engines
and tell us it's normal to break summer records every summer.

Each year the water rising higher as the gaps in America
grow ever wider, like continents pushing apart.
So those of us at the very bottom gather our mops,
and put out the yellow fall'n man signs warning:
“Danger—Slippery When Wet,” they say.
As we lift our feet against the indiscriminate tide.

* Inspired by T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” (1915)