Sleeping in the Living Room

SOPHIA HOUSE

On a walk home from the East Village one night, I accidentally stepped inside a square outlined in chalk. Drawn carefully in dashed, dusty blue lines, the square was just big enough to house a ragged, sleeping old man and an overflowing canvas bag. In one corner, he had scrawled the words "Living Room."

New York City's homeless people are not nomads. They sit, day by day, outside the same Taco Bell or Walgreens or smoke shop. I see them, and I wonder what it is that makes their allotted sidewalk space a place to come back to. These squares of concrete, stripped of everything that could otherwise make a home, are indistinguishable to me, but to their inhabitants each one is a "living room" in which all the functions of *living*—even those that might be reserved for dining rooms, closets, and bedrooms—are performed. The concrete has been claimed, settled, and, in some cases, domesticated. This man's canvas bag overflowed with newspapers, ragged clothes, and recyclables. His life, at least his material life, was compact and quantifiable. It could be taken out and spread before him to be ordered, stacked, counted: four newspapers, two shirts, twenty plastic bottles. We see that existence on the fringe is not without things or even territory. But alienation results from not having a place to sleep, pee, or have sex outside the public sphere.

Even when privacy and domesticity are not an option, material survival still matters, still has meaning. Concrete, which is free for the taking in New York City, is just as easily taken away. No dwelling, no matter how fortified, is safe from peril: a paper deed and some wooden walls are no real defense against fires and floods. But the illusion of safety is much easier to maintain inside a house, where the threat of natural disaster seems distant and unlikely. Homeless people confront their vulnerability constantly. Understanding his own harsh reality, the man whose "house" I stumbled into had gone further than most in trying to claim some property, drawing and labeling in a desperate attempt to defend his own space. It was as much a fabrication as any effort to create a sense of permanence.

In his essay "Late Victorians," Richard Rodriguez writes thoughtfully about the life homosexual men have created in San Francisco. Full of hopeful teenage boys fresh off Greyhound buses and "men who pursue . . . an earthly paradise," the city that sees itself as "heaven on earth" is nonetheless marked by tragedy, death, and disease (131, 125). Young men who find oases in San Francisco's gay neighborhoods soon discover that, like the homeless man in New York, their bedrooms are on display to the world. As the AIDS crisis spreads, public judgment of their private lives alienates them and makes them vulnerable to anger, discrimination, and exclusion. Rodriguez reacts differently to this phenomenon than many of the homosexual men he writes about, repeatedly pointing out that their grasp on reality can be weak and their existential fears misplaced. They feel threatened by stigma and marginalization as if, when forced out of homes, jobs, or neighborhoods, they will simply disappear. This misconception makes them feel less grounded or secure than other people, especially since they cannot have children—the one true, living legacy and prolonger of life. These men are plagued by their own mortality, every absent face a reminder that they, their friends, or their lovers could be the next to fall victim to AIDS. It is harder for them to ignore the fact that they will die one day. Over this underlying reality that nothing ties them permanently to the earth, Rodriguez's men paint a veneer of cultural survival.

Cultural survival, Rodriguez writes, exists "in artifice, in plumage, in lampshades, sonnets, musical comedy, couture, syntax, religious ceremony, opera, lacquer, irony" (127). Homosexual men take up jobs in card shops, or as florists, or interior designers. Their ephemeral existence, "two incomes, no children," goes to funding gym memberships, nights at the opera, and elaborate French foyers (126). Rodriguez differs from his gay friends, who seem to believe they can reclaim life on earth through aesthetics and "the small effect" (127). Their preoccupation is with the inanimate, with things that do not die. Mirrors, for instance, possess an enduring and eternal quality. These things, like the homeless man's meager collection of newspapers and shirts and recyclables, are what Rodriguez's gay men leave behind when they can leave no other permanent, physical reminder of themselves. They invest their mortality in the immortality of objects.

Oscar Wilde was, like Rodriguez, a keen observer of his own world. Though he's literary history's classic dandy, he still manages to offer a warning against a preoccupation with frivolity and the illusion of immortality. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he shows us the difference between the original and a reproduction, and the danger of confusing the two. Dorian, worried

about the transient nature of beauty, despairs that his portrait will continue to be lovely after he is old and ugly, wishing it could bear the brunt of age for him instead. As he enters a life of depravity, the painting reflects all that Dorian really is—older, sneering, and cruel. Dorian becomes twisted, heartless, a selfish escape artist of the worst variety. In the end, the portrait, marking Dorian's attempt to escape the inevitabilities of life, is the ultimate cause of his misery and destruction. The novel's final image, a grotesque and wizened Dorian dead upon the floor, suffices to tell the reader that any attempt to use artifice to ignore mortality is delusional.

Rodriguez's San Francisco, where gay men have taken over neighborhoods and homes once accessible only to heterosexuals, provides an infinite canvas and playscape for remodeling and reclamation. Through remodeling, they have made the homes their own. The idea is "not to create but to re-create, to sham, to convert, to sauce, to rouge, to fragrance, to prettify" (127). Rodriguez argues that the urge and the talent to decorate are not, as his friend Enrique suggests, a part of the gay man's composition or intuition. The act of remodeling is intentional, a direct and desperate response to a grim reality.

For Rodriguez's men, no detail is too small for it to be snatched from nature and reconstructed into artifice. Rodriguez himself finds this practice impossible to embrace. Early in the essay, he references an interview in which Elizabeth Taylor describes "cerulean Richard Burton days on her yacht, days that were nevertheless undermined by the elemental private reflection: this must end" (124). Rodriguez cannot overcome his own preoccupation with this heavy sensation, weary but nonetheless wise to the limits of re-creation. A life that feels reclaimed to the inhabitant of an impressive Victorian mansion still ends with an equally wrought obituary. Like Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian's friend and companion in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Rodriguez emerges from his community relatively unscathed by its delusions. Rodriguez and Wotton have no ultimate, heavy price to pay for life, because they do not demand an artificial immortality from it. Wotton is the story's shrewd cynic and also its lone survivor.

And yet, what the reader sees Rodriguez achieve is not a more authentic reality, not a fuller existence, but a lonely distance from any world he could call his own. His partner César, by contrast, throws himself wholeheartedly into life—and also into the possibility of death—by claiming it in whatever way he can. Rodriguez misunderstands the powerful illusions under which *everyone*—not just his friends—are living. He misunderstands that children are only prolongers of life in the sense that they are facsimiles of their par-

ents, allowing a feeling of immortality—not unlike the remodeled Victorian home. Homosexual men are *given* fewer of these illusions, and instead must work to create them. But because Rodriguez questions the homosexual community's approach, he avoids embracing such creations. Although César dies and Rodriguez lives, Rodriguez's final words ring sad and hollow: "These learned to love what is corruptible, while I, barren skeptic, reader of St. Augustine, curator of the earthly paradise, inheritor of the empty mirror, I shift my tailbone upon the cold, hard pew" (133). What he inherits for all his asceticism is hardly more substantive or worth having than that which the late Victorians have accumulated for themselves.

"*Live or die*," Anne Sexton writes, "*but don't poison everything*" (1 emphasis in original). This revelation comes in the poem "Live," in which Sexton cautions against the shallow or frivolous embrace of life. It is not, she warns, "something you play" (35). Like Rodriguez, she's cynical about the desirability of domesticity and the importance of defining oneself in terms of one's home, children, or marital bed. But Sexton and Rodriguez still find themselves somewhat at odds. Her torturous battle with mental illness, throughout which she saw herself as toxic, a killer, a sawed-off body, lends us some perspective on the Late Victorians' desire for some walls—or things—to cling to. In "Live" she struggles to unwind from the tangles of alienation and realizes how difficult it is to resume the role of wife and mother, given the burdens of mental illness.

In Sexton's poem, living—not authenticity, not necessarily even identity, but embracing life—is at least the place to start. For stigmatized populations, life can seem denied and inaccessible. Sexton writes, "and even though I dressed the body / it was still naked, still killed" (28-29). She does not redeem the idea of re-creation and reclamation or attempt to legitimize it, but she does render it more universal. All varieties of stigmatized people struggle to exist in the mainstream, to buy into illusions of domesticity and the infallibility of traditional American life. Faced with harsh realities, they turn to what they can control. About life, about the body, Sexton admits that she herself "play[ed] it, dressed it up, / dressed it up like somebody's doll" (33-34). She does not take pride or rejoice in the various ways that she "played it" and "dressed it up," but she might know better than Rodriguez why the homosexual men of San Francisco insist on reclaiming Victorian homes, might better understand their despair, their isolation, and why they never stop trying. The gay men in "Late Victorians" may meet awful and tragic and unglamorous ends, with death coming as the worst kind of "real humanity" they achieve, but they do not die alone (132). Rodriguez's pessimism, frustration, and self-

isolation haunt him to the end and leave him lonely. He may live to see that he was right, that their "garden of earthly delights was, after all, only wallpaper" (131). But he sees that he, too, is doomed: "my greater sin against heaven was my unwillingness to embrace life" (132). As for Sexton, she declares firmly,

> I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann.
> The poison just didn't take.
> So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
> repeating The Black Mass and all of it. (109-112)

Sexton ends the poem telling us, "I say live, because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable gift" (113-114).

Although Rodriguez is a member of the gay community, with his gym membership and converted apartment, he remains carefully outside it. He is, as César tells him, "too circumspect" (131). Unlike the men he describes, he does not hunger for domesticity or an earthly home, does not fall victim to AIDS—whose physical symptoms would certainly mark him for social alienation—and attends a Catholic mass at which many gay men might feel alienated or uncomfortable. In some ways, he has avoided being as marginalized as his friends; in other ways, he has avoided settling in a place. If he is unable to attain a certain attachment to life on earth, he also, as a follower of St. Augustine, believes he doesn't need it. But not everyone, on the fringe or otherwise, is able to think this way.

I do not know, for instance, if the house of the sleeping man in the East Village is made any more real by its chalk boundaries, or if its construction makes him any less homeless. In its smallness, its artifice and fading lines, the "Living Room" looks pathetic. It is still a meager excuse for the real thing—the same way, I imagine, remodeled Victorians might lack the grandeur and imposing presence they once had. Anyone who is denied a space for private life knows he doesn't occupy a protected place on the earth, no matter how well he attempts to build one for himself. It is much harder for these people to maintain the illusions that people in the mainstream enjoy. As gay men in San Francisco feel life slipping away from them, they build up a constant wall of *things*. Populations don't, and can't, simply and conveniently disappear. If they are forced out of domestic privacy, they will conduct their lives publicly. If their fleshly grasp on the earth is weakened, they will reclaim it through other concrete means available to them. Well-to-do gay men are rarely fifteen items away from nothingness (unless they, like Dorian, fatally invest too much of themselves in one object). But manipulating the small effect allows them

to be layers and layers away from it. Layers of silk and upholstery and lacquered hardwood floors, until life—at least tangible life—no longer feels like something that can be taken away. It is a lonely and difficult thing to understand that having his own patch of concrete gives a homeless man roots, even in a city that denies him food and comfort. But I believe, even as someone who cannot fully understand, that there is a reason why he drew it and that it is important for him to return home to the same square every night.

They are all worthy of concern, those who are homeless conquerors of concrete, those who are lonely, tortured, and mentally ill, Rodriguez, alone in his pew, and the men he paints as lovers of all that is synthetic or wrought. They are all delusional, and they all seem to meet the same tragic end. But if this end is inevitable, there is something to be said for the homes of the late Victorians, for the long, crafted obituary filled with friends and lovers and memories that Rodriguez writes, for leaving something, even a blank mirror, behind. Nearly everyone is like that homeless man, desperate to claim for himself something tangible that will survive him. As embarrassing and violating as it might be to sleep in the living room, parading his life around on the world stage, it will at least be his living room in his boundaries, colors he's chosen, heaps of trinkets he himself has amassed. Re-creations are never adequate substitutions for the real thing; they cannot be. They are the results of desperate attempts to hold onto life, which, when understood, are much harder to criticize than Rodriguez makes them out to be. Attachment to the small effect is a defensive reaction, an attempt to build walls, sturdy and opaque, around an otherwise transparent existence. Alienated people reclaim life this way, through the inanimate and the earthly. Lacking the warmth and comfort of the family home, they cling to material things—marble, green shutters, concrete—to convince themselves they are not going to die. How could they, when there is a place to come home to?

WORKS CITED

Rodriguez, Richard. "Late Victorians." *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 124-33. Print.

Sexton, Anne. "Live." *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*. Ed. Diane Wood Middlebrook. New York: Houghton, 1988. 116-19. Print.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003. Print.