

USEFUL ●

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While cleaning the gutters, I hear a noise —
a hollow stirring in the chimney. I climb to the peak
and down again to the man-high stack.

Kneeling, I place my ear against the masonry for a time.
The late fall birds keen overhead and wave goodbye,
soot against the sky.

On the kneecaps of my jeans—ground black stains
from the flower bed this morning. Next
I will take in the table umbrella.

But, there, again, the stirring.
I rise to the cap
and bend my head to the mesh siding,
listening, a voyeur atop my own house,
exposed, half-mad, alone—
eager for disturbance.

Is it her, moving in the house?
Throwing a log on the fire,
stirring it with the iron
until flames lash at her face?

The sun thrusts a shard of wet light through the clouds,
and I shut my eyes,
still listening, my grimy hands on the
brickwork like two spent logs.

My usefulness has come to this.

She lay next to the fire eleven days, still.
I confess I spent much of that time
elsewhere. In gardens, extending ladders,
mending downspouts. Useful.

Now, down the chimney,
I hear the sounds of love — love expiring
beside the chaste fire,

she and some younger man
who used to come around
between the necessary chores
to pay her the compliment of attention.

I shiver against the bricks.
The cold-boiling clouds retract the shard.

Slowly, I straighten, slowly,
knees popping, resting my head
against the metal cap.
I don't live in this house anymore.

I climb to the peak again,
feel my heart catch.
The ladder ends protrude.
The dormant grass waves.
A low black bird parts from the flock,
sees its double in the window below me,
kisses the glass, and falls dazed
onto the patio stone.

In descending, I nearly fall myself.
In cradling the bird, I am bitten,
my pulse in my fingers.

Under the umbrella,
with a makeshift nest on my lap,
I resolve to quit for the day.

The gutters are half-clean, and the black bird dies on the bench
while I rummage in the pantry for seeds.
It glitters darkly in the leaves like creosote.