

Peter Porter

The Easiest Room in Hell

At the top of the stairs is a room
one may speak of only in parable.

It is the childhood attic,
the place to go when love has worn away,
the origin of the smell of self.

We came here on a clandestine visit
and in the full fire of indifference.

We sorted out books and let the children
sleep here away from creatures.

From its windows, ruled by willows,
the flatlands of childhood stretched
to the watermeadows.

It was the site of a massacre,
of the running down of the body
to less even than the soul,
the tribe's revenge on everything.

It was the heart of England
where the ballerinas were on points
and locums laughed through every evening.

Once it held all the games,
Inconsequences, Misalliance, Frustration,
Even *Mendacity, Adultery* and *Manic Depression*.

But that was just its alibi,
all along it was home,
a home away from home.

Having such a sanctuary
we who parted here
will be reunited here.

You asked in an uncharacteristic note,
"Dwell I but in the suburbs
of your good pleasure?"

I replied: "To us has been allowed
the easiest room in hell."

Once it belonged to you,
now it is only mine.

Riddles for Jack

1.

I am dark and copious
a place to be born

On my floor earth sifts
with the seasons' husks

Winds dry and pollen-thick
stir them, shake my doors

What the tillage crops
is pitched into my dark

Barred, braced against harvest
my storm-timbers groan

I am a hold, a hoard
a made pod ripe in winter

Plunder me then
but know that I exact

Strict tithes for rats, mice
all my familiars

2.

I am sun-bleached, rain-washed
My brick and stone breed lichen

My walls warm from within
My windows light on bounty

Inventories add and subtract
pots, emblems, beds, live cargo

My doors open and shut
I am a passage and a halt

My furniture, my linen
suffer private weathers

I am well and hardly used
My stone face does not shift

But what is born in me
is at length borne out

Blinded by boards I sink
Midden in a rife plot

3.

Unlived-in, not aloof
I am a place apart

My door's weight gives
into soft sainted light

Garnished with flowers
my crevice of worked stone

Rich seam, bronze chime
stones dwindle and plumb heaven

Be still, refined as gold
in the flame's stance

Plate that sustains sparse meals
the faithful's striving

Know that when they are gone
I am a sighing shell

And in my yard
nothing but standing stone

4.

Abandoned now I am
an ocean to myself

I am deep down, agape
solicit stones and coins

My mouth holds its reply
my bowels water

Full of rumour I return
no glib reflection

Come gather at my rim
glimpse my stare's spark

I'll not fall from my pit
nor overstep the eye's sill

I am all settling, seepage
Wishes silt in my loins

Fear them, follow them
My pure juice will scour you clean