From the Inside

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Abstract

HE LIT a cigarette and lay down on his bunk. The four white walls, broken in their vulgar nakedness by a mirror, a light switch and a buzzer, enclosed his body and his mind...
HE LIT a cigarette and lay down on his bunk. The four white walls, broken in their vulgar nakedness by a mirror, a light switch and a buzzer, enclosed his body and his mind. He read his letter again, then tossed it irritably onto the desk. He felt trapped, hemmed in by the barbed rules, petty regulations, schedules, and the laws of the Navy. The ripe, golden years of his life were rotting and decaying before he even lived them. He wanted to get out. He was useless, to himself and to his country.

Going from class to class with listless disinterest; mustering; standing in line for food, clothing, papers; standing by a back entrance for two hours of the night or sitting at a desk in the passageway for sixteen hours; why? . . . to give practice in watching—watching nothing. Each eventless day crawled slowly on its belly into the past.

For four months he had laughed at Iowa; its WCTU, its farmers drunk on 3.2 beer or with their families at the Saturday night show, at the asinine Victorian morals of the college, at the affected college girls who wore their artificial sophistication like a tent, at the narrow-minded state pride and state assertion that called the Missouri the sister ship of the Iowa rather than the Missouri, at the radio’s endless hog market reports. No more: repetition had dulled the humor. He didn’t have the detachment of a sterile philosopher. He had interests at home: a girl, intelligent, poised, who knew how to dress; friends, witty, wanting understanding.
He had tried to escape. Drinking with its loss of sensibility and body control, gave grey dullness a rosy interest, gave boundless confidence, tapped hidden springs of laughter and forgetfulness. Drinking to enjoy the vapid, over-made females who dressed in cheap clothes, used bad grammar, and fornicated. But it became . . . a continual chord of dissonance struck on an untuned piano.

Then what is the whole bitter farce, Life . . . Praised from every pulpit, praised and condemned on printed pages? Bipeds waving their appendages and creating soundwaves and marks on paper, or constantly constructing arrangements of matter. And the bipeds? Arrangements of electrical energy; the energy, just a warp in ether; and ether, nothing. Nothing, doing nothing in a universe of nothing where there was but one element: time. Thus everything reduced to a ludicrous absurdity without a beginning and without an end. What was the use of living or dying? What difference did it make?

But the bipeds had thought of that already and had fashioned an answer. It was God. And God watched over souls. It was a good answer, but it was like putting paper in a hole in the wall and then saying the hole was no longer. It was a fairy tale. Like the primitive man who could envision lightning only in terms of terror, they could conceive of nothing only in terms of distaste and fear: it made them seem small and made their accomplishments insignificant and useless.

If he told this, he would be regarded as a cynic. His mind would appear as a world of slime and quicksand obscured by the miasmas of unhealthy thought. But those who condemned looked at his world from their own tenaments of provincialism, rickety tradition and antiquated religions. They would live, cramped and contorted by their walls of inculcated thought and feeling. He had torn down his tenaments. Now was ready to build firm structures of belief based on his experiences.

But did he think of demolishing first then building, or did he think of building then find that to build he would need space? The former. It was all childish rationalization.

Then he spoke, "But it's all nothing . . . nothing." He smiled humorlessly. "The exalted, the chauvinists, officers, ignorant strikers, great leaders—all nothing—getting excited and worried about nothing." He dropped his cigarette down the tube of the bedpost, turned on his side and closed his eyes. Sleep erased the jumbled thoughts from his mind.