The Barber Shop

Aldis, Mary, 1872-1949

I spend my life in a warren of worried men.
In and out and to and fro
And up and down in electric elevators
They rush about and speak each other,
Hurrying on to finish the deal,
Hurrying home to wash and eat and sleep,
Hurrying to love a little maybe
Between the dark and dawn
Or cuddle a tired child
Who blinks to see his father.

I hurry too but with a sense
That Life is hurrying faster
And will catch up with me.

Right in the middle of our furious activity
Two soft-voiced barbers in a little room,
White-tiled and fresh and smelling deliciously,
Flourish their glittering tools
And smile and barb
And talk about the war and stocks and the Honolulu earth-quake
With equal impartiality.

I like to go there.
Time seems slow and patient
While they tuck me up in white
And hover over me.
The room gives north and west and the sunset sky
Lights the grey river to a ribbon of glory
Where silhouetted tugs
Like tooting beetles fuss about their smoky businesses;

Besides, in that high place
No curious passer-by
Can see my ignominious bald spot treated with a tonic,
Nor can a lady stop and bow to me, my chin in lather,
As happened once;
So I go there often
And even take a book.

There's another person all in white
Who comes and goes and manicures your nails
On application.
One can read with one hand while she does the other.
Because I feel that Life is hurrying me along
With horrid haste
Soon to desert me utterly,
I used to take my Inferno in my pocket
And reflect on what might happen
Were I among the usurers.

One day a low-pitched voice broke in.
I listened vaguely,
What was the woman saying?
"Please listen for a moment, Mister Brown,
I've done your nails for almost half a year;
You've never looked at me."
I looked at that,
And sure enough the girl was young and round and sweet.
She coloured as I turned to her
And looked away.
I waited silently, enjoying her confusion.
The words had been shot out at me
And now apparently she wished them back.
"What do you want?" I said.
Again a silence while she rubbed away.
I opened my Inferno with an ironic glance
Towards Paradiso waiting just beyond.
"Well, rub away, my girl," I thought,
"You opened up, go on."

The book provoked her.
"I'm straight," she said.
"I never talked like this before.
The fellows that come round—
Good Lord!
Showin' me two pink ticket corners
Stickin' out the pocket of their vest,
'Say, kid,—tonight,—you know,'
Thinkin' I'll tumble
For a ticket to a show!
They make me sick, they do,
Boobs like that;
You're different. I want to know
What's in that book you read.
I want to hear you talk.
Oh, Mister, I'm so lonesome!
But I'm straight, I tell you.
I read, too, every evening in my room,
But I can't ever find
The books you have.
I expect you think I'm horrid
To talk like this—but—
I got some things by an Englishman
From the Public Library.
Say, they were queer!
He thinks a woman has a right
To say out if she likes a man;
He thinks they do the looking
Because they want—
Oh, Mister, I'm so terribly ashamed
I'll die when I get home,
An' yet I had to speak—
I'd be awful, awful good to you, if only,
Please, please, don't think I'm like—
Don't think I'm one o' them!
Whatever you say, don't, don't think that!"

She stopped, and turned to hide her crying.
I looked at her again,
Looked at her young wet eyes,
At her abashed bent head,
Looked at her sweet, deft hands
Busy with mine . . .

But—
Not for nothing
Were my grandfather and four of my uncles
Elders in the Sixth Presbyterian Church
Situated on the Avenue.
Oh not for nothing
Was I led
To squirm on those green rep seats
One day in seven.

And now,
The white-tiled, sweetly-smelling barber shop
Is lost to me.
What a pity!