

A Traveler's Tale

*Step over here a moment, if you please;
I'll tell you a tale which may your fancy seize
Or, if you're old, may possibly displease.*

Slipping time, of course, will kill a man,
But, think I, there is something more than time
In every natural death. Oh yes, say I,
Vibrations of the supernatural
Confound our lonely loony lives the more
For our denial of their awesome power.
Let me pluck a rich example from
The undercurrents of my memory:

The beard of wizened white swayed calmly as
The brittle ancient rocked his pensive chair
And reveried his many pasts. He knew
Somewhere within his lonesome bones the ten
Dead-looking fingers he possessed by far
Outnumbered his remaining years or months
Or--what he thought was likeliest--days.
The optimist, yes, optimist I say,
(Ten minutes would have been a closer guess)
Could not foresee his tragedy that day.
Each time he rocked he minused his remaining
Seconds by one tick, one tock, one rock.

The red clay jar stood center on the broken
Top of marble on his yearful desk.
The center of his life, this jar became,
For parent after parent of his line
Of ancestors had forwarded the myth
That supernatural forces lurked within
Its clay, some power that governed life and death.
Religiously, throughout his wifeless life,
The old man trimmed his fingernails just so,
Not too long or crookedly or short,
And dropped the trimmings carefully into
The timeless jar with utmost caution not
To let one fall outside its gaping rim.
Oh, deepest death if ever that should happen--
Time would shuffle to a sickly halt.

But now yeared eyes could plainly see that death
Was far from far away: a mound of yellowed
Fingernails was piled above the rim.
The jar with all his packing down would hold
Not many more, he knew. The time when one
Would vibrate from the pile and fall beside
The jar was near, too near to free his thoughts
From dreams of death and musings of its shape.

In silence as he rocked in silent thought
His black-haired cat traversed the soiled rug
And stopped unseen beside the desk. It gave
A weakened leap (it lived on non-existent
Rats and mice that roamed the undug basement
Of the one-floor house) and missed its mark,
Falling on its once-lithe feline ribs
With an animal thud. The old man stopped
His motioned chair and sat transfixed, wide-eyed.
The cat resumed its feet and jumped its all
And landed on the olden oaken desk.
Its thready whiskers brushed across the jar:
A fingernail end fell to the broken
Marble surface of the desk, and then
The cat fell lifeless to the rugged floor.

A wave of horror washed the old man's brain--
He felt a thrill of long-lost warmth surround
His head and stomach, bones and gasping lungs,
And down into the deepness of the rug
He fell, beside the rocking rocking chair.
As nothingness approached he thought he heard
His doorbell ringing for the first time since
The ancient inundation and the garden
With the stones and fiery wheels had come.

*The aged one was thus undone, kind friend.
If this has entertained you, please be kind
Enough to drop into this hat a coin.*