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A Character

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A CHARACTER

Summers, in hospital whites, he takes your breath away
strolling with the incredible deftness of an eland
among merchants, schoolboys at jab-and-scramble play,
waddling girls, the usual stink and bustle of the streets.
He stretches, easily, onto the balls of his feet
As if he might get soiled, or might recall an errand
and sail out like a white heron, someone from another planet,
dimension, some pure merciful visitor, reincarnate.

Asked for his rent, he hasn't the faintest comprehension
but will pass on without so much as disapproval
of this corrupt town. His is that intense preoccupation
one sees in nuns or Eighteenth Century fops.
He frequents only the most fashionable of the shops
neither to buy nor sell; beyond good and evil,
he saunters along the aisles, lifting the cunningest
little things—his own by right of natural good taste.

And hasn't he, after all, the right—no, almost the duty—
To take care that such fine things are not neglected
In the hands of those who couldn't appreciate them truly?
And after all, if you think what he has suffered,
It is no more than just that he should recover
The few small things he has been able to collect?
Surely a man needs some haven, some small fortress
Against manifest vulgarity and worldliness?

His throw-rugs and furniture are all in whites;
lately, he's done the walls white like a physician's
consultation room. He sits up, languishing, nights,
cleaning his nails, or lies down to inspect his injuries
since, though he lives immaculately, he's
developed a strange susceptibility to lesions
apparently of some old wound he's liable to forget.
He thinks the world is his scab and picks at it.

—W. D. SNODGRASS