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Welcome, Pilgrim, to the Hostelry

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JOHN ALEXANDER ALLEN

WELCOME, PILGRIM, TO THIS HOSTELRY

These harpies, tinted with fluorescent green,
Scent my indigence: the grim cashier
And waitress, calculating on my flesh
The question of my entertainment here.

Even a wretch may climb his purgatorial
Heap of crockery, after all, to clear
Accounts, or fall upon his knees and scrub
A stubborn way to freedom down the floor.

"So Ernie's sick again!" The waitress dourly
Taps her nails and eyes my row of plates.
The second Fury glowers. "Sick or sorry!
That's the way they always are," she grates.

"Listen! Don't I know? That Agency
Must think we run a mission for the bums
They get!" And Ernie, entering on his cue,
Extends a hand, as though to beg for crumbs.

Standing at the door, he pantomimes,
Against his heart, the ultimate defense—
Mortality, and reverently lays
Him down, before their feet, in evidence.

Half a smile, arrested with his breath,
Bends benignly on the sisterhood.
"Oh Lord!" the cashier groans, "our only help!"
And dials a number with a pencil head.

Around the lean impediment, the waitress
Brings the check. And oh! mine host, I cross
Her palm with poverty! I pledge a king's
Ransom on my thorny nothingness!