

Hanging Wallpaper

by James Como (September 2015)

Alone, she sits in a straight wooden chair,
moving only her eyes, and watches the
wallpaper with despair as a breeze teases her neck,
saying to herself, “think, design or stain?”
– but really doesn’t care.
“It’s too much strain,” she mumbles,
“and it’s just not fair. It changes if I even blink.”

Staring brings out stains but dulls design.
So if there’s no pattern – at least one link –
she makes it, moving here one, there another line.

People are in the paper now but weren’t
at first. She put them there and
bursts with joy, because now they’re stuck.

The trick, after all, spares her the cranks.
And, you know, if she’s really well-rehearsed,
she can always bring back even the stickiest
of them, thank you very much.

So watching the wallpaper now is her life,
and whenever she wants – what the heck?
– she can mock a smear, a blotch of strife.

But when she sees her own face she is
suddenly trapped. This happens a lot lately,
and it slaps her hard with fear. She claps
and claps the more, so the people will step out
and be shoved around the floor – even spoken with
(after her nap) – but *certainly* not loved.

So she awakes one day and sees before her an empty chair,
the open window (its half-drawn shade swaying in the breeze),
feels fear now creeping up, and screams,
she thinks, out into the air, but there is no one.

James Como is professor emeritus of rhetoric and public communication at York College (CUNY). His next book, *The Tongue is Also a Fire: Essays on Conversation, Rhetoric and the Transmission of Culture* is due out on New English Review Press in November. Biographical and contact information is at www.jamescomo.com.

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