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Familiar story

by Alan Shapiro

Tonight they have to be both host and stranger,
talking together all evening after dinner;
the candle burning down till they are half
in darkness as they lead each other back
through their accumulated separate lore,
telling the stories they have told before
to other lovers, who are stories now.
They give no truth here, but the practiced glow
of truthfulness: even as they confess
whole-heartedly to niggling attentiveness
disguised as love, to no or too much care,
affection parcelled out till it's not there—
the more one tells, the more the other sees
just how appealing is this honesty,
how generous they are to those who hurt them.
They think this kind shrewd vision won't desert them.
And tonight, at least, it won't, as they forget
what all their lore will lead them to expect
of one another, what they will later owe
day after each slow day when all they know
is the familiar story they are living,
restless, and remote, and unforgiving.
It's then, when they don't feel it, they will need
the love bad days require, and impede.
But not tonight, the candle dying down,
their eyes shut briefly as the light goes on.
Tonight desire's generosity,
desire in each other's all they see,

and all else now is no more than the light
hurting their eyes, too sudden and too bright.

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