

# Hard Autumn

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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Published by Seattle Book Company, [www.seattlebook.com](http://www.seattlebook.com).

\* \* \*

Kate only half listens to the television news as she smokes and gazes at the dots painted on the wall by a previous tenant. She connects the dots in her mind, forming constellations. Dennis, meanwhile, reads his tattered copy of *Being and Nothingness*.

"I wonder what he means by that?" Kate says.

Dennis looks up. "What who means?"

"What the weatherman means. I think he just said it's going to be a hard autumn. What does that mean?"

"A cold autumn," Dennis says, returning to his book.

"But if he meant that, wouldn't he say it was going to be an early winter?"

Dennis shrugs.

\* \* \*

The next day, as Kate leaves for work, she opens the door, takes one step outside, and stops. Overnight, the leaves have changed. The day before, all the trees were green, but the street is now an explosion of yellow, red, and orange.

Kate wakes Dennis.

"Look at the trees," she says as she hands him his glasses.

Dennis rubs his beard. He scratches. He looks outside.

Kate says, "Is this what they mean by a hard autumn?"

Dennis says, "I don't know," and he goes back to bed.

\* \* \*

Overnight the wind blows all the leaves from the trees. Kate says, "This must be what they mean by a hard autumn."

\* \* \*

The next night, the wind blows every last shingle from the roof, and from every other roof in town. She shows Dennis a crack in the paint-dot wall. He is unimpressed.

\* \* \*

The night after that, the rest of the roof blows off, and when Dennis wakes up he sees sunlight through cracks in the bedroom ceiling. He tries to read *Being and Nothingness* in bed, but pages keep falling out of the book. All day long, Kate notices that things feel, well, a little shaky. Hubcaps fall off of cars. Bricks and siding fall from the walls of buildings, and then the exterior walls fall away altogether. When she comes home from work, Kate discovers that the dots on the living room wall have fallen to the floor.

In bed, Kate and Dennis are cold as the wind curls easily through the house. "Dennis," Kate says, "I think this is definitely a very hard autumn." But Dennis is asleep.

\* \* \*

Dennis wakes up to find that, as usual, Kate has already left for work. There is a lot of her hair on her pillow. In fact, Dennis notices that there is a lot of hair on his own pillow. The interior walls have begun to crumble, and Dennis can look through two rooms into the street.

The bathroom mirror hangs crookedly from one corner.

When Dennis washes his face, most of his beard rinses off.

Squinting into the mirror, he notices that his ears wave back and forth on his head as though they were only tenuously attached. He touches one ear, his left ear, and it falls.

"I wonder," Dennis says, "if this is what they mean by a hard autumn?"

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