

An Account of my Dwelling (for Kamo no Chômei)

by Marc Lowe

...Or, to be more accurate, perhaps I should instead have entitled it “An Account of my Wretched Box-like Hovel.” For, you see, this flimsy construction of rotted wood, rusted door-hinges, and broken windows that have been taped and re-taped so many times they are more tape than glass can hardly be termed a dwelling, at least not a proper one. The only person fit to live here, I can honestly say, is me. If it wasn't for the assortment of arachnids, red ants, and flying roaches that share this space, I'd be completely alone. I don't mind the bugs much, to tell the truth—they're full of protein, and I've only been bitten twice (by what I'm not exactly sure). What I *do* mind, however, are the damned crab apples those idiot kids keep hurling at me from the bottom of the hill—or perhaps I should say *ravine?*—up through the slats in the decayed walls, the wasted doorframe, the battered windows. They have this game they like to play: they take turns trying to fling the putrid apples clear through one of the not-so-tiny holes in my hovel; whenever an apple lands inside without first shattering against the doorframe or the window, cries of “Yeah baby!” “I rock!” and “Hole in one!” swell up from below. Most of the time, however, they miss and something is broken. The frequently unhinged door, which I've repaired hundreds of times during my stay here, is covered year-round in pulpy apple shit. There's no smell quite like it.

This place was a damn near ideal abode for me when I first discovered it, left the city to become a writer-hermit, which is basically what I had been before leaving anyhow; I was, as Poe would say, an anonymous “man of the crowd.” The difference between the two worlds was more psychological than anything else, and, being the restlessly cerebral fellow I am, I was able to call my

own bluff; by fleeing the city to live on the outskirts of nowhere—a place so far off the beaten path that even Duras's aging Mr. Andesmas would have felt isolated—I was of course trying to escape from none other than myself. When I was younger I believed, as most young people do, that I had been born with a purpose, a mission. This “green” sort of thinking continued throughout my twenties and early thirties, further spurred on by a series of small, insidious successes as a fictionalist and part-time essayist, which, in turn, led to a series of short-lived, intense affairs with various women, some of whom were prostitutes by profession...But all of these petty details are neither interesting nor necessary to the narrative, which I have already determined to bring to as swift and decisive a close as possible.

What happened, basically, was that I woke up one day with a dull ache in my gut that told me, in no uncertain terms, that I was in fact nothing, a nobody going nowhere (the three “existential Ns” of every man's existence, if you will). The small “successes” had done little but feed my feeble ego, and for a short time they also helped feed me literally, but was that all they were worth? A few bucks, a few fucks? Was that all *I* was worth? (Oh my, this has devolved into a sentimental portrait of the would-be artist as a middle aged man, I'm afraid, which is precisely why I want to finish as quickly as I can.) It was wonderful here at first, oh yes; no mirrors, no microwaves, no cell phones, no electricity: in a word, *paradise*. I was living the Beatnik dream, and, like some romantic Gary Snyder-figure, every day I'd chop wood, fill buckets to overflowing with mostly drinkable well-water, and write haiku on the walls of my humble abode. For example:

Living is dying
A dyslexic ode to God
Who loves anagrams

But then, inevitably, I grew bored, tired, anxious; I couldn't write anymore, for I had nothing more to say, had never in fact *had* anything to say, although—in my youthful pride and naïveté—I'd convinced myself of the opposite, at least for a time. And then the brats started throwing crab apples, which was the beginning of the end.

...Which brings me right back to the present, doesn't it? Have you, by chance, ever read Kamo no Chômei's *Account of my Hermitage*, written in 1212? It's a good book; short, too, which is great for modern-day readers, who are known to have exceedingly short attention spans. In it, the narrator—who insists that he's a sort of hermit, though he was also a hypocrite who led a dual life among the aristocracy at court—tells us that all of life is impermanent, that nature can destroy man and his humble creations in the blink of an eye, and that nothing is worth being attached to in this lifetime. And yet there is one glaring omission from his so-called “eyewitness” account: there was a war raging in and around the capital (Heian-kyô; i.e. modern-day Kyôto) that threatened to change the political landscape forever. And so it did. Well, I too am at war. This shotgun—surprised? did you want more foreshadowing perhaps?—has a single bullet in it. I'm a romantic at heart, yes. I like my sentimental haiku as much as my postmodern fiction. So, how's it going to be, then? Have you any idea of what it feels like to have a crab apple pelt you in the head, or in the groin, when trying to sleep for a few hours? And what happens once the well of “inspiration” has run irrevocably dry. I can hear them growling like feral animals out there. I begin counting from ten to one, a roach the size of a silver dollar crunching beneath the sole of my boot as I slowly back away from the window.

