

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Jamie Lynn Heller

A Stranger's Hands, Her Hands

Her hands were grandma's hands, and it startled me
to see them again.

The grey veins swelled from
their stream beds under dried skin,

knuckles bulged and slowly turned
her fingers into bared tree branches.

The service ended.
She rose to retrieve her purse,

a bulking old leather piece that had slipped
further than she could reach under the pew.

I offered to get it for her. She smiled
and patted my arm gently.

I wanted to cup her hands in my own, kiss them,
hold them against my cheek.

I tried to think of something
to say

that would keep her
near me.

I faltered out
a flat statement.

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She replied quickly
and walked away

while I mourned
each step she took.

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Flour Sack Dresses

When confusing the faces of her family
Seeing in them blends of strangers
Who seem familiar
Mixed with sudden flashes of young lovers
She closes her eyes and sinks into
Clear memories of summer grass under bare feet
Water pulled from a deep well on her lips
And the whispered touch of homemade dresses
Pieced from flour sacks bought at the general store
Their many patterns eventually sewn into quilts
And laid across her lap
To warm her now even on hot days

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Hijacked Memories

"Remember how your sister
once snuck into my room

"No, mother."

I laid ironed shirts on the back of a nearby chair.
and covered her face
with my lipstick?

"It wasn't her."

She likes me to use the pink hangers for her shirts,
the blue for her pants.

Oh, how frightened I was!

That she'd somehow burned herself -

"But mother-"

She gets upset if I don't
put her clothes back in the correct order.
on my curlers! She was such
a beautiful, funny girl.

"But mother, remember-"

When she once discovered a shirt in the wrong place,
they had to call the nurses in.

I always knew she'd make something of herself.

She had that spirit you know?"

"it was me."

I hope she doesn't notice
she's one shirt short today.

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It's Due

They come over once a month.
Doesn't matter how much the grass grows.
I hear the growl of that old truck.
The tail gate thuds open.
My grandsons tumble out of the cab.
"Come back here you son of a bitch I'm doing
the mower You're supposed to pick up the
fucking sticks Go to hell Dad said it's my turn!"
Their father's on the phone, "Shut up!
Shut up!" He tries to yell over the now roaring mower.
I never know who he's talking to.
I watch him from my chair.
The line of his jaw is my dead brother's.
His hair falls across my father's forehead.
He stays outside for quite a while.
When he pulls the screen door open, I look back at the T.V.
"How are ya?" "Fine." "Need anything?" "Nah."
I reach over to pull newspapers off the couch. "Why don't you sit?"
I want to touch him. Just lay a hand on his arm.
"Nah."
I have to tell him something important today.
It's not much, but it's due.
The envelope from the credit union is in my lap.
He stomps across the room to the kitchen.
He still doesn't stand up straight.
It's too late to remind him.
He yells at his boys through the back window, "Hey!
Hey! You can't go all over like that! I've told you shitheads
a hundred times. Now do it right!"
His phone rings.
He hurries back out the front door.
The screen doors slams behind him. The mower stops.
"Shut the hell up You shut the hell up!"

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The tailgate groans. The horn honks twice. They leave.

“Well, shit!”

I throw the letter I’d been holding.

It slides partially under a book shelf.

Her picture watches me from across the room.

“I tried! I tried!” I yell at her again.

The envelope begins to gather dust.

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My Father's Sister

She'd rustled on the peripheral
of my childhood, an aunt who once gave me
a red sucker after I skinned my knee.

We hurry around the kitchen, in each other's way
as only people who are trying to be familiar but
haven't learned a rhythm yet can be.

She's a guest in my home, a guest in my life
I wish would stay long enough to take off her shoes
and learn where the silverware drawer is.

I place on her the burden of carrying answers
to my questions about a man I didn't really know,

but at his name she shakes her head, halfway smiles
and doesn't finish the sentence, "Your father was..."

So he just was.

But when we stop for a moment in our circles,
her hand rests next to mine on the counter,

our skin tones match, finger bones angle
along similar tracks, and I don't need
her words anymore to know my hair will turn white
instead of grey as age spots hide between our freckles.