

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Joan Colby
SITTING

With his pocket knife, he cut a plug
And stuck it in his jaw. The stream
Of tobacco juice brown as
Excrement shot into the brass spittoon
With such accuracy that I was both awed
And repelled.
Half blind from an explosion on the coal docks,
A scant pension let him sit
Through afternoons of radio soaps
His woman loved. Stella Dallas. How the World
Turns. His favorite Just Plain Bill.
He'd push the mower over sparse grass
In the backyard where a Tree of Heaven
Dropped its stinking pods. Pick up the
Pale turds that Laddie deposited.
That dog lived 15 years on bread crusts and
Rancid baloney. He wept digging
The grave in the vacant lot.
I sat on the porch steps observing
A city of red ants. I was the Lord Mayor.
Occasionally, I'd squash one to demonstrate
My powers. I admired how they hauled
A beetle like slaves who built the pyramids
In my book about the Pharoahs.
Sitting in the cellar by the boiler,
He told me about the mule teams
He drove in the copper mines in Butte,
How at 12, he'd run away from beatings,
Later, how he'd ridden the rails
All over the western states. A stream
Of caramel juice hit the spittoon
With regularity. He wore suspenders
And a blue work shirt buttoned tight.

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His shoes were heavy.
His black sweater on a hook by the back door.
Mostly he drank soup because part of his tongue
Had been sliced away. Cancer,
A fearful, whispered word. It didn't stop
The plug, the chew, the spitting.
The pungent tobacco smell
That sat on Papa like his workman's cap
With a brim he tugged as he told me
The names of all his horses.

RAIN AT NIGHT

Rain at night disassembles
The darkness lurking in the slats
Of the wooden blinds. Clots the rich
Greenery of the spruces. The windows
Streak with lamentation and the old
Tattoos tell you conflict will never cease.

Lying awake is what you do
When it rains at night. A steadiness
Reminds you how your mathematical life
Marches in an army of integers.
Think of the uniforms you wore
At convent school. All of you alike en masse,
Imagining yourselves unique and splendid,
All of you heading irremediably toward darkness,
The rain echoing your diminishing heartbeats.

Such thoughts belong to the rain at night
Which saddens with its forlorn operetta.
Here you are, millions of you, in your beds
Listening to the rain that you apprehend
Is falling for you and you only.

A CANTICLE FOR THE BEREAVED

Like casseroles or potted plants,
Poems to ease grief,
Booklets of psalms and lilies
Or a rainbow road where dogs and cats
Await those who have passed
From master to ghost.

Like crossing fingers to avert the evil eye
Or telling hangman jokes,
The bereaved held at arms length
In the hug of schadenfreude

Not knowing what to say, friends tell
Their own grim stories. An Irish wake
With its complements of Guinness
And Bushmills to insulate
The living from the dead.