

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Ken Wheatcroft-Pardue
Cafeteria Wars

The décor: straight out of a Cecil B. DeMille movie,
lots of gold leaf with green and gold curtains,
Doric columns every few feet.
You half-expected Hedy Lamarr
to dance from behind a curtain
balancing Victor Mature's head on a silver platter.

While my sisters and I threw grapes into each others' mouths –
when in Rome, act Roman –
from a raised stage,
a fat organist with a mustache and blue hair
played hits from the 40's on a Wurlitzer.

The worst part came at the end,
when my grandmother would utter the words
that would strike fear into our young hearts:
"It's my turn to pay."
Then their twisted game would begin.

"No, Mom, I'll pay," my dad'd reply.
But by then my grandmother had palmed
a ten-dollar bill into my dad's front pocket.
My dad would counter; point to the ceiling.

And while my grandma was admiring
some particular gaudy gilded chandelier,
he'd stick the ten dollars back in her purse.
This went on to us kids for what seemed like hours.

Each of them inventing ever new-ways
of palming that poor Hamilton onto each other.
Didn't they know that torture
was outlawed by the Geneva Convention?

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Embarrassed as only kids could be, we acted.

Our arms and legs spread-eagled,
we sprawled at our table like Mafia dons after a hit.
When they finally noticed,
my dad and his mom couldn't stop laughing.
No wonder no one ever could remember who paid last.

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Visiting My Mom (1966)

At the crack of dawn,
us kids play possum,
so daddy has to carry us
to the brimful Falcon in our pj's.

Now reeking of Aqua Velva,
we cuddle in blankets
on the green vinyl bench seats.
"Awake" to a car filled with smoke
from Folgers, Winston, Lucky Strike.

Make good time through towns that echo
some unnameable, unknowable past:
Prairie View, Hempstead, Brenham, Giddings, Elgin.

Finally, Austin – the State Hospital
is huge, wooden, white-planked,
like something straight out of *Gone with the Wind*
with screened-in porches
where from the outside you can hear
the insane stomping their feet,
not once, but continually, as if
they're stomping out special coded messages
in Morse Code to their imaginary friends
they must think hover somewhere nearby.

I even spot a few jitterbugging,
swinging their invisible partners behind them.
And from one dark corner one poor soul howls,
the sound of the purest human despair,
the saddest music I've ever heard.

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I Miss

our goofy life together.
Cheap dates, free museums,
our bookish, old movies life.

I miss some one to laugh with,
while out getting an afternoon buzz
from espresso shots and chocolate, lots of it.

I miss our homemade cards,
always years behind the tech curve,
coupon-clipping life.

I miss you taking forever to pick your entrees,
dancing with you in the kitchen barefoot,
your laughter when I sang off key – always.

I miss our foster dogs
romping in the living room,
homemade napkins, old sit-com life.

I miss you next to me,
your smile always steadying me.
I miss our silly, our goofy life together.