

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

Marg Walker

How the Swedes Eat Grapefruit

After his surgery my father asked her
to cut around the grapefruit wedges,
free each triangle from the membrane
so he could slip it pink and sweet
onto the breakfast spoon, no struggle.

"I've always preferred to eat it that way"
he simply said. My mother stared
and, knife poised, stated for the record
"You've never mentioned it to me
in fifty-seven years."

My father's lineage gave rise to men
both stalwart and judicious who,
long before his Swedish grandmother,
fed from the hearth of cottage or farm
learned to live without complaint

no matter what the fare. But now
a new-born line of thought unspools:
Let go of habit falsely fixed.
Let go of what's unfixable.
For all the rest, ask now.

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What There Is to Remember

In the darkened bathroom the candle flame
lures us with its slender light.
From the edge of the tub I read to you
of wizards and noble adventurers
whose courage and kindness
draw you into their splendid quest.

Lounging in bubbles, you lift your knees
into snow-covered mountains. Wall shadows
shift, a forest flickering beyond our campfire.
You burst upright at a daring rescue,
ease down again to grieve
the suffering of an injured creature.

At five, you are a specialist
in the brotherhood of baths and books.

Tonight you asked for candlelight –
an adventure of our own making –
and I supplied it as readily as any instruction
for what may lie ahead unseen,
my voice in the dark your touchstone,
steadfast as the pull of the page.

This is what there is to remember.
This is your mother, reading.

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I Push Her Wheelchair in the City of My Childhood

We bump across the lawn from the parking lot
to the entrance of the public gardens where
passing the feathered grasses and sentinel
chrysanthemums my mother comes face to face
with the puzzle of lingering autumn.

Almost Thanksgiving and she didn't want to come –
too cold, too much trouble – but now, sun struck,
blanket tucked around her, she murmurs "oh" and "oh"
at the profusion of purples, golds, lush greens
beyond all reason still thriving. Why so much, God?

Begonia, impatiens, verbena.
Common zinnias like she planted after the war.
She studies each sign. "Coleus," I read aloud
and pause. My sister's favorite. "Cathy was just here,"
my mother guesses, though she was not.

I push again, her small weight heavy in the chair,
the wheels stubborn on the crinkled path. Soon
none of us will return to the city of our childhood.
For now, we are guests in the patient gardens.
Hibiscus, hydrangea, a triumph of wild rose.

My mother moves her lips, rummaging
for the words "annual," "perennial,"
though she never could keep them straight.
"What lasts?" she settles for asking
but I don't know how to answer.