

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

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THE PRODIGAL RETURNS

They said I have no reason to worry. That I can find
A home within myself. But what if my mind is a home
I don't want to live in? They said I should return, stay
Here for one month. Three months. Thirteen. I have
Not tended to this house. When I swung the door open, faced
Myself for the first time, the frame broke. Sins spilled
Sawdust from the ceilings, blinding, suffocating. Outside,
My father asked me what was wrong. I could not breathe,
Much less explain why. When I stepped onto the floorboards,
Rotting timber crumbled, collapsed. I plunged face-
First into colonies of questions thudding my eardrums, eating
Through my head like termites. *How*
Did it come to this? If it is not my fault,
Why must I still endure it? Sleet shot
Through fractured windows. I looked for quilts to keep warm—
I saw only straitjackets of promises I could not keep
To myself. I looked for a bed, a couch, a carpet—there was
Nothing. I had pawned off parts of me on strangers
Disbelieving they were scavengers squatting
In the fissures of my body, a street comforting to them
But foreign to me. The best thing about being
Outside with a group of people was ignoring
The weight of my own cracked skin, chameleoning
To classrooms, crowded malls, karaoke bars. Solacing,
To fasten my dead ends to their dusty pavements, to fire up
The lampposts, to laugh, to scream, to turn all the traffic
Lights green. When there were people constantly crossing
My path, I could not see all the damaged roads that needed
Fixing. Screeching tires and blaring horns turned
Crashes into quiet whispers. But now that the street is empty,
I can no longer ignore the sirens, the stop signs, the speed
Limits. My mind calls to me. I trudge back, mourning
Time and soundness lost on trying
To make a home out of mere visitors.

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MOVING DAY

It took me months to pack up all my things. I started with clothes. Some shirts. Some pants. Your soot-black sweater I took. The silver necklace you gave me last summer.

I stopped wearing them. I hoped you would notice.

I packed the sheets next. Pillowcases, beddings, blankets. You never asked why. You went to the basement instead. I understood. We only need beds for sleeping.

Not for shaking from the cold of someone's hands when they hold us but no longer love us.

I packed the toiletries last. Soap, shampoo, toothpaste. I stopped showering for a week. You were fine. I mean, you didn't have to pay the water bill.

I wanted you to ask me what was wrong.

Or at least tell me to take a goddamn shower.

When I told you I was leaving, you smiled and held the door wide open for me. You took out a handkerchief and patted my cheeks dry. There was a skip in your step as you carried my bags to the car. (Last night, you'd filled up the gas tank. You'd been waiting for this. But I wanted you to break my car, slash the tires, burn my bags.

I wanted my absence to ruin you as much as yours ruined me, so much that I would have no choice but to stay.)

I had my foot on the pedal, my eyes on the rearview mirror. Why was it so easy for you? As I looked back, I saw that my room was the only one left standing.

You destroyed everything long before. You left first.

You left me with your sweater, your necklace,
a full tank of gas, an endless road,
and no home to come back to.

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ODE TO MY RICE COOKER

Basket of plenty, cornucopia of blessings, giver
Of life. Emblem of prosperity and abundance.
Though you proceed from the humbling,
Dusty walls of shameful metropolitan
Factories, of mindless managers
Who overwork the poor, who view
Selfless entities such as yourself
As mere products, as profit, your nascency
Is anything but disgraceful. When you were
Birthed, machines and metal whirred
In proud applause. Your fellows clinked
Their glass lids together, celebrating
Your creation. From the very moment you were
Boxed, imbued in you were gifts
Of power. Of purpose. Of the promise
Of home. How lucky, blessed, indeed
Graced by the divine, I am, for you
To have found your home in the chaos
Of my kitchen. O bearer
Of edible pearls of the orient. O sacred
Uterus of stainless steel and plastic. O Teflon-lined
Magical chamber in which lowly, indigestible
Grain transforms into glorious, heaven-
Sent clouds of nourishment. You are
The salvation of bran, the messiah
Of oryza sativa, the redeemer who chooses
Not whom she saves. In you, all crop
From red and brown to jasmine and calrose find
A mother. A nurturer, a caregiver, with no
Complaints, no demands, no impositions.
With only the numbing, violet fuel
Of electricity you give sustenance
When asked. With only a small space

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On the kitchen counter you provide the most
Reliable of companionships. Most dependable.
Most unchanging. You stand by me when others
Do not, you on your small, delicate
Feet of tireless rubber, on your holy mat
Of microfiber towels. When the world
Is against me, when I am derailed by the bone-
Crushing abasement of bosses and aunts-in-law,
You are there for me. You listen to my laments
With patience, with compassion, and when I seek
From you a response I receive not
Anger, nor unsolicited advice, but
Refreshing wellsprings of soft,
Strengthening meal. Through
My pregnancy, through my doctorate
Theses, you cared for me in the mornings,
Noons, and nights, in moments of burning
Gastronomical desire, in moments of crippling
Nausea, in homesickness. I am grateful for each
Day that I pour grain and water into you
To be transfigured, that I am graced
By your alabaster armor adorned with cerulean
Lilies — a reminder of the peace, the handfuls
Of heaven you bring to me.

This poem was first published on Paper Crane Journal's online gallery at this link:
<https://www.papercranejournal.com/ode-to-my-rice-cooker-by-ikera-olandesca.html>

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FLIGHT 5J 9218

The split second before I step
onto the plane that will take me
back, I freeze—

suddenly, the hum
of the engine is the wail
of a siren pointing to the exit—

They ask me to hand over
the boarding pass, take my seat, but—

all I can think of is
how the stinging
coastal breeze is warmer
than the inside of this vacuum,
how I would rather be within
these borders and not the seat belts,
how I wished the fuel ran out
and the airport shut down
and the planes stopped flying,
if that gave me an excuse to stay
for one more night.

I forget what home is.
Is it still home if I fear
coming back? If I always
keep the windows closed,
the doors locked? Why
do the planes always take
me away but leave pieces
of my heart behind? When
I return to get them back,
I end up leaving more
in their place. Like bread crumbs—
I follow them to
the candy house—

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Why is the witch's lair
warmer than home?

Will I die here?

Is this just a fairytale?

Will the best things
always be fairytales?

Why do they lie about
happy endings? Why

do we have to end at all?

Why does the house burn

when it gets too sweet?

How far must I go to find

the kind of home I want
to return to—

The split second before the plane

leaves, I think of how long it has taken

for our coasts to close in, for our paths

to cross. I think of how long until it happens

again, and how long until I might finally stay—

I leave bread crumbs

with every tear that stains

this ground, so if I can't

get back to you, I hope

you will follow them

back to me.