

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

Christy Prahl
The Professor

A man has pulled up a stool
to a staged reading of Ulysses
on a modern college campus
for Bloomsday.

He enters the space while a red-haired chemistry major
details the primal taste
of piss in fried kidneys.

There are many better things he could be doing.
Clearing last year's newspapers from the basement,
eating a hamburger with his 13-year old daughter,
as he has every Wednesday since the split from his wife.
Preparing tomorrow's lecture on
agrarian tropes of 19th century novels by women.

But this is the thing that he chooses to do
and will choose to do for the next seven hours.
Like Leopold Bloom he will contemplate his life.
Like Leopold Bloom he will measure his futility
in four repeating syllables.

The thing about this man is he knows he is dying,
that his pancreas has turned against him,
dormant, but determined.
He won't yet tell his family,
who seem to be getting on fine without him.
No need to inform the department
until he can no longer stand in place for
ninety minutes.

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On his last morning on Earth,
his friends will read Whitman and Rilke to him
until he forgets about narrative altogether,
about the start and stop of living,
and simply hears each undulation
of his withering breath
as a requiem.

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The Baker

My sister will bake you a pie
with black custard inside for your husband' 50th birthday
or one that looks to be topped with meringue
that's actually mashed potatoes.

She'll bake you three dozen fortune cookies
where the small slips of paper inside read, "Try Again."
Her idea of a King Cake is one with the baby
missing from the center
so the Catholics eat,
the children search,
and all of it comes to nothing.

What a kick.

She didn't invent the vagina geode cake, but she keeps one in her shop
window

and has orders on file through October.

She'll bake you a cake in the shape of an ear of corn with a bite taken from
the center,

a sad clown holding a can of beer.

There's a surprisingly large market for these wisecracking cakes.

I don't fully understand this kind of bakery.

To me a cake's purpose is to congratulate yourself because you didn't cry
at the office today

or finally cleaned the grout from the bath tiles.

Today is my birthday

and I'll receive a cupcake

topped with a set of plastic clattering teeth,

reminding me she's always been the funny one.

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The Masseuse

I will touch your back for ninety dollars.
You'll feel better when you leave
is my personal guarantee.
The room will be quiet and smell of lavender.
Music hanging soft to disappear.

You're mostly just blank parts to me,
a map to follow from the back of the head
to the arches of the feet.
A kind of Braille
from the knots of your shoulders
to a jagged stack of vertebrae pushing
outward through the skin,
down through the electric fences along the backs of your thighs.
Once in a while I may care about what happened to you.

Maybe you were broken by love,
wrecked by money,
erased like an errant cobweb by so much unseen work.
Maybe you lost a child
who lives on in the cords in your neck
that flinch in pain with each grocery bag
rewinding him.

Stillborn?
Soldiering?
(Mine was a car crash after a party).
Was he drinking?
Was he alone?

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For you I'll work ten minutes extra.
For you, when it's done,
I'll show how to straighten your back,
pull back your shoulders in line with your hips,
lift your arms toward the ceiling,
and hold.

Cast your arms slowly out and down to your sides.
Envision yourself a moth.
Hold.