

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

James Cariddi

Lunch Duty Twenty-Twenty

The grass has been tortured today,
leaving lingering in the aftermath
a scent evocative of baseball;
green and sharp in its
organic tang, almost channeling the tender bouquet
of fresh cut garden cukes plucked
before growing too big—
but more suspenseful,
with a hint of gasoline

Where children choose to kick a ball or dream on a rock
for thirty minutes, taking a break from the smell of cleaning
chemical QT3 sprayed, wiped, sprayed again
and left to almost dry

then back inside

Guarded by the simple cloth of all the festive, fun little masks
usually worn when not eating rows apart in the room of learning
and washing hands, under the shadow of impractical Pontius Pilate
guidelines making no mistake about sparing not a word for *Bisabuela*
at home, say

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“Look Mister, look at the dead wasp.”

It’s the same one that was shown to me weeks ago by the three kids who come to school the

other two days;

long, shiny black,

winged little finger of an alien xenomorph

twisted onto a tiny face cradled by

yellow-flecked forelimbs as if embarrassed

by its non-decomposition in the dust atop a low

bookshelf by the far desks.

And there’s another one on the back ledge of their

constantly sterilized classroom they haven’t

talked about yet.

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Pulaski Prayer

At the lowest achieving middle school in my state,
named after an intersex immigrant cavalry officer who,
despite never winning the respect of his regiment, saved
George Washington's life twice during the revolution,
having his guts fatally ripped out by grapeshot the
second time, it's the first day of school and

kids are gathering for the start of the second full-year back,
fully in-person, after a disastrous first one in which students
continually came down to my office suffering sensory overload-
related panic attacks from the volume and calamity of their
classrooms and the hallways.

Administration has assigned me to help with a classroom
of incoming 6th graders for the day,

and as they trickle in I'm able to feel slightly useful when I explain
to a new student from Ecuador in broken Spanish that it's okay
he didn't speak English as his teacher (who was running around
the room getting things ready) speaks Spanish, and to have a seat.

Not knowing what to do next, I stand back and watch another staff mem-
ber
demand "collateral" for a student to use the restroom, explaining it meant
that she needed to surrender something important. The little girl looks
shocked
then looks at me and rolls her eyes.

Just then the loudspeaker announces that its time for breakfast, and for
students
to go down to the cafeteria. The student from Ecuador stays seated while
the
others bound out the door, until another kid slaps him on the shoulder to
tell him
in Spanish that breakfast is being served.

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A couple minutes later, the class quietly files back in, heads bowed, because
apparently, despite the announcement, there is no breakfast today after all.

Taking the hit like little gamblers, however (who have been neurologically evaluated to more easily absorb loss because of their copious experience), they are mostly all laughing and having fun again a few minutes later

Because although the loudspeaker let us down

and not all adults, or kids, are kind

reflected in some of the easy smiles around the building

It's a fresh start and a new slate and a sort of spring is seeping through the stained vents

Stalking around the planters in the hall full of fake mixed with real

Above demons allegedly whispering in the basement and

over the heads of vaporous ghosts hogging bathroom stalls

As a slowly trickling feeling now filling the air almost like a smell, the thought, nearly a promise, that this year, unlike so many before, figures to be better than the last.

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Shooting Star

Saw a shooting star
just blip on by
one night
under a clear farm sky
when I looked up while my dog was pooping.
My stomach tightened, fluttered, then relaxed
as I realized my life could now be divided into
parts consisting of
before and after witnessing
this marvelously incomprehensible
event of space.
What did it mean—
Nothing, a nameless voice called out
through the darkness—
But what did it mean to me?