

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4

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False Dawn

Victor was awakened by the sound of chirping birds – hundreds of birds, of mixed species, in the trees and the ivy that climbed the walls of his brick apartment building. Victor loved this time of year because the birds woke before he did and he'd listen to them for half an hour with his eyes closed before he had to get up, imagining that he and Irene were on a country picnic. But something sounded wrong this morning. So wrong he was afraid to open his eyes.

The birds. They sounded alarmed. As if cats were about. Or boys with slingshots. Maybe dark clouds were rolling in. Yes, there was a charge in the air – Victor could smell it, and feel a statical crispness in the sheets. Is that what the birds were saying – that a storm was coming, so take cover.

That made sense. But it didn't feel right.

Victor kept his eyes shut and now he had the sense, even through his eyelids, that the sky was brighter than he expected. It was as bright as 7:00, or even 7:30!

Was that it? Had he overslept? Had his alarm failed to go off at 6:30? And, if it was 7:30, could he still hurry and catch the 7:57 bus, reaching it just as Irene took a last, concerned look back down the street before climbing the three steps.

Now Victor opened his eyes. Raised himself on one elbow. And reached for his alarm clock. But it said – in red numerals that looked larger than usual – 3:30.

What?

It wasn't too late at all. It was too early. Yet bright out.

How could that be?

Oh, the electricity must have gone off in the middle of the night. The reset to 12:00 when it came back on. Three and a half hours ago. But

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– and Victor smiled at this thought – his friends had awakened him on time. The birds. He'd be fine. He'd make the bus.

Victor looked to the window, toward the birds, to thank them. But the sky was too bright. It was brilliant and in the wrong place, like the sun was rising in the west. Was that why ...

Before he had time to put the thought into words, Victor understood what had happened. And he was one of the few who did. For people in the city the blast was so intense that reflections were transformed into shadows, and shadows became bas relief sculptures. People in the immediate suburbs felt only an odd shift in their dreams before their faces bubbled and popped like eggs in a frying pan. Even out where Victor was – “almost in the country” – few people woke in time, and fewer still were able to put the pieces together in the seconds before the blast swept every bird from every branch.

Werner Low's stories have appeared in twenty different literary magazines including, "The Journal" (of Ohio State University), "Lily Literary Review," "The Literary Review" (of Trinity College, Hartford), "The Pedestal Magazine," "Slow Trains," "The Square Table," "Taj Mahal Review," and "Void Magazine." He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts