

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/1

Michael Todd Steffen

Down from the window...

"Twelfth Night," Phyllis McGinley

The yellow leaves out on the back porch cast
Dallying sunset light into a film
Of dust, bedfellow with the pollen red
In my eyes trying to clear for this air.
All talk was finally uncontainable
But built to more deliberation when

I took a pen and tried again to write.
Though weightless words could pan to something left
And balance the tip I had begun to feel
Startled by an unexpected noise—
The little winter in the icebox clatter
Then hiss to fill back on its own, settling,

Mimicking a presence in the house...
The carved face in the pumpkin out front could be
Terrifying no more than to let
The kids in costumes ogle for a treat
With tricks in store, if fleeting, to be carried
Year round in heart with flame from angled eyes.

The Daughter He Lamented

Littleness grew up to say touché.
He read it in the journals, saw the neighbors'
Lawns where bicycles and wagons lounged on grass,
Pondered the hollow in the tire swing hung
Down from a limb whose trunk gleamed zinc and green
With moss knit by the shade on yarns of dew.
How did a parent come to trust a world
Of blocks with intersections and skateboards,
Balls with noses that bounced unpredictably

Off for the contest of a screeching chase?
How did they trust a culture's independence
Reading bedtime tales with the pine needle
Strewn floors of the forest where the ogre
Introvert in verdure stood? Not to mention
Household squabbles over tv programs,
Over tuna or tacos, toast or cereal,
Bologna or spam or fruit juice, over pop.
In him you feel the emptiness lamenting

These things a mother's focus sinks upon
Into some clarity of resonance
With memory. The girl with the umbrella
On the blue container of earth salt
Is both the girl of means in her deep world
And every umbrella gathered in the rain.
Full of stinging grains the sentiment
Casts to replace her now that she has grown
And gone away. He could have been her father.

Jealous Mirror

Waiting, he sees her in it while she cleans
Some furniture in the other people's house
Holding her back straight, worrying the rag
Across another surface, mahogany,
Which needs to show these people their reflections.

If that's what brings a loaf home, who is he
To want to throw a stone into its silver
(The window open) ogling her, holding her backside
And the other guy's face partially from the Journal?
His eyes dart out swimming to say something.

When she answers, her voice in unison
With a diligence undreamt of in love at home
That rubs whiskers on her cheek, taps a finger
On his belly, sharpens with pitch worthy of her
To land above him, nobody, the invisible

Element in the scene they're half aware of
Gnawing on a toothpick with his shoulder against
The ridged bark of a tree, part of the shadows
Deepening in the penumbra of evening
Toward darkness for their promenade back home.