

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

Steve Glines

Last patch of ice in the spring

It's spring but the color of life is brown.
The robins have been here for a month
or more but their dance is over
I have seen robins and wrens in flight with bits of grass
sure signs of homemaking in progress.
So it is spring.

But in a far corner of my yard
the last patch of ice lingers, shrinking.
A week ago it came to my back door.
I would never think of violating its pureness
so I trapped myself in a winterbound cottage
longing for spring, true spring.

I can escape to the back yard now
but I resist the temptation
while the glacier still stands. Silly habit?
The ground an inch below the muddy swamp of spring
remains firm and solid,
the field mouse asleep in its burrow.

To the worms and bugs and field mice winter lingers
to halt the northerly progress of nature's tourists.
The pair of robins, I don't know the boy from the girl,
prance and peck at the earth but the worm,
succulent morsel,
remains frozen, imprisoned, still safe by winter's grasp.

And so the migrants hold back.
Honking geese, who never left, are angry:
no fresh shoots of green, no savory salad
served fresh from the farm, yard, and golf course,
only brown withered stalks of last year's bounty
made dry as tinder by the winter gales.
Straw for another's house.

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It is time, time to throw open
the door to the back yard,
slip on my mucking boots
and parade the perimeters of the estate.
When I was a child on a much larger estate
I knew every inch, every rock, perennial and lair.
A tree had fallen, probably before I was born,
blocking a small stream,
crossing at a gap in an old stone wall.

The pond behind the dam was full of life.
Skunk cabbage announced the true beginning of spring.
Skunk cabbage is the first green explosion
reaching for the sky before a canopy of oak and maple
place shadows on a dark, wet, primeval scum pond.

The pond with its log dam outburst with life
and I knew every inch of its periphery
having only ventured once
barefooted into the muck up to my knees and sinking
(there were minnows and pollywogs there)
a situation requiring my mother
and a hastily broken green sapling.
Mortification for a little boy!

I would sit on that log for hours, for years.
When I left, the log had split from its use as a bridge
and the water had begun to flow more freely.
Some neighborhood kid, I was no longer a kid,
but a dispassionate and clean observer now,
had attempted to rebuild the dam with stone
and twigs, a childhood beaver. But even that valiant effort gave way
when last I looked and
I have no reason to look again.

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I have no stream, no waterworks on this estate
and no time to learn each rock and lair.

A line of overgrown pine
makes a fuzzy property line to the south,
a rickety waving fence
almost marks a northern boundary
except that it crosses the line at an angle,
the west by a stone embankment,
the east by a road and Bumblebee Park beyond.

What is now my yard was once a large brick stable,
burned to the ground at the turn of the last century.
My house and my neighbor's were built from the rubble
and its stone foundation still defines the only feature
in an otherwise unremarkable yard.

Rubble from that inferno lies inches below the ground
and voids constructed from falling timber,
stone and brick make homes for chipmunks, groundhogs
and other assorted and as yet unidentified rodents
still asleep.

Upon that bed of rubble I built my garden.
Sixteen, eight inch by eight foot boards
and three tons of topsoil
gave birth to Bumblebee Farm.
I imagine rows of red ripened tomatoes,
but it's way too early
and the robin pounds at a still frozen earth.