

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Roxanne carter

HERE WAS THIS GLAMOROUS FREAK

she needed a way through.

the arc of her ankle suspended in the air, an arabesque on a rhinoceros: a whimsical composition. a horse stampedes through her head, whinnies towards the wind. a souging sound in the wind. it's like fucking a child, they all said.

she hasn't taken her nap today.

equestrian latitudes, falling into shadow. standing in tall golden grass, cinders falling from her fingertips fill an empty swimming pool. her head haloed by mustard grass doused with sun, her lean body leaning colt-like to the sea. she'll go down, she'll go up, clutching her cigarette, setting fire to the room that entraps her. she'd rather be shoplifting, eyes as big as tea-cups, a diva in a stretch limousine, devouring long city blocks, towering buildings. gangling girl in a leotard swishing shoulder grazing earrings back like hair, switch hitting lip kisses, turning her cheek side to side.

seasick she slew mink, ermine, fox; feasted on their flesh, pressed blood stained fingers to her eyelids, a thousand weasels staring out from her fine-toothed face. on an bare mattress floating in the middle of the floor, ship sinking, retching over the side.

a girl kneeling in a field of long grass, a girl surrounded by prairie, her skin like honey, camouflaged by the summer, it's already time, summertime: the crows waiting in the trees. the sun already setting. she's not allowed to play with the other children. she doesn't know what to do with herself when she's alone. an inability from which she'll never escape.

her morning routine, an egg in a porcelain cup, one earring brushing a reedy shoulder blade, her head lop-sided, somewhat ridiculous but preying on that dissonance: something awry, aesthetic incongruity. an eyebrow pencil in one hand, a cigarette in the other; she reaches again and again for the cup of coffee topped off with brandy but though she raises it to her mouth her lips never mark the edge with their print of red, a mark as distinct as a fingerprint circled mercilessly round the tip of her cigarette.

there are ways in which she's not pretending but it is difficult to see what those might be.

she wants to be taken seriously and still have fun: sliding her bracelet up and down her arm, her voice breaking over the din of conversation around her, her voice cutting all the others out, a long string of ohs issuing from her lips. she'll store her best lines for later. there are things she'd rather not do. she's already looking off or away, murmuring oh darling, clutching the tablecloth with her free hand, then rising, her hand lifting suddenly to caress the enormous necklace banding her throat. a decorative gesture of annoyance. a halfhearted scowl crossing her features; she's disgruntled by the passage of time, every moment she's coerced to sit there waiting, wasting her time. her display of impatience works beautifully:

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she gets what she wants, she's served, bought and sold, looked over and relied on. what took so long, she complains.

maybe it isn't a real hot toddy; maybe there is nothing there, or it has gone lukewarm and that is why she never drinks. she holds the cup in her hands, warming herself, her attention skipping on the tableau of glossy flowers, silverware and glass laid out before her.

to take anything away from her: she screams.

be quiet, the camera's here, she says. the camera's already here. can you give me that line again, ach-choo!she'll react based on how she's followed, she'll let herself be convinced that she is still beautiful, but sad, they will say afterwards. but sad. sitting on the beach, needing to be convinced of the tides' ceaseless pull.

her frailty, calculated to seduce. she couldn't stop herself from knowing how to recognize an easy mark. she didn't mind being in the way. she wanted out. her concern for economy: one would not be enough for her, she needed more or a way of making more: the capital of the kisses she sometimes allowed.

the trouble is in finding the right image. she wanted to make something of herself, no easy compromise on her integrity, no resignation to a formulaic girlish beauty. crashing her mercedes on the way to a party, cutting off her hair, dying the rest quicksilver to make herself a model, a girl going grey in her youth. she cultivated bad habits, urged men into her bed then set them on fire. she couldn't find her money; her dress had no pockets. her pocketbook empty save for a tube of lipstick. she doesn't need anyone to hide behind, she'll walk out without paying the bill. facing herself and whoever might be watching. it's the only thing to do.

what is she trying to regain? a look of anguish crosses her, blanches her, thins her from the inside out. she'd like to dance on film, a mermaid surfacing with her hair billowing around her, her skin sheened blue by the plaster walls of the swimming pool. blown up photographs taped to the walls, a host of disembodied faces keeping their eyes out for her. do you like, do you like, do you. she wants to know, raising her hands to her breasts, enlarged by silicone injections, her own eyes orbiting far-off planets. she'll only make it halfway through, then leave or perhaps fall over, her whole body collapsing, making a ripple as volts of electricity shiver along her skin. she is callously left face-down; i stand back to survey the wreckage.

she is markedly absent. tennis shoes hang by their laces from telephone wires but there is no sign of her.

there are girls in black leotards and fishnet stockings walking down to the beach with black eyeliner smudged around their sockets. they will scissor-kick sharks with their legs and wrestle each other down into the sand, sink slowly as the cliffs close in around them, frat boys hurling empty beer cans from the bluffs, white stucco houses facing out towards the sea. looking out on oil platforms, looking out on islands, looking out for her walking her dog, her hair uncontrollably long, drained of all color.

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what has been taken away is already lost. the space in front of a camera, which holds her steady, resolved to commit the same mistakes, to take the queues she missed the first time. in order to compensate for her losses she grins so that her whole face is transformed into a mockery of a grin. nothing is left of her but that smile; where she was there remains only her phantom, reaching out across the frame.

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