

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Rick Marlatt **Opening a Soda**

No undertaking could be more delicate,
especially when it's the last one in the fridge,
half your students misspelled "thematic,"
and your wife charred the pork chops again.
Ask her a question you know will keep her busy
filling the evening air with layers of sound.
Something like the car payment or her mother's operation.
Whisper a concession of ice cream to your oldest son
in exchange for his retrieval of the paper from
the front step. Keep nodding at her. He'll reluctantly
slouch his way outside. If you've thought ahead, you've
brought your coffee mug to the table, of
course you've rinsed it out and added ice.
Point at your youngest son's empty glass all the while nodding.
He'll eye you all the way to the fridge, so be transparent.
Let him see you fill his glass with milk. Keep nodding.
As you put the jug away slide the can into your pocket.
It's coldness will gnaw into your skin, a price you're willing to pay.
Guard the bulge in your pocket with your off arm.
Hold the glass out and watch his eyes dance.
Set it in front of him, kiss his forehead, remember you're still nodding.
Just before you sit back down examine your palm
with a look of frustration. When you hear the front door open
excuse yourself to the restroom to wash your hands.
With commendable nonchalance, take your mug with you.
This far into her oration, it's likely she won't notice.
What happens next is crucial. Close the
door. Turn the water on and cough as you pop the tab.
No, this isn't superfluous. Their ears are
trained for the cracking of aluminum.
If you fail to muffle the sound, they'll come synchronically
like mangy wolves to the fresh kill, moths to the light,
blazing comets to the nearest atmospheric gravity.
Pour slowly, experience the expanse of the fizz.
Hide the empty can under the sink. Push it far
back. Enjoy of a couple of initial sips.
But each second is imperative. When timed perfectly,
you're right behind your oldest as you return
to the table and when you sit down
she'll finish the story. Give her a good smile. She deserves it.
As she replenishes your plate with a mountain of potatoes
and your sons guess how many bean seeds are in each pod,
take your first long gushing swallow. Try to conceal your bliss.
Few men ever count themselves this lucky.

Crane Watchers

Spring is inventory for everything I owe my dead grandfather, most notable is my sense of irony. After giving up on his marriage, he leaves me this rust-boned tractor that refuses to die. Following a life detesting the smell of fear, he leaves this talon-like, formidable nose.

His only conviction was to never waste a minute and I have this watch that has never worked. Odd that a man who so famously hated trees was buried in a casket bordered with evergreens. Such a mystery, it is, that I find so much fodder in a man who detested poetry. A self-described people person, he treated his family like the soil he suffocated with pesticide. He hated passionately the tourists who parked alongside the road with their binoculars. Retired folks from Florida, Alabama who drove their RVs to Nebraska to watch the cranes nest. He used to swerve at them in his truck, screaming, "Get off the road you dumb sons a bitches!" He'd turn, his lips a contortion of barbed wire, "By Christ, one day I'll mash 'em into the ditch." Worst of all were the converted mid-westerners, he called them defectors, deserters, traitors. 600,000 cranes descend each March for two weeks on their route from the desert to Canada. It's said the early people here formed languages from mimicking the sounds of the birds. Watching a Georgia couple pile out for what looks like their final crane trip, I think of him. They set up a picnic table on the shoulder, she pours out tinkling ice tea from a green thermos. He lights up a smoke, nibbles on a perfectly cut ham sandwich, they wear matching sunglasses. They sit silently in the dusk watching the cranes hunker down, her head rests on his shoulder. Passing them slowly I catch myself smiling in the rear-view; this I get from my grandmother.