

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

Steve De France

Eating

Early in the morning

the day after

Thanksgiving.

bleakly I regard

my fellow patrons,

squeezed from

surrounding tract homes.

They nudged out & stumbled away

from frightened lives.

They stand at the restaurant wall

looking at grease splattered

"Especials."

These accidental victims of excess,

butts bulging, thighs dropping,

ruminate on pancakes or burritos

chorizo or bacon, tacos or tuna salad

eggs with hot chili. or coffee, tea, or Cerveza,

They order---filling an emptiness,

jockey for a seat overlooking a sea of hybrid

station wagons plastered with "baby on board" signs.

These folks dying of cancer, or filled with divorce,

or worse yet,

homes infected with lies that kill,

homes of infidelity, homes of indifference,

homes one plots to leave,

homes with children without parents,

or worse yet--with twisted parents

looking ordinary---but living on rape,

or blood or tears on the mattress,

as suns come up & moons go down.

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You don't know how to love them,
or pity them. They simply are---and they leave
no apologies for their pain, and your eyes glaze over,
as you too stare at the parking lot.

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A Last Time

At night I am required to Sleep
outside on Grandma's porch,
open to the night & to all kinds of weather.
There under distant stars, I manage to stay dry
under a patchwork of broken down blankets.
Above my head---all night long---surprising bright stars,
seem to ache with loneliness until they too slowly
surrender to inevitable day & at last
they burn dim & blink out.
Soon---house lights randomly flip on---as
Owosso Street rises
from its television induced slumber,
the seaside mist giving a softness to the scene.

I rise covered in night dew & dreams,
to squat down at the backyard water spout,
trying to shave with a Gillette blade, sans handle
without soap, as the sun rises with another
hungry day standing on its shoulders.

I wait
for grandma to flip the Master lock
giving access to the kitchen.
There I eat
cold cereal with Otto the war hero
who continues to cough & spit
as I pretend not to notice a string of snot
dangling from his nose into his corn flakes.

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Grandma empties her piss pot in the toilet,
mother wakes on the living room couch,
eyes red with the memory of night tears.
A tattered copy of love poems by
Robert Browning falls to the floor.

It was to be my first day in High School.

I left grandma's for a last time,
walked down Bonita Avenue to Pacific Coast Highway,
stuck my thumb out until a driver opened his car
door saying, "I'm goin' to San Diego."
as I slid into the car seat, I didn't look back in tears for
a mythic childhood, I was a man now.
And my education had begun.

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Preface to the Avenue of Souls

For Shaula

Before the last black crow struggles
on its creaking wings,
gliding across a green canopy of trees
to hastily clatter down on sharp talons,
clicking across ancient tombstones.

Before
falling evening---solemn as any soldier
going into battle, settles down
to wait for the striding of the dark.
Before the evening sun
squints out of sight at the far horizon
& a few grey clouds hover like
tattered hawks over a new kill.

Before
steamy wet & antique streets
in New Orleans gather the shameless,
homeless & heartless into a single beating
reptile heart & folds them
into nervous sleep and into the consciousness
of the long hot smells of the Mississippi night.

Before
the last bitter word
falls
from the last argument,
& the needle falls from the trembling hand.
Before suicide, revenge
& murder settle
over the peeling paint of window sills
in the meanest rooming houses

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and in the rich man's mansion
on Saint Charles Street.

Before
my hand carves
words on this paper,
& before
my heart tells me it isn't worth doing,
before my mind starts
pulling funerary cars
for my dying spirit.

Before
you step on
or have your dreams
stepped on,
and
before
you mutter
into the growing night
that you believe
in nothing.
Not even
this gathering night.

Before
you swear to me
love
is the last hope of the desperate;
before
you tell me
about the hole in the ground
where they toss our bones
before
forever.

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Before
you tell me the little guy
is the world's sucker—
and before you sing
to me of Wall Street
and international commerce
and how it
demeans and enslaves
us all.

Before
you tell me how
noble
you are.
How you'd set this
raving world right
with a benign
fiat
that would make all our sorrows
as soft
as kittens' tongues
in ivory milk.

Before
you paint a picture,
tell a story,
write a poem,
carve a rock,
pray to gods,
or raise hope in
willing flesh.
Before
these things are done,
take my hand.
Tell me

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the biggest fear
you have ever known
that you still know...
And after
all this is said
and after all this is between us,
let us sit quietly
on what solid ground
there is, and agree
that none of our lives
are what we thought
they should be,
hoped they might be.
Before
the night gets
too thick to breathe,
or too dark to dream in,
before
all this
lets think of ourselves
as the last of the
rational beings.
And as we sit here
on the Avenue of Souls,
outside of Mexico City,
tentatively waiting for a
celestial translator
to interpret the garbles messages
spoken to us by the orderings of this night.

Give me your hand---it trembles so
and before we sleep, let's just say,
it's getting very dark now.