

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Al Ortolani

Sometimes the End is a Beginning

We take our sleds
and hide in drifts
behind parked cars.
Then, we run through the snow
after the first car
to turn
onto Huntington Avenue.

Johnny Pentola grabs
the bumper then Stevie
Grant takes hold of
Johnny's boots, followed
by me and little Arnie,
then whoever's fast
enough to link up. Fat
William is always last.
Now, he's a tug. Nearly
jerks the arms out
of our sockets.
If we are really slick,
the driver drives on
about his business, unaware
of the train of kids
snaking through the traffic.

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But always, someone
gets pissed and swerves,
trying to shake us off.
This is the best ride,
holding until our fingers
freeze like claws, slamming
into curbs, parked cars,
cops blowing whistles.
Who knows? A bunch
of dumb kids without
a nickel between them.
Danger. Hell, it is 1939.
Snow lasts forever.

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During Hard Times, the Boat Maker Resorts to Football Helmet Repair

The boat maker examined each football helmet
With a shake of his head, "What I won't do for a buck."
Then whispering "Sweet Jesus,"

He hung them on hooks screwed to the ceiling,
Cracked temples and shattered crowns. Coach
Jabbed with his finger, "The guy that wore that one

is worse off than the helmet," The boat-maker
Nodded his head vigorously, laughing
A fingernail of ash from his cigarette.

Over the week, he layered the helmets
With patches of fiberglass, a bright red resin.
On Friday, Coach fisted them all

By the facemasks. "Now, they're ready
For the next poor slob." There was
Laughter, more ashes fell. "You should have

Stuck to leather," the boat maker scoffed.
Coach grinned, "Look who's giving advice,
A wop who makes sailboats in Kansas."

The boat-maker pulled deeply on his cigarette,
Picked a twig of tobacco from his tongue,
"Well, not many."

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Subsistence Farming as Love

The kitchen door
swings wide
and his wife appears,
her arms folded against the chill.
Snow makes the green
so very green,
and she points to the squirrel-ear lettuce
cropping in bed rows.
He flails a hand as much to heaven
as to snow, Cold
will set us back.
But the curve of her
warmth comes to him
and he returns to the house.
Words fail him in love; they rust
like garden tools
and clank against his teeth.
A well-oiled hoe. Soft
soil for carrots. Red
worms and mulch.
She opens her arms to reply,
Turnips and radishes,
potatoes pulled
from dirt.

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Tuning Her Guitar at the Safe House

She uncovered the old
Gibson at a Joplin
pawn shop. She practiced
new chords
for months, callusing
her fingers fret by fret,
a new song for each
of his moods,
until finally
the strings
tightened to breaking
bent the neck
to a vibrating twang,
and when the bridge separated,
the only action possible
was a twist on the truss rod
and new strings
of lighter gauge.