

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

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Bird Song

even bloody minded walnuts bow,
even morning warblers' black throats never quit
filling the pregnant air with endless chatter.

I don't know what they have to say.

preen bodies, light as luciferase,
as tufts of smoke, as yellow clouds,

so young to remember how
the dark fingers of winter grasp
so close to the heavy earth, the
pallid ground always hungry, so
even the proud fire of their
ruffled plumage speaks.

I am here, this is my song.

so even with the early vesper shadows,
even as tenuous forms haunt the rising star,
even as the cold steel blade rings,
a chorus of black lungs cry:

the day is very short,

why not sing?

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Ebenezer Swamp

i don't want to feel disgust when i sink into the mire.
still, as my toes slide beneath the green surface,
bubbles rise to the top like little pearls and pop
like rancid gems—hold my breath, my hand.

i don't want to be a stranger to this world, but
know, at my approach, dark shapes along the rim
of this bellowing swamp disappear to vapour,
to whispers,
to silence.

i don't want to be afraid of the night,
blindly stumble like a fool though this world,
or hide my head from the owl's eyes, what's more,
i want to move like a swan through this world,
not this endless step for muddy step.

is this the stuff we are all made of?
sharp and vicious, sad and slow,
i hope the mossy water never leaves my skin.

why do i hesitate, waiting for the cold
touch of mud, fumbling as though

i want to know something tonight,
something profound about the eternal blackness
swimming around my pale, tired form.
i don't want to be a stranger to this world, or
feel disgust when i sink into the mire.

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Gathering Ferns

as tenuous light threatens our dark sash,
little remains of night's lavender canopy.
in the dawn I am here,
breathing your breath
as fiddleheads unfurl their damp
yielding stipules of flesh, wound
sinews tangled tight as vines,
closer than the skin between us,
closer than the watery tendril's call
echoes across the dim ravine—
vacant corridors of stone voices,
where garbling current
still clings to oaken hollow,
and hides in lingering margins of shadow.
Oh, how they cry for carnal moonlight,
how they yearn to curl night's downy blanket,
but threaten soon to be nothing,
wisps of smoke, closer than the wounds
where hungry roots grasped wild
fleshy trunks, smothering the thick air
as blood pooled in the riverbeds
staining moss and leafstalk.

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Love Song from a Sinking Island

we are sprouts from the same dirt mound
loosed roots, grew legs, and ran away
but we'll all be together in the ground

brash tongues beat loud inordinated sounds
till there was nothing left for us to say
but we still are from the same dirt mound

cast stones, broke bones, spat salt into the wounds
cut paths, drew maps, we paved our own way
so we'll all be together in the ground

made gods in our likeness, the sun, the moon
demanded all else that moves on earth obey
forgetting we are from the same dirt mound

though made of selfish flesh, helpless bound
to share this dark, this dirt, this day
when we'll all be together in the ground

now on this sinking shore, marooned
our eyes, cold stares, unflinching impasse
and since we are from the same dirt mound
we'll lie peaceful together, here in the ground

Rain

listen to the rain—

as it beats a slow drum,
the bitter blue procession
on tin roofs and tender gutters—
does it sound like marching armies?

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as it pools on the soft mud
of the corpulent river bank

awash with ancient mollusk shells
idle carapaces, those once,
and ever after, dispossessed—
not more or less than stones,
scattered like minnows in the current

as it falls on swollen mounds
and earthen cornices, the throats and beards,
dead tongues drum sepulcher mouths

as it drips from the moist wicks of autumn's
gaunt fingers onto misty panes

can you hear the past's bone white stare?
as it falls in the delicate green tendrils—
locked roofs of grassy graves

is it the voice of death, or of life,
which pounds the solid ground outside?

can you hear it, and
is there a sound more beautiful?

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The Deepening

the newscaster said the sky is falling
scientists and preachers agreed, and
set a tentative date for the apocalypse,
this time: televised in high definition,
next thursday at ten o'clock pm, eastern time.

he went to work anyway, sat at his oak desk
filling forms and sharpening pencils until five o'clock
phoned his wife and told her he had to work late,
but a frustrated silence heard something echo,
and on close inspection, found it getting deeper as
interstate tires hummed, profound approaching shadows
merge adjoining lanes, dour faces too close, and not receding.

in deepening shade, highway workers
squat in dusty spears of curling grass and
pass a solemn water jug, emptying as
encroaching silence threatens the stillness,
but soon the men resume filling holes
in the asphalt lake, widening the dark shore
in the spots where it recedes.
diminishing sunlight, pooling darkness, the
resounding night brims with renegade barking
echos not receding. getting deeper.

on his ride home every light was a head on collision
with blue snow pooling on the dark road, billowing
down a slow speary dance in the swelling dark, a soft crush
echoes in the night, getting deeper, not receding.

swelling throngs gather in the billowing nothing,
laughing as receding stars narrow, waning moon
projects opaque spectres onto the silent darkness that
rising, swells. not receding, getting deeper.

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roadside prophets to malignant crowds:
the sky isn't falling, rather, its filling up with holes,
a worn ethereal gasket, leaky intangible dam, getting deeper,
billowing nothing, watering heaven, not receding, and
projecting spears, dripping a primal, boundless flurry of everything, flooded
with the oceanic universe advancing from the deepest shoreless black.
swelling, not receding, getting deeper, billowing louder
noiseless echos. not receding. the silence deepening: not receding

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What is the Wind?

there are nights, I sit
on solitary river banks,
asking the darkness,
and the pale shapes on the water

what is the wind
if not the discourse of leaves
as it storms, arboreal
through dark branches before the rain

is it a prayer
blessing the valley's nodding blooms—
sunny burgeons of morning buds
unfold, worn as hymnal pages

is it tangible
like my fingers through your hair—
sinewy roots, tendrils of flame
in the meadow grass, pollen grains,
and bee-hum—alive—spreading seeds

is it a song,
an elegy for the curling grass, spoken
from the acrid smell of the dark pond

or a word—
the rhetoric of everything—
by an old hand,
scribbling endless,
incorrigible marks in the sullen clay,
that we may see, kneel, and ask:

What is the wind?

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Why Thoreau Left the Woods

what will remain of us in a thousand years
after worm torn darkness reaves flesh from our bones?

the red bricks of our city walls will have crumbled
our temples, no more than piles of stone

will the steam still rise from the muggy pavement
on hot summer mornings after the rain?

*

Thoreau went into the woods seeking a quiet place to sit,
and watch the years run off like mud into the pond
instead, he watched morning's grey throat echo over the water,
mourned the poverty of labor, the fleeting wealth of life,
and so he made a well known road, trying to be still in time

*

Thoreau felt the soft earth path he beat into the ground
a compulsive grave, dug from daily-door to pond-side—
saw the hackneyed lines he drew with furrowed feet

*

in a thousand years, will we still sit on pond banks,
and ask what will remain in a thousand years?

*

roads are like words, we set them between us
because we long to connect—
that disappointed bridge between solitus and solitude

the worn and dusty highways of the world
are holes men dig to hide in,
grave-dirt is chewed from birth, peck by peck

habits are a pact with the darkness—
like rain on worn gravestones, pond-banks,
fastidious old bones, and ruts in the clay

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