

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

Ralph Pennel

UNDER THE MISSING AND INNUMERABLE STARS

Sitting in your car, parked directly behind my own,
our two cars the only ones on the street now
the hour of midnight having passed us long ago, you
tell me of your failed marriage and release your terrible sadness.
It started with nights alone on the couch, before the fireplace.
Sometimes with wine. Sometimes without. You giving
yourself slowly to the idea that you deserved more somehow.
And this idea grew until you left him. You took nothing
with you except the great immeasurable hole that only love
lost can make. In the dark, in that quiet small space, I reached my hand
out and touched your leg, rested my palm over your thigh.
You did not move it, but reached your own hand down and held mine,
both of us resting there at what could have been either the beginning or
the end of the world, our eyes fixed ahead on hundreds of stars
whose light we would only see once and then never again.

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

For that brief moment, I watch
as you fit your hands around mother's throat,
press your thumbs against her trachea,
your face calm, as if squeezing a melon.

I stand and speak your name. *Charles.*
You pause, thinking the voice has somehow
passed up through your grip. You release
her neck, hold your hands up to the light.

And then it comes again. My small voice. Charles?
Nothing more is said. You turn to me,
hands still raised, two shallow and empty bowls
you have never been able to fill before now.

Calmly, mother turns her back and walks away.
You walk back to the sink, submerge your hands
into the soap and pull the stopper to let the water drain,
revealing the dishes cleaned and ready to dry.

You lift all of them, one at a time, drying rack filling slowly
until you are done. You wipe off your hands,
wadding the towel into a ball, a small new planet
to toss aside. And it is over. Everything is over.

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ALL THAT REMAINS

Sweeping around the radiator
is how I find them —

two large shards
of the glass I slammed to the floor,

frustrated by all
we could not say.

The cup shattered on impact,
large plastic wedges sliding across the floor.

I thought I had retrieved them all
as you stormed out, adding to the hole we had yet to fill.

This morning's light shines just where they sit,
exposing these ruins of our death that day,

the dust of the earth resting heavy
on their withered bodies

as if the earth, too, refused
to hold out for one last idyll of hope,

its wounds weeping, its flesh pushing
these last visceral reminders into the light.

I bend to sweep them up
with the dust and debris,

each piece rattling in the pan
before falling into the trash beneath the sink,

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before they are carried to the bin
behind the house

where they will be carried away
to the landfill at the edge of town

with the other shards of pasts,
which have already been forgotten.