

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Donna French McArdle
Blue Fish

Past the neck and toward the causeway, the guys kill the engine, crack a beer, and laugh. I'm sitting on the bow while the boat drifts and bobs on the water, while the sunlight bounces off the white hull and flashes to the sand and rock below me. It's dream-like, this drifting and flashing, this feeling, for the first time, not seasick. Here on the bow I watch the water lurch under the boat, strike the rocky shore and scatter up, jumping into the air like some fish leap for prey, catching light then plummeting. Its flash dissolves in the refrain of wave to rock to air to light and back again.

I'm feeling the ocean drift and bob on the planet too, a different stirring. The planet turns, the ocean slides on it, the waves undulate, and the air flows over and around me. For a few seconds I am instinctive, rescued. And in those few seconds I see fish charging toward the boat, not drifting or bobbing, but slicing through the water like lightning through the sky, like scissors through fabric; slicing like fear through the theater of a nightmare; slicing like sparks from a bonfire through dim night: insistent, consuming. I point and shout, "There, there."

The guys toss out hooks with bloody chunks of eel that slap the water. They warned me; they showed me the bat. If a Blue bites, they will flip it into the boat and beat it; because a Blue will snap its jaw even after its last exhale, because you cannot touch a Blue alive. Still, the guys want to feel the ferocity exploding through its body, the tug on fiberglass and cork, the sting on their palms, and the tension in their biceps and shoulders as they pull against it. So when a line jerks, they step joyously around the deck. They shout *whoas* and *heys*.

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But the line slackens, and the guys reel it in with less eel,
less exactly by what the fish tore off. A Blue can shred
and swallow its own fate, and so is rescued by instinct – like I am.
I stand on the bow and watch the school circle the cove
until they dive. The guys set their rods, clink their beers –
to life, to fury, to fullness – and they drink.

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Like Clouds through Fog

For almost an hour through fog, I follow the road's yellow center lines, straining to see and not to veer into roadside mud or into a ditch. It's not raining now, but during this ride home, it has rained heavily, a steady downward pitch that bounced off the pavement. The fog thickens then dissolves; my headway is marked not by familiar houses (it is too late for most house lights) or familiar ponds (they are shrouded tonight), but my progress is broken by the shifting of visibility. One moment, I can't see the road; the next moment, there it is.

It's exhausting to the eyes, trick after trick of focus then blur. At the last corner before home, between two fields, clouds drift through the fog, low to the road, gliding east to west. Beneath them, the eyes of raccoon or opossum, of some creature low to the ground, hurry into the bush. I tighten my hands on the wheel. At the very edge of my sight, I see deer, but then none. I think I see fox or coyote, not so much a trick of the eyes but a trick of the mind. I see, I think, a girl at the side of the road, or is it that I remember being that girl,

walking through the dark with the mist blowing against my face, filling my hair, seeping between the stitches of my pale blue sweater. Hands tucked in pockets, I walked alone, home from school through late spring dusk along the streets of my city; Broad, Crombie, Lynde, and Brown, and then across the Common. I knew each corner, which way to look, each alley between buildings, which way to run, if I needed to run. My eyes tired and blinking tonight, I feel that same fear - that something is hiding there - and in order not to succumb to that heart pounding, I take it slowly

up the hill, around the curves. There are high beams ahead, filling the understory of tall oak, maple and pine, giving me a chance to discriminate myself from a field of grays and whites.

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The mist in the air sparkles, flickers like tiny candle flames. The leaves flicker, too, outlined by darkness. Headlights as spotlights, the sight varies like breath come and gone, like a blink, like sunlight on a river current. I drive ahead. I give up the past, heart beating into the unknown. The headlights drop, the air rumbles, and I am eye to eye with another car, another driver, another world passing only feet away.

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Penelope and Sisyphus

They are perfect for each other: so compulsive,
so accepting of fate.

If only they could step from their myths
to find comfort in the roughness of their hands,
their loyalty to their duties. If only
they could whisper beneath thousands
of voices, through lives, across the plains
of death itself, they could share,
so intimately, what they have seen:
that when life plummets down a hill,
or is unwoven secretly at night,
you must let it go. It does no good
to cling. What will happen, will happen.

Soon after they meet, they must part,
taking up their assignments.

At night he writes to her, "I am not done."
"Nor I," she replies.

And later he sends another message,
"It seems," he writes in weary script,
"my work will never be complete."

"No work is ever complete," she prints carefully
then crosses it out
because she does not want to say this
ever, to anyone.