

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Jim Davis

Hollyhocks

Not too, the thousand suns beating.

Stoic irrationality, a habit claimed one winter
on whose flakes the rational no longer adhered.

The man stood serenely on the river bank,
throwing line to the gaps in freshwater skin
fed by hidden streams. Back home, a woman
pinned his clothes to a line. Windswept. The lightest items
near the center of the splintering rope,

where rain fell. A tall tree
stretched across the river, where the dog froze
pointed & barked to a small boat.

The timber in the shed was gathered wet,
sat all summer. The walls are thin, at night, in the wind,
he can see them breathing.

As a boy, he told stories, sang songs around the fire. He bathed
in the ceremony of rambblers. Bobtails pulled apart at the river's edge.

The woman stuck her nose in the air, could smell smoke
on his jacket from nightfires & re-livings.

In the hidden lake, trout move slowly to stay alive.

In the still compartments of water near rocks
slick bodies hide among seaweed stalks

like great silent gods. Should I be
a predator in the muck of leaves and algae, he thought,
while white-bellied trout appear as floating clouds?

The small boat has left us.

The man stands on the bank, noting bubbles between casts, gentle flicks
of demeanor and consequence. The dog barked. Then, the hollyhocks wilted.
And at least one sun split divinely in two.

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Punctuated

Why would this be of interest unless I told you
about the man loading crates of Royal Crown
into a truck – they call him Tim, an ex-marine
whose sore back drove him to liquor – whose liver
failed him – hey, when I say *poetry* will you strip
down to your underwear? I would rather
you imagine Tims wife waiting in a nightie, touched
by soft yellow light from the streetlamp as she sits
cross-legged on their unmade bed – besides
why would you want to write, she said – wheres the good
in book reading when the power lines are down – I imagine
worlds without punctuation – I remember tearing off my fathers
arm but it grew back – itches, he said – new limb branching
from his plaid jacket sleeve – I am not ashamed
to chase the things Im not yet able to explain – are many
students able to read? Can they write? Youll see with testing
that 30% of those in Chicagos Public Schools are hemorrhaging
with lack of explanation – lack of ability to explain: cannot conjugate
a verb, or pluralize a noun, much less evaluate the validity of a comma,
whose presence after the period of abbreviation
as in Mr., as in Rd., i.e., e.g., etc.,
can force one into a career of loading crates onto a truck,
can cause a bad back, stress an ab to herniation,
drive a man to drink. Tim, after half a bottle of rot-gut scotch
can go on and on about the promise of progress giving way
to the value of production – how the desire to write is different
than the desire to create, says Tim,
scribbling nothings with his tongue on the air.

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Automatic

Nana please, I said, there's chickaree trapped
in that steel furnace labyrinth, which groans alive
with frost. Everything owns its own light, as though
light is an orb inside an object, emanating
in whisper, then the crack of conflagration –
I said fire; I said it's not a matter
of light-space relating to dark-space, bound only
through geometric fragmentation. (An old man
sits by the hearth smoking a pipe, swirling a tumbler
of small ice.) Order is imposed, the space goes unnamed
by our burning desire to name it. He, teeth clenched
on a corncob stalk, assured me there was no need for language
games – say, speak, inhale experience and exhale
significance. You die without the rhythm of inhale,
exhale – you short-circuit on interpretation – clogged
with ticker tape and gin. (Unholy fingers
rattling keys at the lock.) Oxygen is a byproduct.
Oxygen is witness to a boy with a magnifying glass
frying ants, a girl jumping rope on the sidewalk, under
which exits the sliver of difference
between coda and volta. Nana lifts the needle
of the old Victrola, tilts her head like a spaniel. Among the inferno
of agelessness, the fire of the furnace is packed with song,
verse, splitting hairs without unsheathing its clef,
without ever unlocking the woodshed door.

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Cutgrass and Gasoline

What is left of the man who walks past
with a weed whacker, with nothing to whack?
Two travel in grids on the backs of yellow riding mowers.
White and green shrapnel in wake. Crow-black hair
pulled back and braided, another
removes a limb from the dragging applewood
knuckles, sagging after a long winter.
The promise of awakening spelled out
in the perfume of the season: cutgrass and gasoline.

Two brown hawks hiding at the limit
of a pine tree ridge. Stone faced, focused
on swallows, chickaree, tabby cats alive on the lawn.

What in the world was I meant for? She said, then pointed
to a chipmunk holding something difficult in its paw,
stuffed it quickly in its cheek, hurried up a tree.

Viejo. He draws smoke with his back to the rose
bramble. Squints. Exhales and flicks
his filter to the grass. The riding mowers juke
the coiled green hose in the shade of hibiscus,
whose pollinated throats
stretch toward the shiver of difference, the tremor
of mower and men. The scream
of cutgrass and gasoline.

Chipmunk, fat with provision
stows away as chicory withers
and two hawks escape the ridge –
talons clenched
on whatever they have found.

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Hoarse

He walked all day through the forest, unaware of the leak in what he called his sweet-sack, a small paper bag of sugar and hard candies, peppered with grit from his travel: bits of dry oak leaf, cinnamon, some thyme. Later he came upon a badger in the thicket, as he approached its comical bark startled him. He has heard that if a badger bites it will not release before defusing the threat, so you are supposed to snap a twig in your hands and scream like a bone has broken. He dips into the sack, sprinkles a handful over a pile of red leaves. He engages the badger in conversation: What was the name of the child whose wings melted after a day in the sun – or was it night, wax dripping by the blaze of the hearth? Either way, he was taken by wind coming in from St. Paul, a strong nor'wester that swept him clear across Ohio, until he got hung up in a briar near Charleston. That's coal mining country, said the man begging for sugar door to door in Muskingum county. What was his name? Horace? Anyway, said the man to the badger, my father spent all day working on a cracked sewer main. He could play the acoustic guitar, Burl Ives, given the season, by mostly love songs that told of nothing more than the way she was: a dry reflection of something wet: blood, maybe, or wine. She told him once that horseradish hollandaise was meant to be drizzled over Charleston crab cakes and there was no exception. She screamed when the neighbor's Palomino Quarter Horse jumped the fence and ate the pride of her garden, pulled full sunflower blooms from stalks. Horace was his name, after the soldier-poet who removed his helmet which was carved and painted like a falcon, set it on the table and took her small hands into his own. Now that the sewer caps are soldered on and the caves in the quarry are bouldered-over you can sprinkle some of this into your tea with milk. How can the crows call so crudely without losing their voices, he wondered, holding the stare of the badger in the thicket.

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What matters is that, without entry, notes return to the origin, the instrument of their making. Three pups poked out their tiny faces. What matters now is that sweet bag of sugar is almost empty, and there's no reason to yell once your voice is lost forever, once the rain washes away the sweet lines of your journey.

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Dionysian Nostalgias

After a few bottles of wine, Dionysus thought it would be a good idea to take a bar of soap and sponge outside, where it was raining, and wash himself sober. He'd never known direction without reference to waffles. He said many times he would starve were it not for coffee and Pop-Tarts. He's certain he would die without fish tacos on Tuesdays, when they're three for five with half price pints of lager.

No longer will he carve the Irish hills in want; no longer will he split his time between coasts; no longer will he moan over a journal, reflecting on the girl over whom he broke. Pioneers of academia, nor oracles at Delphi, can explain why sometimes we act like babies, can't explain the state of self-pity in evolving minds. There was once a specific tickle that rose in his gut when a storm approached. Recently, he's been want for similar sensation. And the lawn is flooded. A pack of mallards are floating, leaving wake and ripple in the sometimes-pond. Sitting on the patio with lemonade and vodka, he swats at mosquitoes, the occasional horsefly.

As a boy, he snuck out through the first floor window to meet her at fountain in the park. Yellow light. They sat on a set of contrasting swings, unaware of their prophetic motion. They shared a few bottles of beers he stole from his father's fridge and he told her how, as a child, his only desire was, in this same park, to hit a ball from sidewalk to street. A boy sat in the back of a truck throwing newspapers. So late it's light, he thought, climbing in through the window of escape. He found his father sitting with a cigarette, an undershirt and a pair of faded blue jeans, said simply, Next time I hear someone breaking in I'm coming down with a shotgun – echoing certain strength of deed not done – strength, or gratitude, or relief. Years later, over coffee and pastry, on the quiet balcony, he is moved, Dionysus, nearly to tears – empty bottles of wine and a few stained glasses left in the sink – as a dark front glides over the lake

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with acres of hidden violence. He remembers morning in the Irish hills, sitting by the peat-fire with his father, when soft rain came and he ran out to the garden to collect his clothes from the line.