

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Israel Wasserstein

The Missouri by Night

The land slopes its slow way
toward the fog-thick river.

The air's a clamour, rise and fall
of cicadas, tuneless anthem,
drowning the downshifting
trucks, their brakelights blinking
behind trees. Closer, a baseline,
the soft wash of the waves,
trees whispered hymns.

And branches' crack and snap.

The surface, silver pools
in darkness, sways
to some other rhythm.

A chill across my arm. A banshee.

No--coyotes' call and response.

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Aubade

Those days I rose in the darkness, left you sleeping,
with nowhere to go but the call center,
to spend the day troubleshooting Blackberries
and routers, arriving before the sun slides
over the Sandias, and leaving in the cold
February night. It happened imperceptibly.
One night I was sleeping over. Before long,
my dog was staying with yours.
Days, I listened to the quiet buzz of conversation,
paced back and forth, the my orbit tethered
by my headset. Evenings I'd pick up takeout,
we'd watch something funny or frightening, anything
to help me forget I will rise, Sunday morning,
for that same commute. A few more months of
call quality checks and hard resets
would have killed me.
But one night I came home, and found you
wearing my sweater. It keeps me warm, you said,
I like it for the smell of you. This is no sentimentality:
know that you kept me moving forward,
those dark months, you gave me your body heat,
something to keep me from driving on,
past the city's sprawl, into the high desert,
into the morning's glare.

Simic's Doll

Addicted to pathos, I like to think
it slipped from the hand of a girl
on a Titanic life raft as she watched
her father leap awkwardly, his limbs
twisting as he plummets. Later,
she imagines hearing the grey slap
of impact. Or it drifted
from the wreckage of a liner
sunk by U-Boats, some heirloom
smuggled amongst the gold,
the urgent documents.
But just as likely a crate of identical
toys slipped from a cargo ship.

So it's only the strange tides
that mark it, till it ends up in the poet's
hands, not swirling in a plastic
graveyard, some Atlantic dead
zone, or decaying imperceptibly
at the bottom of a trench.
The sea effaces the past,
tricks us into believing one might step
from it, new born, naked,
blank as a porcelain-faced god.