

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Joan Colby

THE APOSTLE ISLANDS

We pitch our tent in a pelting rain
that falls all night, the rhythm
competing with the waves
endless self-abuse. Dreams
full of omens, lightning
illuminates the ravaged pine.

Waking, the sun claws over Lake Superior,
the offshore island dark as sleepers.
We stand together like the white birch
with two trunks, like the Apostles
crowned with tongues of flame.

We drink black coffee. The day is fine.
A slight chill off the sun-hunted water.
On the ferry, the cold Superior wind
sculpts our hair like wooden saints
on ship's prows. The islands
slipping before our eyes,
beads a nun tells. Red cliffs
of the sorrowful mystery.
The spirit stone
of the Chippewas. Indian burial ground,
its ghost cages
vandalized by the winds,
caves gnawed from rock
by ravenous waves from Canada.

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We walk the eagle path,
climb moss-covered blowdowns
in a ferny grotto-wood
alive with boulders,
until the sheer red walls
plunge into seamless blue.

Standing at the edge, side by side
we look down and remember
last winter's quicksilver
shriveling in the glass
subtracting us from each other
in a new record of frost.

THE BURN OF OLD MACHINERY

Narrative of sulks. Blister of the dead
but unresolved quarrels that still
ruffle the waters, an uneasy breeze
that fails to cool you.

Dwelling on these is to dwell
in a house with rotten floorboards,
where rain abrades and windows
focus nothing but loss.

The bird who spoke your name repeatedly
with no comprehension of who you were
rocks in the swinging cage of memory
pecks at its own reflection in the mirror.

No apology could resolve
the ungreased rub of metal on metal.
The factories where guilt is turned
on its bitter lathe.

TURTLE CROSSING

I.

The sign announces that turtles
Will be traversing this road
From nesting place to wetland.

You are advised to look out
For them, sluggish, slow
With a carapaced dignity
That has seen era after era
Embrace extinction.

II.

A painted turtle in a glass
Casserole. I planted a rock,
A variety of shells so she might
Sun in our kitchen window.

Mostly, she slept, withdrawing
Her punctuations into the sentence
Of her sentience whenever I tried
To prod her with a question.

She (I had conferred a gender
To match her name: Myrtle)
Principally dozed or nibbled lettuce.
Not yet forbidden as a carrier
Of salmonella. I kept watch,
Changed her water, tried to make her
Look at me with her strange hooded eyes.

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I failed to comprehend the planet
In which she vegetated and can't recall
Her fate, having lost interest.

III.

A box turtle is clumsily crossing
The posted avenue. Cars halt
With more compassion than the child I was
Ever imagined. Lethally decorated,
That turtle's life was circumscribed:

No swamp, no absurd and noisy mating,
No buried eggs. No thought
Of conservation as I upended her
To see the stubby legs pumping air
In a comedy of desperation.

TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT A PICTURE
Dream of Night by Sheida Keylan Haghighi

I

Will-o-Wisp, Friar's Lantern.
Glowing orbs in a night forest
where winter trees absolve a
sanguine dawn far to the east.

A sheeted pond haunts reflections,
how dreams sleeve us with relief
or despair.

II

She disappeared on her way
from school. A familiar
story. The parents huddle
on TV. In the night wood,
winter trees hold hostage
whatever happened.

The lights of searchers float
in darkness. Ignis fatuus,
phosphorescent delusions.
A skin of ice silvers the pond.

UPON A BURNING BODY

The wick of her belief. Voices
That claimed her mission.
Always the simple

Who are selected. The villages
Where she was not mocked
When she spoke of the Dauphin

Or the saints, when she donned the mail,
Took up the sword, when the arrow
Pinioned her. When they

Betrayed her, still she
Trusted, then shuddered, for a moment
Persuaded, but the way

To the stake is the way to glory.
As the flames ascended, she cried "Jesus"
Three times, not in denial

like Simon Peter, but refuting abjuration
Of her voices, the voices
That led her this far. One less simple

Would have shrugged at the notion,
Would have spent a still life
In a stonebreaker's cottage

Birthered a child, unfettered
By history, died of fever,
An unremarkable burning.