

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Karen Kelsay
Winter Lullaby

It's always in the violet hour you call,
when dusk spreads infant-smooth across the skies,
and winter teeters on the wings of fall.
The poplars change to gold and improvise.

In spite of chill, the memory of you warms.
Unpunctual star, kind winter brings you near,
to break you from your listlessness — transforms
that vagrant whisper I can barely hear

to incandescent words; the subtle burn
of maple leaves to red, a flame of thought
that gives the seasoned birch a breathless turn,
as random dreams within its twigs are caught.

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Vignette of a Winter Evening

It's wintertime. The beachfront wears a wrap
of citrus-colored cloud at dusk, and mist
from the Pacific clings to Sago palms.
You are seduced into this lunar tryst,

as moons and endings occupy your mind
of late. Obsession with slow tides, swift gulls,
and balmy surf-scent pulls you to the water,
where rocks across the jetty rise like skulls,

to float above a blackened tide. Your dress
has turned the filmy color of sweet lime.
The moon drops closer, like a ripened fruit.
The emptiness is clear. It's wintertime.

An elegant and arching sky bends near,
hanging like a paperweight, makes pale
promises to fill your darkened void—
yet all the larger landscape wears a veil.

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The Courtship Hour

I love the hour that hangs its weightless haze
of yawn across my bed. An ivory wrap
of humming stillness, spectral dance embossed
in thimble-light. I love the wentletrap

of thoughts and gurgled chants that twist before
white shoals of sleep. The bend and blur of night
with loveliness and brokenness inside
soft vagaries that pivot in the light.

I love the hour subservient to dreams,
when day's satiety leaves remnant sky.
And all beheaded moments shed their wings
into a hushed reluctance as they die.

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Winter Needlepoint

Here comes the cold time—holly, pine, and yew,
low grass-laced hills crisscross in winter white;
dark threads of cloud stretch sugar-plum and blue
along a canvas sky of fraying light.

The frost arranges crystals on a limb.
Flakes, falling, reappear as snow on snow
like French knots sewn above the tree root's rim,
that stencil little patterns, to and fro.

The frozen oak is filled with mistletoe,
its yellow berries unconcealed by leaf.
They offer fruit for robin, thrush, and crow.
It makes me think of emptiness and grief—

reminds me of a summer field of yarrow,
and everything that bloomed before the chill.
December brings a tapestry of sorrow,
with knots pulled through a surface of goodwill.

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Draining the Cup

After she agonized about the equity
disappearing from her home, and walking away
from the city she grew up in; after she wept
at the thought of leaving white plantation shutters
that slit the morning into little ribbons
of warmth, and the fireplace mantle she had constructed
to look like a picture she found in a magazine—

after she anguished over living in a small apartment
with no garden; after she announced she was taking her piano
with her, no matter what; after she talked to lawyers
and accountants who said there was no logic
in staying—

after she moved into a pint-sized rental
by the beach, and stopped the three hour commute
each day; after she realized a dishwasher for two people
wasted more time than it was worth; after she discovered
her cats got along better in a tiny area; after she could
sleep in, and have an extra cup of tea
before eight o'clock—

after she had no flowers to clip or sidewalks
to sweep; after she spent an hour on the sand and studied
a strip of scarlet cloud that stretched
from Palos Verdes to Santa Monica; after porpoise
appeared and the sun's back-glow turned the bay
into a goblet of rose-colored waves; after she bought
a hot chocolate on the pier and proclaimed it
the best dessert in the world—

She realized how delicious it could be
when the cup is drained.