

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Al Ortolani

Knotted

Bobby scoops his
Stetson out of the dust
and slaps it against his thigh.
A tan cloud puffs into the blue. He's got
the look in his eye again, the one
that turns him loose.
Randy Randy he sings
and sets off towards the bandstand
Miller clucks his tongue
against the roof of his mouth
and throws the chili spatula into a dirty pan.
You got too much of the world
knotted up in your brain, boy. He points at
my forehead. Let's go dance a bit,
he softens in kind of a mocking sass,
kicking up dust and jogging off
to where Bobby disappeared.
I watch his pony tail
bounce against his back,
tossing in the desert air
like a frayed rope.

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Blue Dress Discipline

Pop throttled us in the vacant lot
behind the school. The flatbed
running, door ajar, our books piled
on the floorboards like battle axes.
My brother Andy held Bobby
under his wings. Bobby flapped
and cussed to get free. Pop squinted,
what's the name of this
girl in the blue dress? She's
turned the three of you into idiots?
All the girls got blue dresses, Pop,
Andy interjected, uniforms
woof woof woof.
Miller and I kept shut, bloodied
by Bobby's fingernails. Bobby lunged
and tried to swing at me again.
Andy held his collar, jerked
his head back like a balloon.
Spit bubbled at his mouth.
Woof I added to Bobby's misery.
Pop finally got pissed, you little shits,
shut up before I throw you in a sack
and drown you all. Miller, struck
funny by the thought of it, burst
with laughter. Pop turned red
and wacked him with his hunting cap,
then he wacked me twice
before turning on Bobby
who'd finally begun to smile.

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Sparrow Child

Maria has a baby. More like a bird
than a child. Randy Buck
stands in the hallway
outside the delivery room.
Too scared
and weak-kneed to enter.
He can hear Maria calling
his name. But he's paralyzed.
He can't move his Tony Lamas an inch.
His heart is warm, pained
like a sparrow twisted
in heavy test mono-filament.
Big Brother Andy shows up.
Takes his arm and rubs
his elbow like he was chalking a cue stick.
Slides him across the green felt.
You belong here.
Randy finds himself transported.
Suddenly beside Maria. She's
barely visible to him,
no longer straining in the stirrups, limp

as soft leather, a crushed western jacket
buried on the floor of a cloak closet.
Maria is all he knows to say.
She tries to smile, senses
he wants to run, slide like a last shot
scratch into a corner pocket.
Rack'em up her eyes plead.
Randy's short a quarter.
Manages to pat her arm.

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Make-Believe Bacon

Pop is waiting, propped in his
favorite lawn chair. I take him
into town and we eat make-believe
bacon sliced from turkey,
eggs without yolk, coffee without caffeine.
I drive the truck, but he points
which way to turn. I wait
for his signal before I flip the blinkers,
left turn, right turn, his bent finger
curled on an invisible trigger.
The sun sets early. I make coffee,
set floral cups from Maria's china,
hand-painted hyacinths, vines,
caterpillars and butterflies,
an intricate garden of change.
Maybe I will write her a letter.
Explain there was a dream we shared.
On the horizon headlights appear.
They play across the back forty:
the hay rake, the mower, the flatbed
rusting where it quit.