

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Ron Yazinski

MASKS

In the Orlando Sentinel are pictures from a charity masquerade
Which had as its theme
"The Dark Side" of STAR WARS.

So there's Emperor Palpatine, with a face like melted wax;
And two Darth Vaders with their black arms around Boba Fetts;

And several young men and women uniformed as Storm Troopers,
The mindless functionaries of an evil empire.
All with drinks in their hands;
All for a good cause.

And I think of Joseph Campbell's observation
That masks either conceal the person we are,
Mild mannered drudges with deep resentments,
Or they reveal the true nature we keep hidden.

As in the story the old men of Winter Garden tell
Of the movie star Clark Gable,
How when he stayed at the Edgewater Hotel,
Each morning before he went fishing at Lake Apopka,

He removed his ill-fitting dentures
And tugged a floppy hat over his Easter Island ears
So that no one would recognize
The Hollywood idol that he was.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

LILY WHITE

A little woman with a walker waves away
The man that hurries
To open the glass door
For her to enter the bar.

Then she inches her way across the floor,
Before hoisting her bent body onto the stool next to me.
On cue, the bartender,
Sets her whiskey and soda in front of her.

"I told them, Lily, you only need that walker to get home."
And Lily smiles, sips her drink and turns to me,
"I know you're new here,
"But you're in my seat."

I offer to change places with her,
But she declines.
"Who do you think I am, my mother?
"Now that was a woman who would have demanded her rights.

"For twenty years she and her friend had the best seats
"At every high school football game,
"Right on the fifty yard line, in the seventh row,
"Just high enough so the railing didn't block their view.

"Nobody would ever think to take her seat,
"Because everybody in this town saw how elegant she was
"And they respected her for it.
"When she died, I thought I could take her place,

"But her seat was already taken by someone who refused to move."
She took another sip.
"So you keep your seat.
"I can drink just as well here."

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

HARPS

Ever since middle school
I've played the harp,
Learning from the juke sounds of Little Walter
Through the slurs of Sonny Terry
To the retainer method of Dylan.

For a kid like me,
Who couldn't hit a curve ball
Or memorize Presidents,
Bending notes and playing cross harp
Became my identity.

Since fifteen, I've always carried a cheap harmonica in my pocket,
So that I was ready to sit in with any band that would have me.
When I wanted to show off at the end of a set
I'd dip it in water to warp the reeds
So that each note sucked through my stomach

Was like the cry of a wounded animal at night.
And after the crowd applauded, I'd throw the ruined harp away.
All through my career in the Merchant Marine,
On those sea-weary nights between ports
I lived and breathe through my harp,

Perfecting my technique.
But it wasn't until I lost my job
And my second wife left me
With nothing but my case of harmonicas,
Did I master the blues.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

ENLISTMENT, 1941

After seventy years, she remembers that night,
Which, like most nights, was made for crying.
But that night was different:
Because that night, she had a reason.

Normally, her world was full of crying,
As if her family were mourners newly arrived at a wake
And had yet to resolve into gossip.
She was raised to believe that though there was beauty,

It wasn't important;
That the soul was a decorative object,
Now out of fashion like corsets.
How many times had she tried to calm herself

By rocking like a crazed mother with a dead child,
Only to finally admit that nothing has a cure?
But his smile had changed that.
In his arms, she was no longer afraid of the night,

Or the thunder, especially the thunder,
Which she called by the devil's name.
But this afternoon, when he left for the army,
She didn't go the train station to see him off,

Because she knew
That only if he were holding her,
Would she find the strength
To wave good-bye.

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DE RERUM NATURA

Just as Persephone resented her mother
For ruining her relationship with the only man
Who ever wanted her;
Just like the phases of the moon,
It's natural for a daughter to hate her mother.

Either the love was suffocating,
In which she wasn't allowed to realize the failure she was
Until it was too late;
Or the love was withheld,
Because children, on the whole, are disappointing.

In either case, there is the bitterness
Of not being a Princess,
Simply because the slut slept with the wrong kind of man,
A bitterness that grows every time
The daughter wakes up for work,

Or does the laundry,
Or pays someone to clean her apartment.
The only way it can end is
With the aged mother lying in the hospital,
Begging her daughter to let her go home.

"You can't. It's already up for sale."

"But I can't stay here.

"They want to cut my leg off."

"No, you're lucky.

"It's too late for that to do any good."

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

And the woman begins to cry.

"Just promise me you'll bury me next to Daddy.

"And don't cremate me

"Like they did to Helen from across the street.

"I'm so afraid of fire."

"Now, we've been all through that."

She says, patting her cold hand,

And, for once, not even considering a lie,

"You know it's cheaper that way."