

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Thomas Piekarski
Cannery Row Canto

In this scenario there is dream
not some philosopher's hip new
makeshift hypothesis. I mean
vivid live dream
woven into clouds above the bay,
those clouds trundling down the coast,
brooding gray clouds that hitch a ride,
captive on the back of a stiff wind.

We make a deal about where to dine:
if a porpoise soars from the aqua waters
it's Lobster Thermador at Louie Linguini's.
But should only a whale appear
we'll reluctantly settle for
Bubba Gumps and popcorn shrimp.

Soooo windy. No skin divers in sight
as is the norm from this beachfront cove
below Steinbeck Plaza. Above us the sun
breaks through at unexpected intervals
as lilacs, snapdragons, begonias and tulips
bow, whip and jitterbug for passersby.

Now we're overlooking the scythe bay,
photographing piers of former sardine sheds,
piers that have been shorn up or replaced,
hopefully high enough that the restaurants
and curio shops they hold won't be
swamped with kelp once the oceans rise.

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Inside Sly McFly's Kentucky Slim plays
twelve string guitar, sax and harmonica,
alternating vocals of songs that titillate
as the clientele sips drinks.

Massive clouds blow down the coast,
increase in weight as the wind swirls.

Slim segues into a popular tune,
Santana's hit about a Spanish Mona Lisa.
Couples at lunch can't help grooving
in their seats while they dig into
thick cheeseburger or cod with asparagus.

Talking of places we passed on the way:
San Martin wineries below Hecker Pass
where at tasting rooms along the route
can be purchased dago red, cheap
by the case, or a bottle of aged Muscatel.

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Talking about Mt. Madonna Inn
at the summit of the pass, how for decades
its thick shake roof and river rock facade
have held up, but now the building
is shuttered—big chain and lock
secure the front door. Shuttered are memories
of scores of dreamers who went there
to ogle at the gyrating view
of the valley below—alfalfa, artichokes—
who on a clear day got slammed
by sunlight tossed from sheet metal roofs
of barns, and dozens of glass greenhouses.
These days they must be satisfied
to sniff Easter lilies outside,
gulp pregnant spring air,
pick purple bougainvillea, or cut
a bundle of roses to take with them.

From Sly McFly's we watch wave
after wave of ocean drumming ashore
as people on the Plaza chit-chatty, stroll
in and out of La Dolce Vita Home & Garden,
Pebble Beach Pro Shop, Monterey Canning.

I close my eyes and reflect on those
greenhouse roofs, how they intensified
on summer days saturated in light.

In its day this bay was a giant ocean basket
where fishermen stuffed their boats
with millions of squirming sardines.
And once they were all fished out
Cannery Row began a period of decay
that entailed decades of neglect. Revival
gradual, but most certainly worth the wait.

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Slim sings "take a little trip, take a little trip,"
and the crowd goes gaga. I whisper to my date:

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going across the street
to buy some cotton candy and a plastic kite.
Should I become sidetracked and not return
search for me under the Plaza in the Wax Museum
where I'll be loitering amongst the stiff figures."

To which she reflexively replies

"While you're away I'll make an exit too.
Should I be absent when you return
you'll find me dancing on the surface
of the sun, my skirt in flames, and my feet
undoubtedly cold as virgin snow."

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Conviction

One summer afternoon I parked my car
in front of Arteaga's Mexican Supermarket.
As I walked across the cracked tarmac
of the lot, I noticed a little finch-size bird
huddled down in a vacant parking space.

The bird was motionless, and at first
I speculated it was dead.
Upon closer inspection
I noticed a slight twitch, as though
the brisk refreshing wind had somehow
revived the poor thing.
I was nonetheless concerned

that it was severely injured,
perhaps almost dead
or otherwise totally disoriented.

I stooped down next to it and urged
"oh sweet little birdy, get out of the way
or some car will come along and squash you!"

I watched its tiny eyes flutter at telegraphic speed
and was a bit relieved. So I further urged
"oh please listen to me! You must move soon
or die right there!" At this the bird batted
its wings semi-frantically, as if suddenly
the warning rang through. It flew
over to the next parking space,

no safer a place to roost than the last,

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nevertheless proving it could avert the first
stage of disaster, that from which forms
function as broken tools
purchased surreptitiously

at dream auctions conducted by convicts.

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My Father's Pills

I wouldn't think of taking
my father's pills left over
from the days of the Cold War.
Being so long expired
they could be poisonous,
perhaps as dangerous
as the rocket fuel that was dumped
into the water table
at the factory where he worked,
fuel that has caused mutations
in dozens of newborns.
He'd take those pills most mornings
before embarking on a grinding commute,
often driving through pernicious tule fog
in a rush to get to work on time
and place purchase orders to build missiles
meant to threaten Russia.
And plenty enough were built
to stunt the Red threat, in fact adequate
to annihilate every living organism.

When he became disabled I drove him
by the air base where he had special clearance,
where silos go deep into the earth, and still
contain nasty bombs just waiting to kill.

He reminded me that he purchased the engine
for the rocket that sent man to the moon
his effort undoubtedly to the good.

As I contemplate furthering the good
I wish those old pills could produce
some vital enrichment that would
eliminate the evils that infect us.

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Stanchèd

“Sacreligeous! You’re going to hell!”
dad yelled, peeling off his belt.

Armor clinking, entrails dragging,
pieces of eight like furious diamonds
foamed from his vacant eyesockets.

“You’ve been saying you’re riding
that 10 speed bike I gave you
to church, but you lied.
You’re going with us next Sunday
or I’ll give you a taste of this!”

I hated church. Spurious sermons,
altar boys carrying fancy chalices,
silly hymns. But what was worse,
my athlete’s knee, already inflamed
by participation in rugged sports
hurt worse than hell
when I knelt to recite prayers.

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Summit

They gathered from round the globe
In little rowboats: Arab, Asian, American,
African, European,
To attend the impromptu paeon
At the summit.
Parsimonious pastor and pauper alike
Licked salt, and drank nectar
From thin air.
Then along came Bezmeralda,
Naked bride and appellation
Of the apparition Tantimon.
She gathered them at the fountain
Shouting out
“Oh you murdering zealots!”