

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*Ted McCarthy*  
**PURGATORY**

There is something terrifying  
in watching the still-young mind flying  
into oblivion, while the body  
maintains its course; steady,

functioning in every obvious  
way, but absorbed in some mysterious  
world which shadows ours, then bursts  
through, drawing down a curse

which lingers after explanation.  
Something of primal superstition  
attends on each heart-rending flight  
into that place from which they might

never return; then all twists, so  
that it's we who are the shadows  
meeting flesh in Purgatory,  
hearing that stranger tell his story.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

### WALLPAPER

I imagine you with the taste  
of forty years of exile on your lips  
and we in a frenzy of forgetting.  
And as you look across the river  
- its cranes, its squatting geometric glass –  
the phrase golden years runs through you  
as if in a maze.

And your hands, their skin welded  
to their story like those coloured plates  
you left festooned across myriad cities,  
are mute swooping through morning  
like swallows caught by an early frost.  
Something is unstitched; when you sit at cards  
your eyes will betray a double truth

neither banter nor tall tale will assault.  
There will be no smoke, no old men,  
secrets and secret guesses will circle warily, unspoken,  
someone will hold a trump and not know it,  
or knowing, surrender advantage to the hour's strangeness;  
our knowledge of you, hearsay, will be stilled,  
the pass of coins be an exchange of lamps.

Which brings, crazily, to mind, the word  
*wallpaper*. I came across a roll  
you must have known; dust-coated, pristine,  
it bloomed in its unfurling, like a blazing  
Kodachrome decade, sheer and astonishing  
as light in the well we cleaned  
because you drank from it: our pilgrimage.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

And though I grudge the memory of insect-bites,  
the disappointment of dead creatures  
on a surface they reclaimed by thrust of instinct,  
I think of you not as the loser but the lost,  
of what we could have had, and how  
it was impossible because the image  
must be perfect. We were baptized to this.

So it seems – ghost, do your worst – that every  
plate you fired was a station in the church  
of struggle, and every light you scattered  
was a seeding of subversive hope. Confined to a room,  
wherever, I hope you twist with a rebellious pain,  
your mind coiled like a fern-tip on dank soil  
as you turn from light's surprise into the truth of years.

MOTHER AND CHILD

As with her, they took your soul away.  
No ordinary being dead would do,  
and though no candles burn beneath your icon  
your name is air, flesh that you were, forbidden  
to fade around the bleak bones of its truth.

On and beyond those huddled lanes, rain seeps  
into the pools that welled, the roots that fed:  
epitome of misery. How vain  
the hard word hurled, the head-averting litany:  
you were and are not. What you were, we are.

VISITING HOUR

Beyond the institution's buckled pane  
where men and women swear and swear again,  
the magpies build; careless in the cold,  
they sidle along branches and unfold  
their green sheen like an unsheathed blade; no fear  
loosens their grip on what they hold most dear.

Two marble figures on the fireplace;  
spindle and woollen comb in hand, they face  
a nymph recumbent by a sacred glade  
or comatose perhaps: her only shade  
comes from her wings askew, her legs are wrapped  
round each other in a drowning grip.

So this is where I've come to: Brigid's Day  
listening to cars like breakers in a bay,  
clawing life as on a riverbank,  
too old, too dry, too much time to think.  
Visiting hour is over, cars will pull  
away, half-lit, and leave us to the dull

struggle that is the season's fight with dusk,  
ours with ourselves - the pain, the shame, the risk  
of resolution and its falling off.  
And now the night is looming like a cliff.  
the eyes pierce one last time, but nothing's seen  
but flitting black and white - no hint of sheen.