

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

Denise Mostacci Sklar
Still Life

The poet enters the apartment on 85th and Riverside Drive where Odette and her friends wait to have tea and discuss poetry. Near 90, thin with white hair, they sit perched on the plastic covered sofa with his latest book on their laps as they nibble stale Pepperidge Farm cookies that have been stored in the living room end tables, the same cookies from the last visit three months ago. He was once a poet laureate and the woman have taken to inviting him and a few other poets to their homes on a regular basis. They were vibrant, young and cultured when they first met him; now the years and ticket stubs clutter their purses. He drops into the easy chair across from them and begins to read, his words, a slow engine reeving echo into their hearing aids as loud pages turn slowly. He is the black eagle above them, a kind of fireworks contained in a box, safe man made manipulated. He carries with him a sad emptiness, but lets the adulation fuel him until he hovers. He is their god for the evening, they are his audience -- filling them, he cannot lift them. There is no life and death on these pages, a quiver, explosion messy birth memory ... words translucent that slide through space glowing illuminate until they burst, each time reborn again.



Odette pours the poet a little brandy from a crystal decanter which was a wedding gift from her youth. She was a nurse in the Red Cross stationed in France during WWII. She fell in love with one of the young soldiers that she nursed back to health. After the war, they married and moved to Hawaii, but that was a long time ago. She thinks of him as she finishes pouring the brandy into each of the delicately etched liquor glasses that circle the decanter. The women take a sip letting the warm sharp liquid sit on their tongues host-like for a moment before it slides under and they swallow, allowing the poet's words to pour over them, numbing their bodies, warming their memory. And before you know it they are dreaming dreams. They swim languid in air of brandy, poetry and flower scented cologne. They embrace the last spark of life fantasy validation because it reminds them of something they can no longer remember.

At the center of the coffee table sits a bowl filled with waxed fruit perfectly shaped and artfully sprayed glossy with pastel paints.

As they chat the poet reaches his hand into the bowl to grab a large, waxy peach. With his manly but sensitive hand, he rolls it in his palm, takes a bite teeth sinking in, he chews and chews, swallows with no effort. But before he can finish, he bends over and clutches his throat. He begins to choke and cough- something deep inside of him knows that this is not for human consumption. Odette pours the poet more brandy. In one fast gulp he drinks the liquid falling back into the overstuffed chair with its floral brocade upholstery enveloping him like a kingly robe, his head thrown back, his eyes bulging and his mouth opened as if he were a profit or martyr. Wax and words spill out with dust all at once, and sounds & syllables of poetry suspend in the perfumed stale air, slowly settling. The sound deepens and slows as these words become heavy syrup, their color spreading like a paint by number masterpiece on a black velvet ocean;

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they sit on top, neat opaque replicating nature...knickknacks behind glass cabinet doors. The woman clap politely and let out their breathless bravos as a piece of their soul shadow slips out of their mouths searching for an exit, instead falls & settles with dust quietly into cracks- sticky as it trickled down their chins.