

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

B.T. Joy
On Suicide

A four-foot pike with brindle like a tiger's flank
is tossing noisily in the same bend the fishers use
and, scooping light and water in the cup of a brown tail,
he flips and pounds the river with his body. Hoping only
to be seen on a surface made muddy by the recent rain
and to be wrestled into the air on a line of filament.

Dark woods. Skirl of wind over thin-laid snow.
A kodiak bear shuffles out of months of hibernation
straight onto the railway line; the train pulling
her skull along for half a mile. Mercury low. Early January.
John Berryman is climbing the Washington Avenue Bridge
and Van Gogh broods in his workshop at Auvers-sur-Oise.

But don't worry. I don't believe there is a song,
or poem, or single painting, that explains the act of suicide.
Though foxes sound and stray dogs whine in scented gardens,
though shapes fall from bridge-tops and crows rise. Nevertheless
every body is a brindled fish lying, clean of guts on the red frost;
each mind encased in air that once cut lightly through the water.

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Prayer

Our prayer should be
never to get home safely.

To finish the journey without any broken bones
is to render the setting out redundant.

I'm thinking of Odysseus
how his painted trireme bucked on vicious waves like an old bull;
scudding its excessive wanderlust often against an outcrop of rock;
keeping the sailors
from Ithaca for years.

In this way sometimes
it's necessary to ask the lion to devour us
or to introduce a colony of ants into the tunnels of our veins.

In the antipodean forests, round Arnhem Land,
a tall and slender eucalyptus tree sacrifices its silver body
to families of termites like a pack of muggers.

Later, even the axe that beats its sharpness
into the pith of that vented trunk is a kind of joy.

And falling
in the wind and scent of resin is a feeling
which closely orbits bliss.

Now we see the eucalyptus too
is insane for the cyclical drone, like an insect humming inside wood,
of the artist breathing into his hollow pipe; to cause vibrations on the
outer air.

And so sometimes
the capsized beetle that kicks and writhes beneath the skull
must be fished out into the open world and fed, with compassion, on
small
strands of mulch and rotten log.

It was Rilke's contention that the entire function of a human being
was to find some way to love what could be loved;
which is another way of saying *everything*.

After all,
there are small names that falling water has for stone.

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The dark street, asleep at sunrise,
invites the light into its chest of wetness
as a fixed settler in a city on the trade-roads
invites a wet traveller into his house from the rain.

Rumi was nothing at all; only he did suffer
from the paranoia that anyone could be Mohammad.
And so he spent a lifetime looking
shifty-eyed at goldsmiths and at beggars.

Sometimes it's necessary to ask
the lion to devour us.

Sometimes it's necessary to stand
for hours, shoeless, in the white frost.

Sometimes we need to sit
in an alleyway, in the thick of winter,
clutching our alms-bowl with nothing left but hope.

Though we have to tell the passers by, and repeatedly,
that there's nothing in their pockets that can cure this longing.

That no amount of change
will unkink the wildness of our hair or wash
the scent of wanting from our tatty clothes.

The one I beg for a single instant of her time
is too vast for any poem to say.

She is a pine-forest on the coasts of Provence.

She is the reason the troubadours couldn't stop praying.

She is wheat fields in Northumberland
or thorn-trees catching the fluttering litter like plastic flags.

She is Jerusalem
and every dirty road that leads there.

And so I can't help
but keep on asking.

Let the lion devour me.

Let the ants share my skin like sharing sugar.

Let me dissolve like a chip of ice in tepid water.

River through me, love, river through me.

Wash the mud of me
to your silent ocean.

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Memory

No one ever told you it would all be stepping out
of the stand of blue spruce you found that May in Utah.
The road was scattered in fallen conifer cones. Your boot-soles
felt strange on the concrete after snow and a smell something
like butterscotch was heavy in the chilly deep of the air. Then later
that night a girl with full red hair fell in love with your voice.
And later still, the sailed petals of pale flowers spanned
like tiny white galaxies on the red fingers of the dogwood
and every silly moment either seemed larger than it was
or was larger than it seemed.

It just goes to show
there really is no telling what might be lost in memory.
Like the Tang Dynasty poet who sat at his tea-table trying to recall
the names he gave to things, during the damp summers of his boyhood.
Or how the smooth stones by the rivers of Hangzhou
would warm his bare feet set down on the banks at noon
where he stood while fishing for grass carp in the open water.
And you too are a river flowing away from something. A procession
of sleep and waking, of drunkenness and sobriety, of joy
and of not knowing which way to go.

Take this morning; when you woke
from twelve hours of sleep; though wanting more.
The moon was a refugee in a rough-spun coat. Her cratered face
stating the story of her life with more eloquence than any poem.
No one ever told you that the summer would last. Late winter
arrives like a memory. And it's that time again.
The authorities have issued edicts in the streets of Warsaw.
We are to vacate the city; taking with us only those things we can carry.
The burning crews are already on their way
following, as always, their timely schedules.